ASPIRATIONS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE ASSOCIATE OF APPLIED SCIENCE STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR MEASURING OUTCOMES

by

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ABSTRACT

STEVEN C. SMITH. Aspirations of Community College Associate of Applied Science Students: A Qualitative Analysis with Implications for Measuring Outcomes. (Under the direction of DR. MARK M. D'AMICO)

This study used an in-depth qualitative multi-interview approach to explore the lived experience of associate in applied science (AAS) students at a community college in North Carolina. The purpose of this study is to explore the aspirations of community college students enrolled in career focused AAS programs to understand their stated goals, the social forces that influence them, and the implications this data may have on institutional outcome measurements using an approach informed by Seidman (2019). After completing a series of interviews with each participant, all data were transcribed and synthesized using a six-phase thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). This research features four themes that emerged across participants' responses. The generated themes highlighted how social interactions, socioeconomic conditions, and labor market requirements affected students' aspirations. The findings provide insight into where students' stated goals may or may not involve earning a credential and instances when their goals align or not with existing performance funding outcome metrics. Labor market requirements played a substantial role in whether students desired to earn a credential. Participants were highly motivated to use community college education to explore possible careers and establish social networks. Three conclusions were reached: (1) labor market demands highly influence AAS student aspirations; (2) aspirations fluctuated based on whether students saw AAS training as an apex or stepping-stone; (3) students possessed personalized layered goals that partially aligned with performance funding and outcome metrics.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my wife Anjella and my daughter Harley. Your smiles and encouragement inspired me the whole way through, even on the toughest days.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

On average, community colleges report graduation rates between 39% and 42% for students who took courses between 2008-2015 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). Despite those low rates, community colleges continue to enroll upwards of 40% of the higher education student population in the United States (Ma & Baum, 2016; Snyder & Dillow, 2013). Considering those statistics, it is understandable why legislators and the public would question the quality of education these institutions provide students. In addition, judging community college effectiveness solely by the two-to-six-year graduation rates may lead one to deduce that these institutions are doing a poor job at transitioning students through their programs in ways that lead to success. This is especially true if stakeholders use degree, certificate, or transfer milestones to measure a student's increased labor market value (Belfield & Thomas, 2017; Kane & Rouse, 1993).

The preceding information supports why legislative education agendas include measures that hold higher education institutions more accountable (D'Amico et al., 2014; Dougherty et al., 2014). To encourage schools to combat low completion numbers, legislators have forced higher education institutions to prove their worth through policy agendas that incentivize and prioritize attainment (Dougherty et al., 2014; Dougherty et al., 2016; Li, 2017). Although scholars use a variety of terms to describe the shift towards increased accountability, including the completion agenda, success agenda, and accountability movement, each concept refers to a similar process that places an increased onus on institutions to justify why they deserve public funds (Alexander, 2016; D'Amico, 2016; Dworkin, 2009). As far back as the 1970s, several states have adopted performance-based funding frameworks which attach an institution's government finance stream

to various success indicator metrics (Alshehri, 2016; Burke, 2004a; Weeden, 2015). The award and reward metrics states use to determine success include markers such as student transfer, certificate completion, and graduation (Dougherty et al., 2014; Tandberg et al., 2014). Unfortunately, this legislative mandate also requires community colleges to operate under these types of accountability measures which has created dual concerns (Alshehri, 2016; Burke, 2004a; Weeden, 2015). The first concern is with the seemingly poor completion rates community colleges report, which directly leads to a dearth of funding, the second concern.

Within this accountability movement are many public, non-profit, and private sector-led efforts that motivate institutions of higher education to find ways to track their effectiveness while increasing completion in the form of degree, certificate, or transfer markers. Beginning around 1990, the federal government established the Right to Know Act, followed by the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2008. Legislators created these policies to require that institutions post success indicators using tools such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) survey (NCES, n.d.). This system now tracks most of the full-time, first-time degree seeking students to measure their graduation rates at the 100% normal time allocated to graduate, 150% which measures the one-and-a-half-time rate, and those students who take 200% or double the time to complete (NCES, n.d.). In 2009, the Obama era White House led a push to increase funds while setting goals that challenge community colleges to increase their completion numbers using a plan called the American Graduate Initiative (D'Amico, 2016; White House, 2009). The U.S. financial aid system further fosters a completion-oriented mindset by requiring students to declare that they are enrolling in approved degree or certificate programs in order receive financial assistance (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). At the state level, legislators in over half of U.S. states created performance

funding metrics that tie college and university funds directly to their ability graduate or transfer students (Alshehri, 2016; D'Amico et al., 2014; Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Dougherty & Reddy, 2013).

Outside the world of government, organizations such as the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) have also established structures that enable schools to report institutional effectiveness. The Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA) is a nation-wide system of accountability that uses metrics designers specifically tailored to community college needs while also providing space for these schools to engage in peer data comparisons (AACC, n.d.a.). Despite various the iterations of accountability models, each system uses an output-based structure that pre-defines what success looks like for institutions and students alike (Alexander, 1998; Alshehri, 2016; Tandberg et al., 2014). Within pre-defined accountability structures like performance-funding, there is little room for students to define success according to their socioeconomic circumstances, personal, or professional goals if they lie outside of an institution's standard completion metric. Pre-defined definitions of success also reaffirm concerns voiced by O'Banion (2010) who warned against pushing community colleges toward becoming credential terminals at the expense of promoting lifelong learning processes.

Consequently, there may be a problematic gap between community college student aspirations and the outcome measures institutions use to gauge institutional effectiveness. That potential gap between student aspirations and outcome measures, which institutions do not collectively track on a large-scale basis currently, may lead to a dearth in higher education funding along with additional unintended consequences that may prove to be detrimental to community colleges (Dougherty et al., 2016; Tandberg et al., 2014). These unintended consequences can include lowered faculty and staff morale and a public perception that

community colleges deliver a lower-quality product (Barrington, 2022; Dougherty et al., 2016; Tandberg et al., 2014). As a result of operating under performance funding policies that do not require schools to report noncredit enrollment figures, and by using IPEDS data that do not include non-completion successes, community colleges routinely experience additional potential funding barriers (Romano et al., 2019).

These barriers may be the least necessary considering how community college students tend to have fewer completion-oriented goals and often use community colleges to sample higher education, data that when researchers factor in, illustrate how the outcomes associated with these schools are better than what the surface numbers show (Bailey et al., 2005; Bailey et al., 2007; Horn & Nevill, 2006; Juszkiewicz, 2016). For example, more than half of students expressed a strong desire to complete a degree while others reported a desire to learn job skills, transfer to a university, or take courses for personal enrichment purposes (Bailey et al., 2007; Juszkiewicz, 2016). The results from these studies also suggest that if community college success ratings were solely based on students who expressed a strong desire to complete credentialing programs, their success rates would be much higher (Bailey et al., 2007; Juszkiewicz, 2016).

However, segmenting out those who primarily wish to complete a credential would still overlook a significant portion of students who have other potentially noteworthy goals in mind. Understanding non-credential goals and successes is especially critical when one considers students who enroll in associate in applied science (AAS) programs which tend to focus primarily on labor market skills that may quickly lead to workplace employment or promotion (Bahr et al., 2022; DeFeo, 2015; Diesing, 2012; Guthrie, 2016). Moreover, since a significant portion of AAS students are non-traditional and are often influenced by social obligations such as income, parenting, and employment, they may likely prioritize life goals as much or higher

than academic ones (Carnevale & Smith, 2018; Cohen et al., 2014; Fain, 2020; Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Ma & Baum, 2016; Melguizo et al., 2016; Radwin et al., 2013; Scheutz, 1999; Soobin et al., 2019; Xu & Ran, 2015). The term non-traditional typically refers to students older than 24 who often have additional duties related to their life circumstances, such as parenting and full-time work (NCES, n.d.).

By better understanding how community college students are unique in higher education, the demographic makeup of AAS students, and a brief history of workforce programs, stakeholders may better understand the purpose of AAS systems so that we can serve this population of students more effectively. In addition, developing an increased understanding of students' completion or non-completion-based aspirations may assist institutions in tracking students' stated goals, how and why they might change, plus the college's role in students' career endeavors. Consequently, community colleges may then be able to track their impact on students more accurately. Finally, by understanding prevalent ways community college systems and institutions measure success, stakeholders can better identify gaps and alignments between traditional metrics and students' stated goals. By understanding each of these elements, which I briefly detailed in chapter 2, stakeholders can use the information presented in this study to understand better whether institutions should consider expanding existing success measures. For example, a possible success metric expansion may include students' stated goals to ascertain whether schools adequately help students meet their needs.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the aspirations of community college students enrolled in career focused AAS programs to understand their stated goals, the social forces that influence them, and the implications this data may have on institutional outcome measurements

using an approach informed by Seidman (2019). This study uses a qualitative, in-depth, multi-interview approach, informed by Seidman (2019), which captured the detailed stories of five participants. Each of the three interviews with my five participants featured questions that sought to explore how students' past experiences and current social landscapes inform their aspirations, plus their community college's role in these endeavors. I then used the data I gathered in my analysis to understand better how students stated goals may or may not align with their institutions' current success measures. This study focuses on the following research questions, which I designed to gain insight into AAS student populations' aspirations:

1. Why do students enroll in community college AAS programs, and what are their aspirations?
2. How do community college AAS students' life experiences influence their aspirations?
3. How do AAS students plan to use the education they gain through community college training?
4. What does it mean to AAS students to be successful due to enrolling at their chosen institution?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study seeks to understand better the experiences that influence AAS student aspirations so that stakeholders can assess the implications of this data on performance funding and outcome measures. I selected social constructivism as the qualitative inquiry framework because of its goal to understand how people construct their realities, which are rooted within their own experiences (Creswell, 2013; Gardner, 2021; Jung, 2019; Patton, 2014). Furthermore, social constructivism provides an ideal space to create a methodological environment that helps me investigate how students construct meaning around what is real while examining the

consequences of those reality perceptions (Jung, 2019; Patton, 2014). Rooted in social constructivism is an opportunity to understand the agents of influence which guide and mold the realities of students as they form meaning and aspirations around their higher education experience (Gardner, 2021; Jung, 2019). Social constructivism informed this study throughout my interviews with each participant, who often spoke directly about how they constructed their ideas of success within their areas of aspiration based on their interactions with their college, peers, workplace, and personal social groups. These meaning-making processes then show readers that students do operate based on individually constructed realities that may not always align with institutional success measures.

In addition to the social constructivist framework, this research adopts the Hirschy et al. (2011) Conceptual Model for Student Success in Community College Occupational Programs illustration as a base for which to understand how student characteristics, the collegiate environment, and the local community play a role in whether students attain their educational goals. The benefits of using the Hirschy et al. (2011) model to frame this study lie within its acknowledgment of how a student's circumstances, which includes work and family obligations, employment goals, plus career networks to name a few, can have a direct impact on their concept of student success. The areas within the Hirschy et al. (2011) model that illustrate college and local environmental factors assisted in my understanding of both the internal and external influences that guide the choices students make from within their sphere of meaning. The data I uncovered in this investigation also has implications on this model through my suggested expansion of the variables that constitute student success.

Overview of Methodology

This study explores community college AAS student aspirations and the experiences that lead participants towards those goals and objectives. Consequently, I selected a qualitative approach to gain in-depth insight into the social landscapes, processes of meaning, and ensuing aspirations of each participant (Creswell, 2007; Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldana, 2011). The application of a series of three in-depth interviews helped capture a fuller picture of how my participants' life experiences led them to form aspirations (Seidman, 2019). I used three elements to understand better their process of forming aspirations, including the students' life stories, experiences while enrolled at their institutions, and reflections concerning their education and career choices. Conducting multiple interviews with each participant increased my ability to discover data concerning participants' experiences that may not otherwise have appeared using other quantitative and qualitative methods (Gardner, 2021; Seidman, 2019). The data I captured through the in-depth qualitative interview approach and the initial identification of students' personal goals proved invaluable in understanding this study's implications on performance funding and outcome measure standards. As such, this unique study illustrates students' aspirations in relation to their personal stories further justifying why this methodology and ensuing methods are highly appropriate.

I conducted three in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five community college AAS students. Traditionally, institutional stakeholders label AAS degrees as terminal since they focus primarily on technical skill training that typically leads to immediate employment pre-or post-completion (Batts & Pagliari, 2013). As such, I chose to focus on AAS students since they are the likeliest group at the community college level to fall into the "skill builder" category, which is a more recent data point administrators use in states such as California to document and measure a student's noncompletion based economic gains (Bahr et al., 2022; Guthrie, 2016).

Significance of Study

It is plausible that students in AAS programs may receive training, attain the skills they need to work in their desired career field, get a job or higher level of employment, and prosper without completing a higher education program (Bahr et al., 2022; Belfield & Thomas, 2017; Mills, 2012; Yorke, 2010). Examples such as these may illustrate how student successes related to personal aspiration and labor market outcomes may not always align with institutional accountability measures such as performance funding and outcome measures (Bailey et al., 2005; Liu et al., 2014). Studies by Alfonso et al. (2005), Fox (2020), and Grubbs (2016) show how career and technical education students of all kinds tend to have lower levels of interest in traditional educational attainment markers and are likely to prioritize job placement, short-term needs, and financial gain ahead of completion goals. As such, this study raises awareness concerning how community colleges help some students meet their stated goals, which can lead to continued progress or gainful employment despite there being few if any ways to mark these accomplishments as successes within the current accountability movement parameters. The result is another potential avenue of underfunding for community colleges. The information I present in this study, through the voices of student participants, may provide additional data that supports an administrative re-visitation of current performance funding and outcome measure policies, plus a reconceptualization of what constitutes student success.

Delimitations

This study features responses from AAS community college students who have enrolled at an institution located within central North Carolina only. Therefore, the detailed responses housed within this study are not wholly representative of all community college AAS students in North Carolina or beyond. Furthermore, this research relied upon purposeful sampling and

multiple in-depth interviews, and as such, I did not use a large participant sample (Etikan et al., 2016; Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2019). Instead, this study adopts purposeful maximum variation sampling to capture a large amount of meaningful data from a few information-rich participants I identified through a non-probability selection process (Etikan et al., 2016; Patton, 2002). In addition, this study relied on interviews from a small sample of students to focus on a more in-depth multiple-interview method that captured a deep and comprehensive picture of students' life stories, experiences, and reflections (Seidman, 2019).

Assumptions

The data in this study rely on the premise that each participant who participated in the interview process communicated their responses honestly and without undue influence from the interviewer. The second assumption associated with this study is that each participant understood the interview questions, ensuing clarification inquiries, then responded accordingly. The third assumption is that the lived experiences, aspirations, and reflections represented in this study provide readers with insight into these AAS students' aspirations along with the internal and external factors of influence that influence them. Finally, this study operates under the assumption that my potential biases have minimally impacted all parts of this study via a detailed positionality statement, the following of a data-supported protocol, and my efforts to improve trustworthiness, which I detailed in chapter 3.

Definition of Terms

Associates in Applied Science (AAS) degrees are those that institutions "designed for students seeking employment immediately upon graduation. Emphasis is placed on courses which enable the student to gain theoretical knowledge important for working in human services

and to apply concepts to specialized populations of their interest" (Genesse Community College, n.d., para. 2).

Career and technical education (CTE) refers to "the practice of teaching skills-based careers to students in middle school, high school, and post-secondary institutions. CTE is focused on skills. This differs from traditional and university-based education, which is based on theory" (Applied Educational Systems, n.d., para. 3).

Community colleges are post-secondary institutions that "offer two-year programs leading to the Associate of Arts (AA) or Associate of Science (AS) degree. These colleges also have technical and vocational programs with close links to secondary/high schools, community groups, and employers in the local community" (U.S. Department of State, n.d.).

Outcome measures are indicators that document and record the achievements of colleges and university schools or programs, usually measured through the accomplishments of current and former students (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Performance funding, performance-based funding, and outcomes-based funding are defined as policies which allocate university and community college state funds based on student outcomes such as graduation or transfer (Alshehri, 2016; Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Dougherty & Reddy, 2013).

Success agenda refers to the process where policy makers shifted the priorities of community colleges towards focusing on completion rather than access to measure institutional effectiveness (D'Amico, 2016; O'Banion, 2010).

Student aspiration refers to "The desire to achieve and improve. It emphasizes the need for individuals to look at what they are doing now and recognize its relevance to their future" (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996, p. 131).

Summary

The first chapter of this study introduces readers to the importance and significance of this study which focuses on community college AAS student aspirations and the implications those goals, objectives, and experiences might have on performance funding and outcome measures. This study begins with highlights that illustrate community college and university graduation rates, public and policy-maker concerns over those rates, plus a brief overview of the history of performance funding and student success measures.

Chapter 2 includes a thorough review of the literature concerning community college student profiles along with a workforce program analysis, community college student aspirations, an overview of performance funding, and a brief description of how performance funding outcome measures may align or not with student aspirations. Throughout Chapter 2 are linkages between how institutions of higher education track and report data related to institutional effectiveness, ways in which students experience success inside and outside of performance funding metrics, and how student experiences plus social circumstances play a role in how they view success for themselves.

Chapter 3 houses an outline of the methodological approach I selected for this study. Specifically, this study features an adapted qualitative interview model that relies on in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection source. To thoroughly document students' aspirations, lived experiences, and reflections, I interviewed each participant three times. The participants' financial, social, and professional responsibilities played a critical role in understanding how they view success.

Chapter 4 consists of a synopsis of the in-depth qualitative interview results. I used the thematic analysis process to filter the interview data into codes then themes. Thematic analysis

was highly appropriate for reporting the in-depth interview data collected in this study because it allowed me to filter through participant transcripts to identify similar language, patterns, and themes (Guest et al., 2012; Neuendorf, 2018).

Chapter 5 features the conclusion of this study, and as such, it includes a summary, a statement of implications, and suggestions for future research. This study represents a small step in my attempt to bring the student's voice into the circle of conversations related to how policymakers and higher education institutions can go about determining success.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To better understand community college student aspirations and the potential implications that information can have on performance funding (PF) and outcome measures, it is essential to explore the literature that highlights prevalent data related to this area of study. Shapiro et al. (2018) illustrated that upwards of 46.2% of students who start their higher education studies at community college are no longer enrolled, nor have they completed their studies at any level after six years. This information brings forth questions regarding what happens to these students and how their uncredentialled departure affects how governing bodies measure institutional effectiveness.

This review of literature contains an investigation of previous works that explore whether students who depart their institutions without completing their studies experience success directly related to their educational training in significant numbers enough to warrant a re-visitation of PF outcome metrics. Table 1 highlights data that features information from sources that lie within four main categories. The first of these categories highlights the profile of community college students coupled with subsections that focus on the general student profile, career education students, and a workforce program analysis. The next portion of this review features an overview of community college student aspirations with subsections that highlight completion and non-completion-based goals. In addition, section two includes a synopsis of literature that discusses the variables which lead students towards or away from their initial goals using Clark's (1960) warming up versus cooling out framework.

The third section of this review serves as a synopsis of PF, including information about its history and the two prevalent models' stakeholders use within these structures. The two additional subsections within this area list common ways in which some scholars critique or

support PF systems. The final section highlights the most prevalent outcome measures community colleges use to determine institutional effectiveness. This thorough review of community college students, those who enroll in career education programs, student aspirations, and the policies stakeholders use to determine success provides this study with critical information that helps to identify any potential gaps between aspirations and outcome measures.

Table 1

Aspirations of Community College Career Education Students: A Qualitative Analysis with Implications for Measuring Outcomes Literature Review Summary Table

Primary Topics in the Literature	Subtopics and Sources
Community College Student Profile and Workforce Education	• General Student Profile (AACC, 2021; Carnevale & Smith, 2018; CCRC, n.d.; Choitz & Prince, 2008; Cohen et al., 2014; Community College Research Center, n.d.; Community College Review, n.d.a.; D'Amico et al., n.d.; Hoachlander et al., 2003; Juszkiewicz, 2016; Ma & Baum, 2016; Mintz, 2019; Miller et al., 2016; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019; NCES, n.d.a.; NCES, n.d.b.; Radwin et al., 2013; Vargas & Miller, n.d.; Wood, 2020) • Career Education Student Profile (Aslanian, 2001; Association for Career and Technical Education, 2019; Atwell & D'Amico, 2021; Bahr et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2014; Fox, 2020; Gammill, 2015; Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Jabbar et al., 2020; Melguizo et al., 2016; NCES, 2014; Scheutz, 1999; Thomas & Urquhart, 2021; Xu & Ran, 2015; Zhang & Oymak, 2018) • Workforce Program Analysis (Bahr et al., 2022; Bailey et al., 2005; Batts & Pagliari, 2013; Bowels & Gintis, 1976; Brand et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2014; D'Amico et al., 2018; Drury, 2003; Fox, 2020; Guthrie, 2016; Liu et al., 2014; McDuffie, 2013; National Archives, n.d.; Osborn, 1989; PCRN, n.d.; Quintero, 2018; Van Noy et al., 2016)
Community College Student Aspirations	• Completion-based Aspirations (Alfonso et al., 2005; Bailey et al., 2005; Bosworth, 2011; Craig, 2016; Fox, 2020; Friedel & Friesleben, 2016; Ganga et al., 2018; Hanson, 2021; Hoachlander et al., 2003; Horn & Nevill, 2006; Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Kujawa, 2013; Jean-Francois, 2014; Laanan, 2003; Lohman & Dingerson, 2007; Mason, 2020; McFarland et al., 2019; NCES, 2021; Normandale Community College, n.d.; O'Banion, 2018; Pocai & Davis, 2021; Redden, 2020; Schneider, n.d.; Soobin et al., 2019; Taylor, 2016; Wilson & Lowry, 2016; Winter et al., 2010; Xu & Trimble, 2016)

- Non-completion-based Aspirations (Bailey et al., 2005; Bailey et al., 2015; Balemian & Feng, 2013; Beasley & Aguiar, 2016; Bers, 2013; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Cheng & Starks, 2002; Conrad et al., 2013; D'Amico et al., 2020; Fox, 2020; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Gonzalez et al., 2012; Hanson, 2021; Laanan, 2003; Laanan, 2007; Liu et al., 2014; Means et al., 2016; Miller, 2013; NCES, n.d.; NC State University, n.d.; Nielsen, 2015; Normandale Community College, n.d.; O'Keefe et al., 2010; Sanchez, 2012; Soo-young et al., 2012; Stern, 2015; University System of Georgia, n.d.; Wilson & Wilson, 1992; Young et al., 2009)
- Warming Up, Cooling Out, and Completion (Adelman, 2005; Alfonso et al., 2005; Bowen, 2015; CCCSE, 2014; Cheng & Starks, 2002; Clark, 1960; Cohen et al., 2014; Conway, 2010; Deli-Amen, 2002; Deli-Amen, 2006; Deming & Walters, 2017; Dowd, 2007; Evans et al., 2020; Fox, 2020; Gallup, 2018; Gandra et al., 2004; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Grub et al., 2016; Grubbs, 2016; Hearn, 1992; Heller, 2001; Hellmich, 1993; Jabbar et al., 2021; Kujawa, 2013; Lagemann & Lewis, 2012; Lamonthe, 2015; Langelett et al., 2015; Liang et al., 2017; Lowry, 2016; Ma & Baum, 2016; Moore, 1975; Nakamura, 2003; Nielsen, 2015; Nitecki, 2009; Provasnik & Planty, 2008; Sanchez, 2012; Stevens, 2019; Symonds et al., 2011; Torpey, 2018; Whyte, 2012; Wilson & Wilson, 1992; Zarate & Pachon, 2006)

Performance Funding and Outcome Measures

- History of Performance Funding (Alexander, 1998; Barr, 2002; D'Amico et al., 2014; Fain, 2017; Fischer, 2019; Friedel et al., 2013; Gordon & Hedlund, 2016; Harnisch, 2011; Kastinas et al., 2011; Li & Kennedy, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2019; Oreopoulous & Petronijevic, 2013; Rosinger et al., 2020; Shapiro et al., 2014; Ulbrich & Kirk, 2017; Wei & Horn, 2013; Ziedenberg et al., 2015)
- Types of Performance Funding (Alexander, 1998; Alshehri, 2016; Completion by Design, 2012; D'Amico, 2016; D'Amico et al., 2014; Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Dougherty & Reddy, 2013; Tandberg et al., 2014; White House, 2009)
- Performance Funding Supporters (Bosworth, 2011; Chen, 2021; Cooper, 2010; Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Dougherty et al., 2016; Ewell, 2011; Hagood, 2019; Hillman et al., 2015; Jenkins et al., 2012; Jepsen et al., 2014; Johnson, 2005; Kantrowitz, 2002; Karp, 2011; Kuh, 2009; Li & Kennedy, 2017; Levesque, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2019; Ness et al., 2015; Lin, 2016; Shaughnessy, n.d.)
- Performance Funding Critiques (Boland, 2020; Chen, 2021; Crawford, 2011; D'Amico et al., 2012; D'Amico et al., 2014; Dougherty et al., 2012; Dougherty et al., 2016; Dougherty &

Natow, 2019; Dowd, 2007; Fox, 2020; Gandara & Rutherford, 2018; Grizzle, 2002; Hagedorn, 2010; Hillman et al., 2014; Hillman et al., 2015; Horn & Lee, 2017; Jolley et al., 2013; Nolan & Stizlein, 2011; Petrides et al., 2004; Romano & Palmer, 2015; Rutherford & Rabovsky, 2014; Schutz et al., 2015; Shulock, 2011; Smith & Fleisher, 2011; Tandberg et al., 2014)

- Outcome Measures (AACC, n.d.; Burke & Minassians, 2004; Burke & Serban, 1998; D'Amico, 2016; D'Amico et al., 2014; Education Commission of the States, 2000; Itzkowitz, 2017; National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.; Tinto, 1998; Zarkesh & Beas, 2004)
- Alignment and Gaps (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Burke, 2004; Cox, 2013; D'Amico, 2016; Fox, 2020; Gardner, 2021; Harbour et al., 2003; Hirschy et al., 2011; Jung, 2019; Tinto, 1998; US Department of Labor, n.d.; US Department of Labor, n.d.a.)

Community College Student Profile

General Student Profile

Community college students are a complex group of people who come from a wide range of demographic backgrounds. The terms variety and growth best describe the American community college system, students, and stakeholders (Cohen et al., 2014; Mintz, 2019). Community colleges have seen significant enrollment increases over the past half-century ranging from one half million in 1960 to over 7 million in 2021 (AACC, 2021; CCRC, n.d.; Cohen et al., 2014). Overall, community colleges and other 2-year schools served upwards of 6 million of the 19.9 million students enrolled in higher education courses during fall of 2019 (NCES, n.d.a.). In 2014, community college students accounted for 42% of all undergraduate students and 25% of the full-time student population (Ma & Baum, 2016). As of 2013, 40.8% of students who were either enrolled full- or part-time at community colleges earned a certificate, associate, or bachelor's degree within six years (Community College Research Center, n.d.; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019).

As employers increasingly demand more education and skill training from their workers, the community colleges' role has increased in importance which helps explain a significant portion of their growth over the past several decades (D'Amico et al., 2018). Cohen et al. (2014) credited this increased enrollment to societal shifts that include population growth, financial aid availability, minority student enrollment, institutional reclassification, part-time attendance options, and a reduction in academically prepared students to name a few. Also, an increased number of high school graduates have expressed interest in attending colleges and universities immediately after earning their diploma, which was around 50% in the early 1960s and grew to upwards of 60-70% as of 2020 (Cohen et al., 2014; Hoachlander et al., 2003).

During the early 1970s, around half of the community college student body consisted of full-time students, and by the mid-1980s, full-time students only represented one-third of the community college population which is a trend that continues to this day (Cohen et al., 2014; Juszkiewicz, 2016). In response, community colleges began to offer various learning opportunities to meet their students' changing needs. These modified offerings came in the form of off-campus courses, work while studying, and a potentially quicker employment route for reverse transfer students, which then accelerated part-time enrollment numbers (Cohen et al., 2014; Mintz, 2019). Despite a slight reduction in part-time students primarily due to increases in enrollment from full-time younger students, such as those present in Early College programs, community college systems continue to offer various learning opportunities that include alternative class times and locations (Choitz & Prince, 2008; Mintz, 2019; Vargas & Miller, n.d.).

Despite the historical and current trends, one cannot overstate the value of part-time options. Flexible learning options prove to be valuable to students who have a wide range of

demographic needs. These needs include 12% who report having a disability, and 28% who live within the lowest quarter income range (Carnevale & Smith, 2018; Ma & Baum, 2016). The income data provides insight into why community college students tend to work more hours than their university counterparts (Carnevale & Smith, 2018; Ma & Baum, 2016). Between 70-85% of community college students report working for pay; among them, 33% work full-time, while 15% work at least two jobs (Radwin et al., 2013; Wood, 2020). Starting during their first terms, and while they are enrolled, upwards of 45% of community college students self-identified as part-time workers (Cohen et al., 2014; Ma & Baum, 2016).

Approximately 50% of traditional community college students indicate that they come from a low-income status household of roughly $33,500 a year or less, and among those students, 63% report having an independent tax status (Community College review, n.d.a.; Radwin et al., 2013). In addition to financial struggles, community college students often have difficulty fostering a balance between their student, work, and home life responsibilities. Significant portions of community college students have family engagements, including one quarter who report having at least one dependent, half of whom fall into the single-parent category (Cohen et al., 2014).

According to Ma and Baum (2016), 44% of African American, and 55% of Latino/Hispanic students who pursue higher education do so at the community college level. Community colleges also serve international students by offering English as a Second Language courses that are often cheaper than those found at the university level which further complements their role as a hub for basic education for documented and undocumented immigrants alike in certain states (Cohen et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2016).

Career Education Student Profile

Understanding the community college system can be complicated since these institutions' serve populations that can fall into all or parts of various categories simultaneously. In addition to degree-seeking students, community colleges serve a significant portion of dual enrollment, GED and basic skills, certificate, continuing education, and transfer students, some of whom fall under an institutions' noncredit category (Melguizo et al., 2016; Xu & Ran, 2015). This review of literature highlights the profile of students who enroll in career-oriented education programs. AAS and CTE programs in community colleges are often sub-baccalaureate degree course groupings that provide students with training in high-demand job skills that often lead to work immediately upon completion (Gammill, 2015). Institutions of higher education design CTE and AAS programs to educate students so that they are college and career ready in the areas of critical academic skills, employment training, and technical careers (Fox, 2020). To accomplish this, colleges typically offer an array of degrees, certificates, and pathway programs, some of which reflect the market demands of the local community (Association for Career and Technical Education, 2019; Fox, 2020).

These programs attract a significant number of non-traditional students who are older than the general community college population and university-level students. The average age of students who attend schools for sub-baccalaureate and AAS and CTE-type training credentials is 28, while those seeking bachelor's degrees are around age 25 (Fox, 2020; Zhang & Oymak, 2018). These data remain consistent with findings from Aslanian (2001), who discussed how community colleges, on average, serve more students that are 25 years of age and older than their university counterparts. Scholars often refer to students who are 24 years of age or older as the adult student population (Bahr et al., 2020; Scheutz, 1999). However, Cohen et al. (2014) countered the position of Scheutz (1999) by including suggestions that also consider a student's

demographic circumstances to the extent that the definition can plausibly include 18-year old's that have increased social obligations such as those associated with work and parenting. Community colleges in the United States serve over twice as many adult students, 29%, as their 4-year counterparts, a number the rises to 52% in North Carolina (NCES, 2014; Thomas & Urquhart, 2021). Coupled with these trends is evidence that shows how first-time student interests in setting educational goals below bachelor's degree attainment increases substantially depending on their age range. For example, only 9.5% of students in the 18 or younger age category report having educational goals below bachelor's degree as compared to 21.8% of students that are between 24-29, and 38.7% among those that are 30 or older (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Jabbar et al., 2020). Atwell and D'Amico (2021) found that 75% of AAS students in their study's sample were 25 years of age or older and had a lower bachelor's degree completion rate than younger students. However, in that same study, Atwell and D'Amico (2021) posted data highlighting AAS students' 62% bachelor's degree completion rate, illustrating how they can succeed in university-level programs. AAS and CTE students are also more diverse than their academic counterparts by way of an increased presence of low-income, male, Latino, and African American students (Fox, 2020).

Workforce Program Analysis

Workforce development education finds its roots within policies such as the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, which were primarily responsible for granting federally owned land to states for the construction of spaces for learning practical skills in response to socio-cultural changes taking place in the United States in response to the industrial revolution (National Archives, n.d.). In 1901, the first junior college appeared in the United States marking the initial separation between colleges and universities and their duties (Drury, 2003). After legislators established the

Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, an acceleration of career education enrollment occurred in the areas of trade skill training, agriculture, and other skilled and semi-skilled jobs that lie outside the traditional curriculum programs (Fox, 2020). Over the next few decades, legislative agendas, including the 1947 Truman Commission Report and the 1958 National Defense Act, cemented one of the community college systems' primary roles in higher education by way of identifying them as capstone centers for vocational degrees and basic skill training (Fox, 2020). During the 1980s when the numbers of traditional-aged students declined at community colleges, institutions responded by creating and offering programs that they hoped would attract non-traditional older students (Cohen et al., 2014). The new program offerings, a recession, part-time program option increases, plus a desire to change careers or levels within their current places of employment generated much interest and enrollment among older students (Cohen et al., 2014). The Carl D. Perkins Act of 1984, later named the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act in 2006, fostered an environment that encouraged institutional stakeholders to place greater emphasis on technology preparation and dual enrollment programs at community colleges (Fox, 2020). In 2018, President Donald Trump signed a bipartisan bill into law that reauthorized the Carl D. Perkins Act, thus providing institutions with roughly $1.3 billion annually in support of CTE programs (PCRN, n.d.).

To better contextualize the structures community college's use to organize their service to students in CTE programs, scholars such as D'Amico et al. (2018) described three of the prominent ways in which students receive education in addition to the standard forms of certificate and degree programs. These three categories include registered apprenticeships, credit for prior learning initiatives, and applied associate degree articulation pathway programs (D'Amico et al., 2018). Pathway programs, which are not specific to CTE or AAS programs,

consist of a series of sequenced courses that involve skill training that leads to credentialing, which often includes job training opportunities (Brand et al., 2013; Fox, 2020). Pathway training programs vary by geographic region since they usually provide students with training that reflects local labor market needs (Fox, 2020; Quintero, 2018; Van Noy et al., 2016). Pathway programs tend to attract nontraditional students in high numbers due to the hands-on nature of these programs by way of job shadowing, internships, or apprenticeships (Brand et al., 2013; McDuffie, 2013; Quintero, 2018).

Societal stakeholders, including students, administration, and employers, primarily consider many AAS degrees to be terminal since they focus primarily on apex technical skills and immediate employment upon or before completion (Batts & Pagliari, 2013; Van Noy et al., 2016). Despite the value of vocational training and the potentially lucrative careers associated with AAS and CTE careers, some scholars argue that these programs may contribute to structural discrimination because they can potentially close pathways to higher-level education (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Fox, 2020). Despite these critiques, primarily where minorities are concerned, vocational degree holders report increased wages because of accumulating AAS or CTE training credits (Fox, 2020; Osborn, 1989).

Community colleges also serve students who often have broader needs and interests (Cohen et al., 2014). These needs revolve around students' stated goals including successes that do not involve credentialing (Bahr et al., 2022; Bailey et al., 2005; Liu et al., 2014). The skill builder label is a more recent data point administrator's use in states such as California, Colorado, Ohio, and Michigan to document and measure a students' noncompletion based economic gains (Bahr et al., 2022; Guthrie, 2016). In the following section, I explore community college students’ completion and non-completion-based aspirations in addition to phenomena

that encourage students to complete their studies or deviate from the credentialing process using the warming up versus cooling out framework (Clark, 1960).

Community College Student Aspirations

Completion-based Aspirations

For decades, scholars have been documenting community college student aspirations. As far back as the early 90s, upwards of 50% of community college students reported to be working toward a degree, and among that population, 37% planned to seek graduate degree training (Laanan, 2003). Other goals include earning a certificate, testing readiness for higher education, developmental studies, or continuing education (Ganga et al., 2018; Laanan, 2003; Mason, 2020; O'Banion, 2018, Wilson & Lowry, 2016). When measuring the persistence rates of this same cohort of students Laanan (2003) reported that upwards of 39% of students transferred directly to a university within five years. In other studies, between 80-90% of students who attend public community colleges reported a desire to complete some form of credentialing or transfer to a 4-year institution (Hoachlander et al., 2003; Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Jabbar et al., 2020; Soobin et al., 2019). Likewise, another study showed that 36% of students in 2003-2004 aspired to earn a bachelor's degree, 43% an associate degree, and 17% a certificate (Horn & Nevill, 2006). Despite these stated aspirations, a student's experience in college and changing social landscape plays a crucial role as students re-shape these goals as time progresses (Bailey et al., 2005; Kujawa, 2013).

In addition to listing the breakdown of student aspirations, it is essential to understand the most prevalent categories institutions place students in once they enroll for contextual purposes. The first category of interest is called a degree-seeking status. According to Normandale Community College (n.d.), "Degree-seeking students are individuals who pursue coursework

leading to a certificate, degree, or eventual transfer of their credits to another degree-granting college or university" (para. 1). Community colleges grant associates degrees to those students who complete a two-year (or equivalent) sub-baccalaureate area of study (Fox, 2020; McFarland et al., 2019). The majority of degree-seeking students gain admission to their selected institutions in addition to their programs of interest (Jean-Francois, 2014). Roughly 75% of undergraduates in the United States are enrolled as certificate or degree-seeking students (Hanson, 2021). Within the 4.43 million student population that were expected to graduate in 2021, 24.6% would receive an associate degree, 49.9% a bachelor's, 20.8% a master's degree, and 4.7% a doctorate or professional degree (Hanson, 2021).

The next significant group of community college students enroll in certificate programs. Nearly all of the institutions of higher education in the United States house certificate programs which certify that a student has completed an area of postsecondary study (Bosworth, 2011; Fox, 2020; Lohman & Dingerson, 2007). College and university stakeholders design certificate programs to teach their students specific skills, usually over a short timeframe, that often relate to a particular profession or trade (Alfonso et al., 2005; Xu & Trimble, 2016). Certificate programs are unique in the sense that they typically do not require students to take a broad range of elective courses to complete their programs like their degree-seeking counterparts; however, one must show competency in a skill(s) to earn a credential (Bosworth, 2011; Lohman & Dingerson, 2007). In 2003-2004, roughly half of the students enrolled in community college certificate programs had educational goals that involved training below that of a bachelor's degree (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011). In 2018, roughly 1 million students in the United States earned a certificate (NCES, 2021).

There is also a population at community colleges who already possess bachelor's degree level training and beyond upon enrollment. These postbaccalaureate reverse transfer students tend to revisit higher education through the community college to change their career path, add a specialty credential to their existing professional profiles, or receive career training that might quickly lead to employment with higher pay (Friedel & Friesleben, 2016; Pocai & Davis, 2021; Taylor, 2016). Considering how roughly 41% of recent college graduates work in jobs that do not require higher education credentials and how a significant portion of this group faces student loan debt, it is understandable why they seek out ways to increase their work value and pay (Redden, 2020; Winter et al., 2010). Likewise, since some career and technically oriented associate degree or certificate holders post yearly earnings that range from $2,000 to $11,000 more than workers with bachelor's degree training, underemployed university graduates can also use the community college to potentially access high-value careers instead of continuing to suffer from socioeconomic dissatisfaction (Schneider, n.d.; Taylor, 2016). The phrase high-value career often refers to high-paying jobs also in high demand (Craig, 2016).

Non-completion-based Aspirations

In addition to the number of students who report that they want to attain a credential, a population is present at community colleges who have goals and objectives in mind that lie outside of credential-based parameters. Although upwards of 66% of community college students reported that the institution they were attending was their first choice, only 40% stated that they aspired to attain an associate degree as their highest higher education degree planned anywhere (Jabbar et al., 2020; Laanan, 2003). Clearly, these students have needs that require education; however, it is unclear whether those needs match with institutional goals. These additional needs often revolve around students' stated goals including successes that do not

involve certification (Bailey et al., 2005; Liu et al., 2014). Some undecided major students enroll at community colleges to take advantage of the meta-major areas of study (Associates in Arts and Associates in Science) to continue exploring their options as they navigate their journey through the career selection process (Bailey et al., 2015; Fox, 2020). Fortunately, community colleges allow these students to explore their options at a lower cost than they would incur at the university level.

Within the various populations present at community colleges is a sub-group called transfer students. Transfer students enroll at an institution after taking classes at another school (D'Amico et al., 2020; Laanan, 2007; Miller, 2013). These students' transfer processes between schools can be amongst parallel-level institutions, community college to a university, or a reverse transition from a university to a sub-baccalaureate program. In a study conducted by O'Keefe et al. (2010), 70% of students that completed an exit questionnaire reported that they enrolled in their original programs as a means to gain access into another one of their choice. In a similar study of California's Community Colleges, Sanchez (2012) reported that 87% of those who responded to a survey reported that they aspired to transfer, and that students' aspirations to transfer were greater than their desire to complete a degree. Institutions that take in transfer students may or may not accept any or all college credits from a students' previous school depending on their program and institutional policy, accreditation standards, or articulation agreements (Bers, 2013; Conrad et al., 2013; D'Amico et al., 2020; Stern, 2015). Nevertheless, in the early 2000s, upwards of 65% of students who began at community colleges and transferred to universities did so without a degree, a number that sits between 35-40% as of 2017 (Laanan, 2003; Smith, 2018). With roughly 24.2% of students reporting that they aspire to earn a bachelor's degree as their highest level of education, closely followed by the 24.7% seeking

master's degrees, or doctoral credentials (9.9%), attaining an associate degree or certificate may be of little importance especially for AAS students who may still experience a loss of credit despite receiving their degrees (D'Amico et al., 2020; Laanan, 2003). In addition, institutions typically place transient students into the transfer student category; however, these students differ slightly because they often maintain their enrollment status at their original institutions of choice and temporarily enroll at another school to take courses for various reasons (Beasley & Aguiar, 2016; University System of Georgia, n.d.).

Also present at colleges and universities are non-degree seeking students. "Non-degree seeking students are individuals whose goal is to take a limited number of courses for personal or professional enrichment and who have no intention of accumulating credits toward a certificate or degree" (Normandale Community College, n.d., para. 2). Students that make up the non-degree seeking population may take classes for continuing education credit, to update professional skills, earn college credit while in high school, or to build enough academic credibility to earn a place in a degree program (NC State University, n.d.; Young et al., 2009). In 2021, roughly 25% of undergraduate students were enrolled as non-degree seeking (Hanson, 2021).

While there are numerous ways to measure a student's external progressions and aspirations, such as credential attainment and job placement, few of these litmus tests consider students' intrinsic goals, objectives, and motivations in their success equations. For example, Means et al. (2016) discussed how rural African American students possessed aspirations related to three themes including whether they should leave their pre-existing social environments or not, support group encouragement, and potential financial aid barriers. Also, underserved or minority students may use higher education as a tool for which to establish a level of social

credibility or academic confidence (Nielsen, 2015). The intangible measurements found in Means et al. (2016) and Nielsen, 2015 bring forth insight into the ways in which AAS students, among others, access to higher education through community college may also act as a success marker because it allows them to address the three themes of concern identified by Means et al. (2016) within local institutions that are likely located within their sphere of social capital (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2012; Soo-yong et al., 2012). This sphere of confirmability may prove to be a critical component for students seeking to establish a foothold in the world of higher education. Social capital and comfortability criteria may also account for why there is such a strong presence of first-generation students present at community colleges. Upwards of one-third of the total enrollment population at community colleges are first-generation students (Balemian & Feng, 2013; NCES, n.d.b.).

Consequently, stakeholders in states that use PF structures and outcome measures to ascertain institutional effectiveness may run the risk of overlooking the value of access as a form of aspiration in itself. If community colleges nurture this process of "getting one's foot in the door and let us see what happens," access aspirations can quickly turn into goals that lead to success in the traditional sense, particularly where minorities are concerned. According to Laanan (2003), minority students who earn an associate degree have a higher bachelor's degree attainment level than those who do not.

Warming Up, Cooling Out, and Completion

While few people would question the fiscal and social value of community colleges and their role in providing students with access to higher education, measuring how well institutions nurture students during the time they are enrolled remains an elusive task (Dowd, 2007). The binary measurements of graduate versus drop out, and wage gains or not may prove to be too

rigid to capture the complete picture of how students can be successful in direct response to community college training. This dynamic brings forth the question of what, if not a desire to earn a credential, leads to the warming up or cooling out processes related to their education (Clark, 1960)? It may be necessary that I clarify the operationalization of the two proceeding terms warming up and cooling out in this literature review. The term "cooling out" describes situations where students move away from their initial completion track (Clark, 1960; Moore, 1975). Within this conceptualization, warming up refers to the process of increasing one's likelihood of attaining a degree, certificate, or transfer milestone (Bowen, 2015; Kujawa, 2013; Nakamura, 2003). Factors such as student engagement, high expectations, and instructor quality have a warming effect at the community college level (CCCSE, 2014). According to many scholars, students experience a variety of factors that lead to a warming effect although these same students can also experience cooling due to structural barriers like those associated with the transfer process (Adelman, 2005; Deli-Amen, 2002; Jabbar et al., 2021; Nitecki, 2009; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Overall, evidence shows that community college students seem to have an equal balance between those that cool out during their educational process and students who exceed their initial expectations, with both numbers fluctuating between 20-30% (Conway, 2010; Deli-Amen, 2006; Grubbs, 2016; Hellmich, 1993).

Despite the simplicity of the concepts of warming up versus cooling out, one must carefully consider the broader socioeconomic circumstances, goals, and objectives individual students have in place before determining which of these terms denote success and when. By adding the concept of demand elasticity to the terms warming versus cooling, one can see how these terms can seemingly invert in ways that illustrate how complex the task of measuring success can be. Demand elasticity is a measurement that observes fluctuations in demand based

on one or more variables on which the demand depends (Langelett et al., 2015). However, in this case, one must carefully identify which stakeholders' demands or interests serve as the student's, study's, or evaluation's priority.

In a 2018 skills gap in manufacturing study, Deloitte (2018) illustrated how upwards of two-thirds of its survey respondents reported that they face skills shortages. These data may highlight how these types of shortages plus skill training can offer clues as to whether CTE and AAS student populations can experience significant socioeconomic gains without completing a credential. It is plausible that a subset of these students can gain the skills they need to satisfy their goals without credentialing if companies quickly hire them once they show competence in a needed task. Student's interests in transferring may fluctuate and even reduce "cool out" if a student has goals and objectives in place that relate more strongly to their immediate financial need (Fox, 2020). In general, community college AAS and CTE students reported to have lower levels of interest and commitment in educational expectations than other groups, and they were less likely to complete certificate or degree programs (Alfonso et al., 2005; Grubbs, 2016). Furthermore, students that complete AAS or CTE training often earn higher levels of income than those who possess a bachelor's degree (Symonds et al., 2011; Torpey, 2018). Community colleges, in particular, specialize in giving students access to technical training that can advance their current work positions via short-term credential programs (Lamothe, 2015).

Consequently, CTE and AAS students may warm up to the possibility of experiencing upward mobility or stability by way of getting an immediate job or promotion in replacement of warming up to the idea of completing their programs (Clark, 1960). Studies conducted by Gallup (2018), Liang et al. (2017), and Lagemann and Lewis (2012) show that most students' end goal is to be in a position of increased hire-ability and prosperity chances upon receiving higher

education training. In a report written by Stevens (2019), students' participation in CTE or AAS training seems to point towards successful outcomes even though many of these enrollees are essentially sidestepping the completion and credentialing process per PF and outcome measure standards. In these situations, I posit that the warming up processes happen due to labor-market aspirations and financial gain allegiances as opposed to completion and institutional ones (Clark, 1960).

The question of whether cooling out or even dropping out denotes institutional failure remains, however, I posit that there are two types of cooling out at play in these situations. First, students may be cooling out because they reach their socioeconomic and career goals before completing their studies. This version of cooling out differs significantly from Clark's (1960) original discussion of the term, which included ideas about possible disillusionment, disengagement, or socioeconomic limitations. In general, community college AAS and CTE students reported to have lower levels of interest and commitment in educational expectations than other groups, and they were less likely to finish the degree (Alfonso et al., 2005; Grub et al., 2016; Grubbs, 2016).

However, a population is present within the walls of higher education that exhibits traditional notions of cooling out. Students from underserved low-income homes have lower attendance, transfer, and graduation rates at both colleges and universities (Deming & Walters, 2017; Fox, 2020; Heller, 2001; Whyte, 2012). Community college students often cite personal commitments such as finances, work, or family engagements as their primary reasons for not completing their degree or certificate programs (Cohen et al., 2014).

In either case, these situations raise questions concerning how institutions know when to consider warming up or cooling out a success or failure. Kujawa (2013) discussed the

importance of understanding how malleable student aspirations are and the need for stakeholders to understand better the factors that lead to modifications in student aspirations. Kujawa (2013) listed five factors that may alter students' original goals in a way that redirects their interests toward other endeavors or ceasing their studies. These concepts include disengagement, doubt, knowledge of something different, significant relationships, and transformation (Kujawa, 2013). Of particular interest is the variable that illustrates how students develop the knowledge of something different, which may lead to increased warming-type thoughts and behaviors that potentially change how they plan to use their education.

Another noteworthy example of community college student warming and cooling shifts lies within an analysis of these behaviors from a cultural, racial, and socioeconomic perspective. Since community colleges serve a significant number of first-time, minority, and low socioeconomic status students, understanding their goals and objectives plus the factors that lead them towards completion or not is of great importance (Ma & Baum, 2016). The CCCSE (2014) study documented how men of color report having higher aspirations than white students but are less likely to complete those goals, which points towards the existence of barriers that act as cooling mechanisms. Some of the barriers include a dearth in social capital or family support, a student’s ability to draw boundaries that give them time and space to complete their studies, combating stereotypes, managing interpersonal relationships, and having access to financial aid information (CCCSE, 2014; Nielsen, 2015; Sanchez, 2012). Three-quarters of non-enrolled Latinos ages 18-24 indicated that their likelihood of attending college would have increased if they had access to better financial aid information (Sanchez, 2012; Zarate & Pachon, 2006). In addition, students that come from minority and low-income backgrounds are also more likely to let their social circles influence their warming or cooling tendencies when compared to students

from higher-level income brackets, of who tend to prioritize academic credential markers first (Cheng & Starks, 2002; Evans et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Wilson & Wilson, 1992). Minority students are also likely to display cooling tendencies at the outset of their higher education journey in the form of delayed enrollment, lower self-confidence, access to information, and undermatching (Adleman, 2005; Gandara et al., 2004; Hearn, 1992; Lowry, 2016; Sanchez, 2012). Undermatching refers to instances when students, often minority and low-income, attend institutions whose entry standards are lower than the qualifications and credentials they possess (Lowry, 2016).

To answer the question of whether warming or cooling have positive or negative effects with clarity, one must better understand the specific outcome measures institutions who operate under PF use to measure student success. After exploring student aspirations, the question remains of how well do student aspirations match with the desired outcomes and measurement tools used by policymakers and other community college stakeholders? The following section explores the history and structure of PF and the prevailing outcome measures stakeholders use to determine institutional success and funding levels.

Performance Funding and Outcome Measures

History of Performance Funding

The cost associated with pursuing a college degree has risen exponentially over the past three decades (Gordon & Hedlund, 2016; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). To ensure that colleges and universities perform these duties efficiently from within steadily declining tax revenues, around 30 U.S. states have adopted outcome-based funding models to increase institutional accountability by attaching monies they receive to output measures (Alexander, 1998; Friedel et al., 2013; Rosinger et al., 2020). Concurrently, state leaders decided to cut

higher education funding which has pushed most of the cost to attend college onto students (Katsinas et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2019). This shift in funding has led to increased student loan borrowing and long-term debt (Ulbrich & Kirk, 2017; Wei & Horn, 2013). Despite tremendous economic and scientific accomplishments over the past few decades, citizens have expressed increased dissatisfaction with higher education (Alexander, 1998; Fischer, 2019). Scholars largely attribute this dissatisfaction to student frustrations over the process of dedicating finances to higher education and not completing their studies or finding an adequate job upon completion (Shapiro et al., 2014; Wei & Horn, 2013; Ziedenberg et al., 2015).

Legislative frustration over low graduation numbers led federal legislators and state leaders to design policies that would hold schools more accountable by increasing their efficiency and motivating college stakeholders to find ways to encourage students to complete their studies (Barr, 2002; Katsinas et al., 2011). Most of these outcome-based measures reward institutions in some form based on degree or certificate credentialing (D'Amico et al., 2014; Fain, 2017; Li & Kennedy, 2017). Performance-based funding (PF) models refer to a group of policies, put forth by state-level legislators, which mandate that schools meet certain levels of transfer, graduation, or certificate attainment milestones to gain full or partial access to public funding streams (Fain, 2017; Harnisch, 2011).

Types of Performance Funding

After Tennessee became the first state to adopt PF models in the 1970s, the system has since broken up into two main types (Alshehri, 2016; Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Dougherty & Reddy, 2013). The first classification, PF 1.0, rewards schools that exceed completion quotas with monetary bonuses in addition to their normal levels of funding (Alshehri, 2016). The second version, PF 2.0, attaches an institution's base funds to their completion numbers, and it does not

feature awards that exceed those base levels (Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Dougherty & Reddy, 2013).

In response to the accountability movement's onset, numerous private foundation-supported and federal government-sponsored initiatives have further encouraged schools to boost their completion numbers. The Obama-era White House sponsored American Graduate Initiative established goals that challenged community colleges to increase their number of graduates while finding innovative and effective ways of measuring student and institutional effectiveness (White House, 2009). Pathway programs like Completion by Design and Achieving the Dream sought to encourage institutions to prioritize completion or transfer through data-driven means (Completion by Design, 2012; D'Amico, 2016).

Despite various iterations of performance funding models, each system uses an output-based structure that pre-defines what success looks like for students and institutions alike (Alexander, 1998; Alshehri, 2016; Tandberg et al., 2014). Within pre-defined structures like performance-funding, there is little room for students to define success according to their socioeconomic circumstances, personal, or professional goals if they lie outside state and federal completion metrics. Currently, community colleges have a complicated relationship with PF structures. Some PF states have different parameters for community colleges, and in their analysis, D'Amico et al. (2014) discussed how participant's answers were varied when asked about which stakeholders even set their institution’s PF measures.

Performance Funding Supporters

Supporters of PF models quickly point to the word accountability to justify putting more pressure on post-secondary schools to find ways in which to help their students be more successful than they are currently (Ewell, 2011; Hillman et al., 2015; Ness et al., 2015). With 4-

year graduation rates hovering around 33% for university students, and 28% for community colleges, it is understandable why industry members, consumers, and legislators experience frustration with the U.S. higher education system (Chen, 2021; Shaughnessy, n.d.). Also, college tuition has risen substantially over the past few decades, surpassing the general rate of inflation (Kantrowitz, 2002; Lin, 2016). This rise in tuition cost plus the process of shifting more of that cost to the consumer makes it imperative that students receive a socioeconomically positive return on their investment once they discontinue or complete their studies (Johnson, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2019).

The student loan crisis draws attention from stakeholders who want to make sure that if students borrow money for college, they have many support mechanisms in place to help them succeed, which then justifies the funding schools receive each year (Cooper, 2010; Karp, 2011). Those in favor of PF also mention how these policies act as a check and balance on post-secondary schools by encouraging institutions to teach content and skills that reflect market demands (Ewell, 2011; Hagood, 2019). Community colleges have geared their studies toward building accountability into their practices via new student learning outcomes, institutional benchmarking, and by establishing measures of good practice via survey instruments such as (CCSSE) Community College Survey of Student engagement (Ewell, 2011; Hagood, 2019). Higher education institutions have also increased their creation and distribution of certificate programs, which have slight but positive effects on students' employment and income returns (Bosworth, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2012; Jepsen et al., 2014; Li & Kennedy, 2017). This certificate growth trend is most noticeable at the community college level. While some critics may see this as a process of manufacturing completion for the sake of funding, supporters view this pattern as a means in which to help students leave colleges with something to show for their efforts in the

form of a certification that may lead to a successful career or upward mobility (Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2012).

Legislators designed PF models to encourage higher education institutions to find ways to help students complete in more significant numbers within shorter periods. To meet the demands set forth by this mandate, schools developed various activities and initiatives to help students transition through the learning process efficiently. These initiatives diverge into two distinct categories of which are structural and behavioral adjustments. According to Dougherty et al. (2016), some of the structural adjustments made at the community college level included growing developmental education programs, adding in more articulation options that encourage students to complete so they can transfer with ease, offering tutoring and intervention servicing, reducing degree requirements, and enhancing the advising process to give at-risk students early warnings. In the area of behavioral change, school stakeholders tended to boost admissions requirements, recruit selectively, lessen class demands, and pressure faculty to adjust instruction in ways that would foster student success (Dougherty et al., 2016). Also, institutional administrators began to encourage faculty and staff to work together to find ways to identify the parts of the learning process that led to non-completion so that they could reduce or eliminate them. By limiting wasteful practices, designing impactful student support programs, and communicating to students and faculty that those programs are there, community colleges can foster higher levels of student and stakeholder engagement, which leads to higher rates of retention and completion (Kuh, 2009; Levesque, 2018).

Performance Funding Critiques

Although there are proponents of PF, as reported by authors such as Hillman et al. (2015) and Petrides et al. (2004), a considerable amount of research exists that illustrates how these

types of structures have mixed results at best, and at worst leaves community colleges underfunded plus frustrated due to the "make do/just deal with it" culture this system creates (D'Amico et al., 2012; D'Amico et al., 2014). Not all stakeholders in higher education support using pre-defined performance metrics to determine their institutions' funding levels. There is also a presence of scholarly evidence in this subject area that echoes those sentiments (Chen, 2021; Gandara & Rutherford, 2018; Grizzle, 2002).

From a policymaker perspective, PF policies promote accountability by incentivizing institutions to take measures that increase the number of students that leave their programs with credentials by rewarding schools for output credential-based measures versus input enrollment ones (Boland, 2018; Hillman et al., 2011). However, studies show that the returns associated with PF policy display little efficacy (Boland, 2018; Crawford, 2011; Hillman et al., 2014). For example, Horn and Lee (2017) discussed how the ineffectiveness of PF policies might lie in how institutions and legislators calculate their productivity metrics with their evidence which showed how 18% to 56% of schools misclassified their effectiveness or lack thereof through their use of unadjusted metrics. Dougherty et al. (2012) suggested that PF policies also place schools in a challenging position whereby their funding levels are uncomfortably affected by state revenue fluctuations. Furthermore, studies by Rutherford and Rabovsky (2014), Dougherty et al. (2016), and Dougherty and Natow (2019) presented data that points towards how PF policies have had some harmful and unintended consequences.

This literature synthesis considers three themes that highlight the unintended adverse outcomes schools report to experience in response to PF. In an article written by Dougherty et al. (2016), participants voiced concerns about grade inflation due to the increased pressure school administrators applied to faculty in hopes of increasing success rates. Since community colleges

tend to employ a significant percentage of adjunct faculty coupled with full-time faculty who often work via yearly contracts, it is plausible that these concerns are valid since people's jobs may be in jeopardy if they do not meet the success rate goals set forth by their institutions' administration (Jolley et al., 2013; Schutz et al., 2015). Some methods of evaluating faculty may also inadvertently lead to grade inflation through "traditional use of course evaluation forms in personnel actions, leading to concern by tenure track faculty and adjunct faculty members about the effect of low grades on student ratings and, therefore, on continued employment" (Smith & Fleisher, 2011, p. 36). Secondly, researchers reported data that highlights a population within institutions that operate under PF who experience low morale. Specifically, this low morale centers around a dynamic where student-facing workers feel as if they are sacrificing quality for quantity, or in the case of faculty, must lower class standards in ways that allow more people to pass their courses (Dougherty et al., 2016; Nolan & Stizlein, 2011; Shulock, 2011).

The third negative PF impact reported by researchers relates to how outcome-based funding metrics limit the dollar amounts schools receive, which can have a detrimental effect on an institution's ability to serve students successfully through programs like tutoring or mentorship (Hagedorn, 2010; Romano & Palmer, 2015). This dearth in funding dynamic has a harsher impact on community colleges because they are historically underfunded and serve students with a more extensive range of socioeconomic backgrounds and goals, some of which may not involve earning a credential in the eyes of PF standards (Romano & Palmer, 2015). This underfunding may also explain why PF has had an insignificant to slight effect on their corresponding higher education institutions' completion rates (Hillman et al., 2015; Tandberg et al., 2014). Since many students enter community colleges without having concrete goals in mind, it may be unfair to negatively judge community colleges solely based on transfer, degree, or

certificate completion, especially where nontraditional students are concerned (Dowd, 2007; Fox, 2020).

Outcome Measures

In addition to the varied types of PF funding structures, community colleges that operate within these models use outcome measures to determine institutional progress and priority. The National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) defines outcome measures as data that captures information which highlights the student experience while in school, upon completing a credential, and post-completion. Among the various outcome measures are themes that place each specific measurement criteria into a broader category which often ranges between input, output, outcome, and process (D'Amico et al., 2014). Input measurements typically measure enrollment figures, faculty compensation, and tuition (Burke & Minassians, 2004). Output measures tend to focus on data related to the short-term effects students experience because of their interactions with their institutions of choice of which can include graduation rates, transfer statistics, retention numbers, and students' time to degree progression (Burke & Minassians, 2004; Burke & Serban, 1998; Education Commission of the States, 2000; Zarkesh & Beas, 2004). Outcome measures tend to feature information that institutions use to ascertain how well they affected a students' life using a more longitudinal perspective. Outcome measurements often encompass performance after transfer, licensure test scores, job placement, satisfaction surveys, student learning outcomes, and employer feedback to name a few (AACC, n.d.; Burke & Minassians, 2004; Burke & Serban, 1998; Education Commission of the States, 2000; Itzkowitz, 2017; Zarkesh & Beas, 2004). The measurement variable process includes indicators such as faculty workload, remedial activity, industry partnerships, diversity initiatives, community service, noncredit course offerings, and staff-related metrics (Burke & Minassians, 2004; Burke

& Serban, 1998; Education Commission of the States, 2000; Itzkowitz, 2017; Zarkesh & Beas, 2004). Of the indicator types listed by Burke and Minassians (2004), output measurements seemed to be legislator's primary variable of interest. According to D'Amico et al. (2014), "the top five indicators captured at the state level include enrollment (input), retention (output), degree completion (output), graduation rates (output), and transfer rates (output)" (p. 239).

Alignment and Gaps

There are many ways to illustrate the processes associated with a student's decision to enroll in higher education, their departure, and whether individuals and institutions can count those interactions in between and upon exit as a success. The following illustrations explain how the study of student transitions and departure has matured over the past few decades while still leaving room for improvement. Some of the following figures also illustrate the prevailing outcome measures community colleges use to ascertain whether they are successfully serving students.

Bean and Metzner (1985) created their student attrition model from a social-psychology perspective via the inclusion of intrinsic and external variables which may act as mechanisms that foster the processes of warming up versus cooling out. Bean and Metzner (1985) successfully mapped out many types of demographic and psychological variables that play a role in a student's motivation, socioeconomic responsibilities, and performance. However, the model does little by way of identifying measurable indicators institutions can use to find ways in which to route students towards completion. In addition, the Bean and Metzner (1985) model does not include means to investigate whether students were still successful in response to the training they received at their community colleges even after dropping out. Nevertheless, the authors may have not intended to include such caveats in their model, and the one they do present helps to

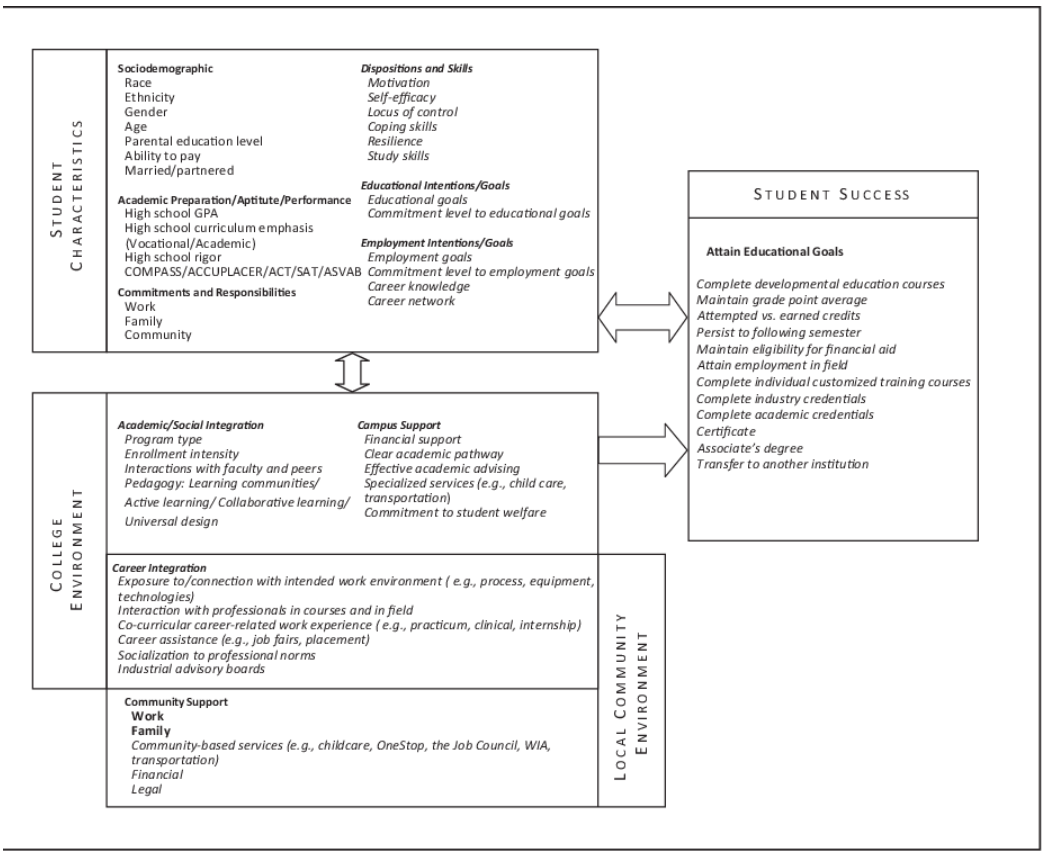
document the community college systems transition from an access model to one that prioritizes accountability.

In Tinto's (1993) conceptual schema for dropout from college, the aspects of institutional commitment appear in addition to the socioeconomic considerations and elements of integration thus illustrating how the study of college completion evolved by way of investigating the role institutions play in fostering engagement and success in greater detail. In this model, Tinto (1998) identified four formal responsibilities institutions bear which relate to integrating students, who enroll with unique backgrounds and goals, into the educational process, which lead to a second set of commitments that will strongly affect whether a student departs or completes.

Hirschy et al. (2011) broadened the conversation of understanding students' relationships with their conceptual model by illustrating a series of paths that display how students, institutions, and the local community play a role in the various ways in which technical career students can experience success. The Hirschy et al. (2011) model differed from the models of Bean and Metzner (1985) and Tinto (1998) by way of focusing on successes rather than dropouts. They also presented a variety of ways to define success along with a section that illustrates how labor markets influence outcomes.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of CTE Student Success in Community College



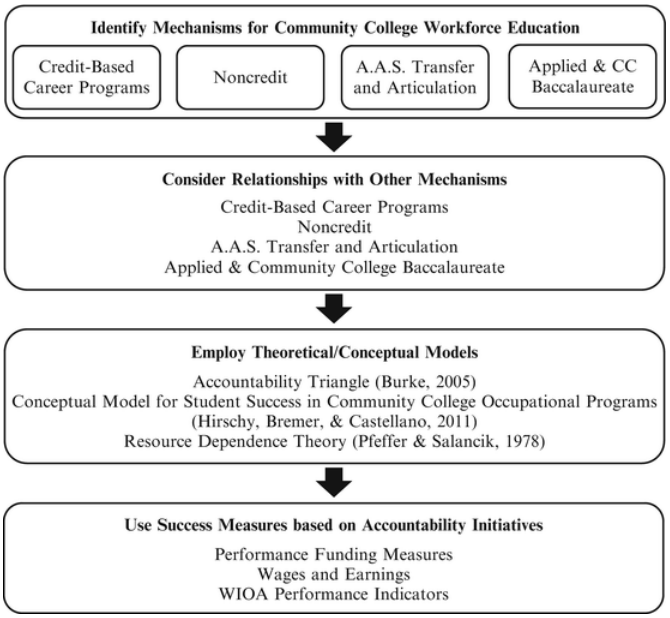
Note. Conceptual model of CTE student success in community college. Adapted from "Career and technical education (CTE) student success in community colleges: A conceptual model" (Hirschy et al., 2011, p. 310)

D'Amico (2016) evolved the conversation more by creating Figure 2. In this model, D'Amico (2016) includes the traditionally present external success factors, the new addition of theory and departmental structure, plus a section that lists some additional prevalent criteria (outcome measures) that institutions use to determine success. The D'Amico (2016) model illustrates how the traditional success measure of outcome can broaden to include wages and earnings plus WIOA performance indicators. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

(WIOA) is a policy initiative that became law in 2014. It features a series of measurements that assess how effectively states produce positive outcomes for individuals that fall into six core categories that include adults, dislocated workers, youth programs, Adult Education and Family Literacy Act participants, employment service programs, and vocational rehabilitation (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.a.). To measure each state's effectiveness, the U.S. Department of Labor measures individual's employment rates two or four quarters after they exit their program of choice, credential attainment, measurable skill gains, and their effectiveness in serving employers (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.).

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework for the Future Study of Community College Workforce Development in the Student Success Era



Note. Conceptual framework for the future study of community college workforce development in the student success era. Adapted from “Community college workforce development in the student success era” (D’Amico, 2016, p. 260)

Some scholars suggest that PF systems and outcome measures broaden to include metrics such as GPA or credentialing to account for changes in a student's aspirations, intents, and demographic backgrounds (Fox, 2020; Harbour et al., 2003; Hirschy et al., 2011). In any case, in this age of corporatizing the education system, it looks as if PF is here to stay (Cox, 2013). If community college stakeholders are to successfully and thoroughly balance students' interests with institutional accountability plus funding, the student voice must be present in the conversation. Furthermore, it is essential to better understand the unique yet significant number of subpopulations present at community colleges, such as AAS and CTE students, to investigate whether traditional outcome measures make sense for them, and if not, how stakeholders might alter them accordingly. For example, how can leaders better identify students who fall into the skill builder category or those who receive training then leave once that training meets their socioeconomic goals, irrespective of their completion status, so that they can then create ways to measure an institution's positive impact on this population?

Each of these figures illustrate various progressions in understanding how a students' demographic background, external obligations, or motivations can affect their decision to drop out. The intrinsic flow of these models also illustrates how the accountability movement increasingly relies on quantitative analytical measurements to determine success as opposed to more qualitative approaches. Consequently, this quantitative approach can overlook populations who lie outside pre-defined success models. Figure 2, which does account for market productivity, wages, and employment steers closely to individualizing large-scale rating systems; however, the existing outcome measures either assume that the students in those models also graduate, or they make no mention of how the models or institutions can successfully account for students that can fall into success categories but fail to earn a credential.

The Hirschy et al. (2011) and D'Amico (2016) models add detail to the performance funding and outcome measure literature plus the overarching conversation about higher education system accountability. However, neither of the models quite capture the student's voice by way of understanding better their perceptions of success especially when and where those gains lie outside of completion or socioeconomic mobility. Other models such as Burke's (2004) accountability triangle illustrate how the pillars of accountability stand on state priorities, academic concerns, and market forces. Nevertheless, one must also ask questions related to self-satisfaction, personal gratification, skill development, or gains without salary increases to develop a full picture of higher education success.

An example of the type of students who may go unnoticed are those who attend community college to receive training on new energy efficient equipment. In these types of cases, students may get the training they need, drop out of the program, and are allowed to keep their job at the same salary level as opposed to being laid off. Which of these models or outcome measures would account for such behavior in a way that gives credit to community colleges for reducing potential unemployment or outsourcing away from local communities? This study seeks to further address these types of questions by bringing student voices to the conversation of aspirations, completion, and success measures. The Seidman (2019) approach assisted greatly in my efforts to capture the five participants' stories comprehensively. As a result, I developed a deep understanding of how students socially construct their realities and aspirations based on their everyday interactions and circumstances instead of institutional metrics. A process also informed by the social constructivism framework (Gardner, 2021; Jung, 2019).

Chapter 3: Methodology

Several existing performance funding and outcome measure structures seemingly take the stance that completing a degree or certificate program is the goal for community college students, yet the surface level completion rates that collectively document these metrics tell a different story (Chen, 2021; D'Amico et al., 2014; Fain, 2017; Li & Kennedy, 2017). Community colleges serve a significant portion of higher education students who do not graduate in high numbers (Ma & Baum, 2016; Snyder & Dillow, 2013). However, students continue to enroll year after year, and in some cases at increasing rates depending on the population (Anayah & Kuk, 2015; Baum et al., 2011; Juszkiewicz, 2016).

From a Kantian perspective, the completion agenda might prove valid, especially at the outset, regardless of the minimal impact it has had over the past few decades (Baron, 2018). Although this strategy may get more students out the door, which is debatable, students may suffer post-educational experience in the form of not being prepared to meet market demands (O'Banion, 2010). Likewise, completion agenda policies may overlook successes students experience due to receiving community college skill training, like that which schools provide in AAS programs, despite them not receiving a credential. After all, many employers in these fields will hire based primarily on a candidate's skill set, which also tends to hold long-term labor market value (Bills, 1988; Satoshi, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to explore the aspirations of community college students who enroll in career-focused Associate in Applied Science (AAS) programs to understand better their stated goals and ways in which that data might serve as implications for measuring institutional performance and outcomes. This study focuses on the following research questions, which I designed to gain insight into AAS students' aspirations:

1. Why do students enroll in community college AAS programs, and what are their aspirations?

2. How do community college AAS students' life experiences influence their aspirations?

3. How do AAS students plan to use the education they gain through community college training?

4. What does it mean to AAS students to be successful due to enrolling at their chosen institution?

Methodology

This study relies on qualitative research as a means for which to study community college student aspirations. A qualitative approach is most appropriate for this research because it allows me, through interviews, to gain valuable insight into how participants navigate the process of meaning-making as it relates to formulating their aspirations as opposed to using a quantitative approach that often relies on ordinal information (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2009). In addition, Seidman's (2019) in-depth interview approach assisted in my understanding of how external factors such as socioeconomic need, social influences, and the local labor market impacted how participants view success because of their academic training. Finally, this study may assist in putting students' voices at the forefront of legislative conversations regarding measuring institutional success (Merriam, 2009; Punch, 1998).

Epistemology

I chose to use a social constructivist framework to study students' aspirations primarily because it assists in my reliance on data rooted in the notion that students, through knowledge and learning, create individualized ideas of what academic success means to them, sometimes irrespective of institutional and state standards. The thought that human beings socially construct

concepts, models, meaning, and reality tethers to the basic tenants of social constructivism (Jung, 2019; Schwandt, 1998). The idea that individual actors can modify the conventional thoughts of the masses or other hegemonic forces to formulate meaning using a more individualized approach matches the primary focus of this study (Breu & Hemingway, 2002; Jung, 2019; Surowiecki, 2005; Woolgar, 1986).

Also rooted in the epistemological framework of this study is my reliance on the Hirschy et al. (2011) conceptual model for student success in community college occupational programs. This model is highly appropriate for studying student aspirations because it focuses on the contributing factors that lead to student success, and the model houses a section that lists varied types of attainment that reaches beyond credentialing.

Design and Rationale

This study seeks to understand better community college AAS student aspirations through their experiences and the factors that influence them, which fits well within a qualitative framework (Creswell, 2007, 2013). To appropriately accomplish this goal, I adopted an in-depth qualitative interview approach informed by Seidman (2019) to capture students' lived experiences and processes of meaning-making as they relate to their formation of higher education aspirations. This approach helped me to gather a first-hand account of student aspirations that reached far beyond data related to major declarations or certificate enrollment statuses enrollees declare upon entry to their institution of choice. The multi-in-depth interview approach helped me to investigate two layers of student aspirations. The first layer focused on student aspirations followed by the second which included a study of the surrounding elements that mold those ideas in great detail. My interview structure, questions, and protocol are in appendix A. A single interview approach or other strategies would have undoubtedly limited my

ability to ask students probing questions that dived deeply into participants' identity formation, social ties, and how their academic training impacted their socio-economic progress.

In addition to using the Seidman (2019) interview approach, this study relied on outside data in the form of peer-reviewed sources, community college website information that documents student demographics, completion numbers, drop-out rates, and job placement metrics. Community college website content helped to triangulate this study's interview data by reinforcing the information I gathered from participants in ways that further validated each of their thoughts (Farmer et al., 2006). Also, by adding website documentation that illustrates how the participants in this study reflect a significant portion of AAS students demographically, I strengthened the case that community colleges serve different students who have differing needs enough to warrant broader performance funding and outcome measure metrics.

Positionality Statement

Born in Chicago, IL, to a working-class single mother of two, I quickly learned that seeking education to grow personally, professionally, athletically, and socially would be my life choice as a young African American trying to find a way to succeed. My father's side of the family, which includes 12 aunts and uncles, features seven teachers, one professional basketball player turned successful real estate broker, four ministers, and one public school superintendent. My mother's side of the family includes one aunt who is a retired nurse and a recently deceased uncle whose highest level of education was high school. My mother attended secretary school post-high school, and my father became a minister, primarily educated through the church. In addition, my older sister and I added to our family's educational prowess by seeking doctoral-level education. Although she recently completed her academic journey in late 2021 while I entered the final phase of my studies, we both remain aware of the value and impacts education

can have on people's lives. Our family has progressed from slavery to college faculty in four generations. Through my service to others in my academic efforts, I hope to foster similar upward mobility in other people's lives.

Most of my higher education faculty experience is in community college. Rooted in the various department of liberal arts programs I have worked within is a desire to promote social change, which collectively prompted me to observe social phenomena through a lens that prioritizes leadership, stewardship, social responsibility, and equity. My tendency to prioritize social responsibility and equity led to my interest in studying institutional equity issues such as funding. Specifically, I wanted to know more about the causes of institutional under-funding within the accountability movement, and how schools can better measure their impact on students and their local communities.

My research interest in student aspirations and how policymakers create institutional funding strategies also stems from my experience as an academic advisor. Many students I have spoken to over the years, through random conversations and advising sessions, attend community college for all sorts of non-completion-related reasons, most which community colleges do not get funding credit for through performance-based models. This thought process led me to question the metrics legislators use to determine institutional success and funding in addition to whether they consider a student’s stated goal even if it does not involve credentialing.

These various workplace encounters, my social science background, plus my doctoral training at UNC Charlotte meshed to help formulate this study from within my natural disposition and tendency to apply the postmodern lens to research. Postmodern theory tends to frame my worldview and my professional proximity to this issue. Like myself, postmodern theory often rejects grand-narratives, hegemonic certainty, or people’s adherence to ideas of

universal meaning in favor of conditional knowledge and realities (English, 2020). Consequently, I desire to bring forth the student voice to the conversation of aspirations, completion, and funding instead of using a bureaucratic grand-narrative approach that pre-defines what success should look like for all students (Barnett, 2006).

In addition to my workplace experiences, I have a bachelor's degree in public health studies from Eastern Illinois University, a master's degree in public administration from DePaul University, plus a master's degree in social science from the University of Tennessee, all of which involve social justice, equity, and policy analysis training. My educational experience instilled in me a belief that I must bring forth silent voices into conversations leaders have concerning governance and policy. In the book Power of Proximity, Warren (2017) discussed how people who possess the power to bring voice to the voiceless also have the obligation and responsibility to do so.

My social privilege comes from the extensive training higher education stakeholders afforded me for over two decades. As a result, I feel as if I must pass social opportunity to others whether that effort comes in the form of my duties as faculty, researcher, or an administrator. In addition to working to ensure that individuals have an equitable experience because of attending institutions I work for and beyond, I am also interested in institutional equity by way of creating research studies and other projects that help institutions uphold their mandates to provide the best education possible for any student that decides to enroll in higher education studies. This study blends these efforts by producing data that potentially gives community colleges a chance to highlight successes students experience that lie outside of current completion parameters. By documenting more of their successes, community colleges might gain access to increased funding, which then allows schools to better serve those in need.

One of the potential barriers that I foresaw encountering stemmed from my work as a community college faculty at the institution I am conducting the study. I thought that my employment increased the possibility that students would hesitate to provide me with their full stories, especially if they involve sensitive topics such as criminal backgrounds, immigration status, or financial aid status information if they had no intentions of completing a degree upon enrollment. However, I countered these potential barriers by ensuring that my participants never took one of my courses by filtering them out during the initial screening processes.

To increase the comfortability level of my participants, I applied rapport-building skills through displays of kindness, support, encouragement, and repeated guarantees of confidentiality during the in-depth interview and data analysis processes. To further combat any potential biases I possess concerning this research, I conducted a series of individual debriefing sessions with my doctoral cohort and dissertation committee, a process informed by Gardner (2021), which acts as an additional check and balance.

Researcher Role

During this study, I was the only person who recruited participants, conducted interviews, transcribed responses, and analyzed the data. My dissertation chair and methodology specialist reviewed my data and suggested edits as needed. By being the sole individual who worked on this project, I could better control anonymity since this data did not pass-through multiple sets of hands. In addition, I was solely responsible for gathering support documentation via community college institutional and system wide websites that illustrated student demographic and completion data. In both cases, I accurately represented all primary and secondary data through the series of credible check and triangulation processes found in the trustworthiness section of this chapter.

Protection of Human Subjects

Ensuring that researchers protect participants during the data collection process is of the utmost importance to this study and others. As such, I took multiple steps to ensure that this study's participant data remained protected from start to post-completion. Step one in protecting the rights of my participants involved attaining permission to collect data from UNC Charlotte's Institutional Review Board. During this comprehensive process, I provided IRB reviewers with evidence that ensured them that this study followed all the guidelines associated with conducting ethical research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moon, 2009; Tene & Polonetsky, 2016). I remained mindful that my participants might reveal data that points towards them having no intentions to graduate despite having to declare otherwise to gain access to financial aid. Understanding that this type of information could harm participants' financial-aid support, I stayed mindful to maintain each student's trust while protecting their individual and institutional identities.

After recruiting and securing participants for this study, I interviewed each of them in-person or with the virtual meeting software Zoom. I chose to give participants two interview options in large part due to the COVID-19 pandemic and my desire to ensure that they would have a safer option to select. To protect the identity of each interviewee, I asked each participant to assign themselves a pseudonym during the interview and reporting phases of this study to avoid using their names throughout the process. In addition to my attempts to protect interviewee identities, I de-identified their institution's identity plus the names of any related stakeholders, whether they be institutional or individual. I then referenced their chosen community college using wording such as their institution, or their community college.

In cases where participants opted to participate in Zoom interviews, I requested that they keep their cameras turned on to increase the chances that we build a rapport during the interview

sessions, which they did. After recording and saving the Zoom and in-person interviews, I housed that data on a password-protected cloud server. Once I gathered, reviewed, and triangulated this interview data, I deleted the electronic files.

None of my participants displayed or spoke of discomfort during the data gathering portion of this study. The additional steps I took to ensure they were comfortable, including assuring them that I would maintain confidentiality and represent their words as accurately as possible, succeeded. In addition to ensuring participants that I would take the necessary steps to maintain safety and confidentiality, I engaged with interviewees using unguarded natural dialog which helped build rapport with each of them pre, during, and post interview (Abbe & Brandon, 2012; Gardner, 2021).

Sampling

This study relied on data sought from AAS students, a unique group at the community college, who may navigate the learning process on campus, off-campus, or on a job site via work-based learning programs (de Alva & Schneider, 2018; Lester & Costley, 2010). My chosen site institution, located in central North Carolina, proved to be an ideal location for several reasons that met my initial criteria. These reasons include my proximity to students, some of whom chose in-person interviews during this multi-session process, North Carolinas' use of various iterations of PF for over 30 years, and the state's robust AAS program offerings (Quinterno, 2019). Serving two counties, one rural and one suburban, for over two decades, the institution I selected for this study serves roughly 3,000 students, 20% full-time, and 41% of whom are minorities (Community College Review, n.d.; U.S. News & World Report, n.d.).

To ensure that this study’s participants generated information rich data that assisted in my understanding of students’ aspirations, life stories, plus the internal and external factors that

affect those goals, I used maximum variation sampling. Maximum variation sampling is a type of purposeful sampling that allows researchers to choose participants that are likely to yield the most valuable results while also making a deliberate attempt to select a diverse group (Etikan et al., 2016; Gardner, 2021; Suri, 2011). Purposeful sampling successfully helped me to capture a large amount of meaningful data from a few information-rich participants identified through a non-probability selection process (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) successfully captured the essence of purposeful sampling in the following passage below by mentioning how:

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in-depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling. Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. (Patton, 2002, p. 230)

I relied on this institutions AAS deans, department chairs, and the vice president of academic affairs for help identifying and recruiting eligible participants. The combination of electronic advertising via emails to all AAS students and word of mouth were the primary means by which I gathered participants for this study. Also, to complete the sample selection step of this study, I created and distributed an online pre-participant survey, located in appendix B, which acted as my initial filter. The questions on the pre-participant survey included students' contact information, confirmation of interest, full or part-time enrollment status, age, race, sex/gender, time availability, the nature of the study, and whether they took one of my courses in the past. I heavily considered students' socioeconomic status, pre-existing higher education credentials, if they were starting or changing their career focus, and how far they were in their current academic progression while choosing the five participants featured here.

On this same online pre-participation form, I listed my UNC Charlotte email and office phone contact in case they had questions. Each online form response appeared in my UNC Charlotte student email inbox for review. The AAS students at this institution, when on campus, primarily take courses and work with faculty on a different campus than the ones where I teach, so I did not know my participants in any capacity. In addition, the online form filter questions ensured that none of my current or former students served as a participant in this study, and that potential participants were willing to meet the pre through post-interview time requirements before moving forward in the selection process.

Prior to conducting my first interviews with each participant, they signed an informed consent document, which finalized their participation in the study. The result was a mix of students who were in their early, middle, and final stages of their community college experience, three who possessed at least a bachelor's degree, one of traditional age, and three who were married, all of whom also ranged socioeconomically. In addition, my participants included one male, two African American females, one white female, and a bi-racial female.

In addition, I choose to interview a small but diverse sample of students to focus on a more in-depth multiple interview method to capture a deep and comprehensive picture of participant's life stories, experiences, and reflections (Seidman, 2019).

Due to the interviews taking place primarily in the summer months, I received no responses from students who worked or sought employment in industrial fields. However, I received and selected students from the numerous responses in other AAS academic areas, including nursing, medical sonography, and education. Even though I did not garner participation from students in the industrial market, I attempted to contact them by sending students multiple waves of advertisement emails while also marketing my study in person when

they held classes, with permission from their instructors. My goal was to secure four to six participants. Consequently, this study features data from five students. Within these five responses, I successfully reached data saturation, and did not need to seek more participants. Also, all my recruiting efforts included a statement, verbal or via email, concerning this study's monetary incentive parameters. Each participant received a $10 gift card for each interview session they completed and reviewed.

This study relied on information from community college AAS student participants who were current students at the time of our interviews. This current enrollment timeframe limitation helped to ensure that each participant had similar education and job market experiences due to the minimal program and structural changes that had taken place at the institution of interest at that time. Also, by limiting my responses to those within the same academic system and institution, I avoided the possibility of mislabeling major, program, and course offering codes, which may differ across institutions.

In addition to the similar education experience, and labor-market interest-related advantages associated with limiting participants by geographic location, institution, and programs, the parameters I set for my sample increased the level of accessibility I had to each interviewee. Having increased proximity to each participant is especially important when using the Seidman (2019) approach that requires multiple interview sessions plus the peer-debriefing and member-checking triangulation strategies I also employed. In addition, North Carolina has a robust presence of AAS students, 931,801 in 2018, which may increase the likelihood that my data are transferable due to the increased chance that our students may look and act like similar ones elsewhere (NC Department of Public Instruction, n.d.).

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Following a strategy informed by Seidman (2019) and Gardner (2021), this study used in-depth participant interviews as a means for which to gather data. Consequently, I selected a qualitative approach to gain in-depth insight into the social landscapes, processes of meaning making, and ensuing aspirations of each participant (Creswell, 2007; Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldana, 2011). The application of a series of in-depth interviews helped me to capture a fuller picture of how students form their aspirations across three themes which include their life stories, experiences while enrolled at their institutions, and reflections concerning their education and career choices (Seidman, 2019). Appendix A illustrates how each interview session features specific questions that capture participants' in-depth accounts of their life stories related to their education journey and ensuing aspirations. Conducting multiple interviews with each participant increased the chance that I uncover data concerning participants' experiences that may not otherwise appear using other quantitative and qualitative methods (Gardner, 2021; Seidman, 2019). The data uncovered via the in-depth qualitative interview approach and the initial identification of students' personal goals proved invaluable in understanding this study's implications on performance funding and outcome measure standards. As such, the unique potential of this study to uncover students' aspirations plus their personal stories further justified why this methodology and ensuing methods are highly appropriate.

Before collecting the data I used for this study, I conducted a pilot study four months earlier, which featured three 50-to-60-minute interviews with one female community college AAS student who sought an associate in business degree and real estate certificate. This student, Keisha, was in her late 30s, African American, a single mother of two daughters, and is enrolled at the same institution as my primary study participants. She lives with her children in one of the poorest counties in North Carolina and worked at a national real estate firm located in a county

directly west of the one where she resides. Her responses indicated that her aspirations were layered, and those layers then dictated how she planned to use her education. For example, this student stated that her long-term ideal goal was to attain a bachelor's degree in social sciences and then attend law school to become a real estate attorney. If her social conditions allowed her to pursue those goals, Keisha discussed how she would only need her real estate license from the community college. The social conditions in question included parenting obligations, relocation, and personal finances. In this scenario, Keisha also talked about how she would not care if she earned an associate degree if she could attend a university instead.

If some socioeconomic factor prevented her progress toward law school, Keisha would instead prioritize earning a real estate license and an associate degree in business so she could progress at her current place of work while also raising her kids and trying to move to a larger city in North Carolina. The stories she discussed during our conversations illustrated that community college AAS students' aspirations could fluctuate based on their life experiences. These fluctuations can then change whether graduation from their selected institution is a priority. I also found that Keisha considers her time at the college a success irrespective of her completion status because she has been able to use what she learned to receive higher pay, a more secure job status at her place of work, and a higher GPA which may assist her in gaining admission to a university. In addition, her responses showed me that the design of my study yielded quality information that I could use to address my topic and research questions.

For this study, I conducted three 40-60-minute in-depth semi-structured interviews with five community college AAS students. I chose to focus on AAS students since they are the likeliest group at the community college level to fall into the "skill builder" category, which refers to students who prioritize skill training over academic completion, of whom often reach

their employment goals without consistently earning a credential (Bahr et al., 2022; Batts & Pagliari, 2013; Guthrie, 2016). At each student's request, I conducted all three interviews with each participant within a 7-day timeframe. Among the five participants, three chose to conduct all their interviews via Zoom, while two opted to conduct them in person. During my interviews with all five participants, the first sessions were the shortest, lasting around 40-45 minutes. Their second interviews were the longest, lasting around one hour, while the third sessions each ended around the 50-minute mark.

Procedure and Guidelines

Before I conducted each of the three interviews, I provided participants with an overview or reminder of the nature of the study, procedures involved with the interview, points of consent, participant rights and responsibilities, and followed up that briefing with a request that they verbally agree to begin the interview. I also asked participants if they had any questions or concerns before they signed the consent form and began the interviews. My selected participants had the option to stop interviews at any stage, take breaks, and ask questions at their leisure during all phases of the discussions. However, no students exercised these options during any portion of our sessions.

During the interviews, I used pseudonyms to address participants at all times while also avoiding mentioning the institution they are attending to ensure that I protected their identities. In-person interviews occurred in my office, and I used REV recording and transcription software to collect and transcribe interview data via my personal laptop. Participants who selected the virtual interview option interviewed using the Zoom online meeting program. Although my participants and I conducted virtual interviews with cameras on, I only used the audio portion of the interviews for data collection and deleted each video recording post transcription. Post our

interviews, I saved all Zoom data on the UNC Charlotte cloud-based server then used REV software to transcribe those recordings to ensure that both in-person and virtual interviews go through the same transcription processes using the same software. Each participant I selected to interview signed all necessary consent documentation, completed their interviews and debriefing sessions, and reviewed their transcripts for accuracy. As a result, each received the $30 incentive payment post-completion.

Interview Questions

I adopted the Sideman (2019) approach by conducting three separate interviews with each participant. Housed in the interview protocols featured in Appendix A, each interview focuses on three distinct areas of interest. The first interview featured questions that prompted participants to narrate their life stories and experiences. Specifically, my goal was to generate a semi-structured conversation that helped me investigate how each participant's past social contexts and processes of meaning making helped to formulate their world views and ensuing educational aspirations. In addition, I used this interview to understand better how participants' professional, personal, and social obligations plus life goals inform their academic aspirations and decisions to see where these aspects intertwine or separate.

The second interview session featured questions that encouraged participants to describe their lived experiences as community college students better. To accomplish this, I asked questions that request that interviewees reconstruct their experiences related to being an AAS student at their chosen institution, current professional and personal life situations and aspirations, and knowledge of labor market conditions. I constructed the second interview session to examine participants' present tense, which helps to compliment the first interview session that focuses on each interviewee's past experiences.

The third and more summative interview session served two primary purposes. First, I began these interviews by giving each participant a brief overview of the first and second interviews, followed by me asking them a series of questions that investigated whether my assessment matched what they took from our sessions. After that overview and review briefing, I requested that each participant engage in reflection by discussing how they make meaning of those personal narrative stories, their lives as students, and how they define and envision success in response to the training they experience at their chosen institution.

Throughout the three interview sessions, I asked probing questions that encouraged participants to go into deeper detail concerning various main and sub-topics. Also, I never hesitated to ask clarifying questions to increase the chance that my analysis closely matched the intended message each participant intended to convey. The clarifying questions I asked also assisted in my understanding of each student's use of career-specific terminologies, such as those associated with medical sonography and nursing. Overall, I designed my interview questions to generate a reflective, honest, and detailed guided narrative that helps to address my research questions with as few interruptions from myself as possible.

Data Analysis

I selected a qualitative approach to this study to tell each participant's stories in detail so readers could better understand how their everyday interactions and experiences influence their aspirations in complex ways not easily understood within existing institutional success metrics. Within these stories, I discovered information that shows how students' past life experiences, current social situations, and future endeavors inform how they view success. To adequately present the information I gathered in this study, I sought a means of analysis that assisted in my efforts to synthesize my interview data into clear points among and across each participant.

Consequently, I selected thematic analysis to analyze the in-depth interview data I gathered from participants. Thematic analysis helps researchers navigate the process of using data to identify themes, threads, and patterns to gain immersive insight into a person's everyday life (Gardner, 2021; Riessman, 2008). Following a template formulated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012), and found within Gardner (2021), this research adopts the six-phase thematic analysis approach. The six-phase thematic approach includes data familiarization, initial code generation, theme search, theme review, defining themes, and the final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012).

The first phase of the Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) six-phase thematic analysis protocol involves ensuring that researchers become familiar with the data they collect. As such, I conducted each interview analysis individually by focusing on one set of responses at a time, which helped to prevent the mixing of data during stages where it should stay separate. As such, I read each interview transcript at least twice before proceeding with the analysis in any form. After I reached a high level of understanding of each participant's data, roughly after the second or third review, I performed a final check to make sure each transcript matched its corresponding recording, then began the notetaking and coding process.

In this study, I began the initial coding process, phase two, by highlighting various words and phrases that captured the essential elements of each interview while taking special note of comments related to the participant's life experiences, processes of meaning-making, internal and external aspiration influences, followed by each interviewee's aspirations. Using a strategy informed by Gardner (2021), I also coded data that did not link directly to the research questions. This strategy helped to increase my understanding of participant's life experiences and how demographics play a role in their interaction with higher education.

During the third phase of Braun and Clarkes' (2006, 2012) thematic analysis process, I created, refined, and prioritized themes according to the research questions they addressed through a collating process. Since the initial codes closely reflected useful raw data segments, I identified through a thorough transcript review, I used them to form fewer codes by grouping them based on similarity and their ability to address one or more of my research questions. Once I reached this stage, I found that my second-tier themes were broad yet supported by numerous phase 2 codes that illustrated how and why I created corresponding categories (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012). I then removed any data that did not relate to a coherent pattern during this stage (Gardner, 2021).

Stage four of the Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) process involved reviewing and analyzing themes. To start the process of theme review, I analyzed each theme using a series of questions that asked whether the themes made sense, were supported by my data, had any overlaps, were themes within themes and needed separating, had too many or little codes present to support them, or if there were any additional themes within the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). To accomplish this with clarity, I read then re-read all collated data-based themes to make sure they formed sensible patterns while eliminating information that did not fit into any particular category (Gardner, 2021).

Step five required that I establish defined themes across the data given to me by each participant. In addition, I remained mindful of making sure that each layer of themes also addressed one or more of this study's research questions. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012), by establishing themes that clearly tie back to one's research questions, researchers add in an additional layer of validation to their study which may strengthen its credibility.

The sixth phase of the Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) thematic analysis process involved a final review, analysis, then write-up. During this step, I wrote findings and analysis sections that help to provide readers with an illustration of this study's themes, layers, and relationships (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). As a result, readers can easily understand how I used the participant's raw data to make codes and each layer of themes I created during this study's analysis phase. The write-up also includes a summary that discusses how the major condensed themes relate to my research questions and the purpose of this study (Gardner, 2021). Finally, the analysis summary includes relevant participant comments that act as examples while directly connecting interviewee narratives to this study's purpose.

Trustworthiness

There are ways in which researchers can increase the trustworthiness of their work to make it noteworthy (Gardner, 2021; Shenton, 2004). By adding a detailed statement of positionality and updating it as needed, I divulge to readers my relationship with this topic plus any potential bias I possess in my attempt to display openness to other perspectives throughout the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

The two trustworthiness techniques I adopted for this study are member checking and peer debriefings. Member checking ensured that I represented the data accurately via the participant's approval (Carlson, 2010). After I interviewed each participant, I contacted them to request that they review their interview transcripts to ensure that they accurately reflected their statements during each interview session. In addition, member checking allows participants to be the first group to test findings and scrutinize any interpretations present in the transcripts (Gardner, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since I discussed the need for and value of member checking with each participant during the interviewee selection process, each of them

approached this step with confidence, motivation, and knowledge of how vital this validity tool is to the overall study.

Peer debriefing helped me increase the credibility of this study by ensuring that an impartial peer checked the data for accuracy (Houghton et al., 2013). Throughout this study, I engaged in peer debriefing by seeking the counsel of my dissertation chair, Dr. Mark M. D'Amico, and Dr. Spencer Salas to ensure that I followed all protocols, limited potential bias, interpreted data following academically accepted standards, and wrote up my analysis in a way that represents my participants' statements accurately. Following a model informed by Gardner (2021), Dr. Mark M. D'Amico read and reviewed my IRB documents for quality control purposes, provided input on the thematic analysis steps I took while analyzing data, and ensured that I operated ethically from start to finish.

Transferability refers to the process of using data from one specific setting as a tool for better understanding other data or phenomena in another similar setting (Burchett et al., 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2010). While this study boasts no claims that the data I present here provides a comprehensive picture of AAS student aspirations, readers may find this information, which may also include the participants' biases, worthy of transferability. For example, since each narrative collectively provides a degree of saturation by way of interviewees discussing how they possess comparable similar socioeconomic backgrounds, financial or job goals, and perceptions about how their education plays a role in their formulation of aspirations, it may provide insight into how other students think who hail from these same types of programs and situations. In addition, by selecting participants who somewhat matched the typical demographic profile of students who enroll in AAS programs in North Carolina and beyond via maximum variation purposeful sampling, it may be reasonable to conclude that students from

similar cohorts experience parallel realities (Etikan et al., 2016). Finally, by providing extensive detail to those who read this document, I hope to increase the potential that this data can provide invaluable insight that others may generalize or transfer to their research or institutional circumstances.

Limitations

Limitations, or the elements that uncontrollably impact, potentially weaken, or influence one's research findings, according to Ross and Zaidi (2019), are present in this study. First, I conducted this study during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has severely affected the job market, job availability, plus community college enrollment, phenomena that may have altered students' perceptions of higher education and their aspirations (Albanesi & Kim, 2021; Bartik et al., 2020; CCRC, 2021). Second, none of the participants in this study work or are pursuing a career in the industrial sector, which comprises a significant number of AAS credential seekers, thus potentially weakening the generalizability of this study (Carnevale et al., 2018; VanWagoner et al., 2022). Third, three of my participants possessed at least a bachelor's degree. Although their information was invaluable to this study, their experiences may differ from AAS students who do not enter with such credentials. Consequently, the data I presented in this study findings and analysis section may be less transferable to other institutions. Finally, although this study provides readers with an in-depth understanding of students' life experiences and the social circumstances that impact their educational aspirations, it uses a small sample that may or may not limit variability (Faber & Fonseca, 2014; Netz et al., 2019).

Summary

Chapter three highlights methods I selected to study community college AAS student aspirations to see what implications those goals might have on performance funding and

outcome measures. In addition to gathering information about student aspirations at the surface level, Seidmans' (2019) approach allowed me to investigate the phenomenon in deep depth by also investigating how each student's life experiences, social circumstances, and the local job market plays a role in how they formulate those aspirations. In addition to providing readers with an overview of how I framed this study, I have included in this chapter a detailed layout of how I applied the Seidman (2019) approach, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic, plus various forms of triangulation and privacy measures to ensure that I conducted high-quality research while protecting the rights and privacy of my participants. The result is a product that allows readers to understand how student aspirations, as stated by them, can fit into institutional success measures.

The following chapter of this study features a detailed description of the results and findings of my efforts using the methods presented in chapter three. In addition, readers will see how I used the framework I discussed in chapter three to address my topic, problem statement, and research questions. Finally, chapter four will provide readers evidence that supports why the methods I use to study this topic are highly appropriate.

Chapter Four: Findings

Guided by an adapted Seidman (2019) approach, this study aimed to capture the stories of North Carolina community college AAS students to understand better their educational aspirations and the social landscape that helped form them. I conducted three separate interviews with five participants to collect the information for this study. Each of the following research questions guided my study:

1. Why do students enroll in community college AAS programs, and what are their aspirations?
2. How do community college AAS students' life experiences influence their aspirations?
3. How do AAS students plan to use the education they gain through community college training?
4. What does it mean to AAS students to be successful due to enrolling at their chosen institution?

I interviewed participants between June 2022 and October 2022. Each interview highlighted portions of the participants' life experiences, perceptions, and aspirations primarily based on tense. However, there were overlaps in their responses while each discussed their past, present, and future thoughts within each session. The first of the semi-structured interviews encouraged participants to contextualize their life experiences by discussing how their upbringing formed their current views and aspirations. Each first interview lasted roughly 40 minutes and helped me to build a positive rapport with each participant concurrently.

I designed the second interview to highlight each participant's recent lived experience by constructing a series of questions that investigate their lives as students, personally, and from

within the context of the current labor market. Each second interview ranged between 55 and 60 minutes. During the third and final interview sessions, I encouraged each participant to summarize and make meaning out of their past and present life experiences while discussing how those events shaped their aspirations and relationship with their chosen institution. The third interview sessions lasted around 50 minutes each. The elapsed time between the first, second, and third interviews with each participant ranged between five to seven days overall, which helped them easily recall each session's details. Post interviews, I conducted a thematic analysis that followed the template guided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) and Gardner (2021).

I have organized this chapter as follows. I begin with a series of five profiles crafted from the individual interviews I conducted with each participant and contextualized in the literature surrounding community college AAS students' aspirations. After a brief introduction of each participant, I then present my findings in sections that match the topic of each of the three interviews I conducted with each of them, including an overview of their early life, current status, personal and professional aspirations, relationship with the college and a brief summary. These initial analytic descriptions serve as a starting point for the second part of the chapter, the thematic analysis, which is driven by the research questions I articulated here.

Participant Profiles

Happy-White Married Male in Early 40s, Medical Sonography

Happy is a married white male who is in his early 40s. He has no dependents currently but would like to have children one day. He was born and raised in a county adjacent to the community college he currently attends, which houses the largest city in the area. He has never lived anywhere beyond this area and currently works at a large home improvement store located roughly fifteen minutes from the community college campus he attends. Happy is a full-time

student majoring in medical sonography, a major that in his words, "requires the full attention of any student enrolled in the program." His current goal is to complete this program and become a full-time ultrasound technician in this same geographic area. In addition to his current studies, Happy earned his geology and environmental science bachelor's degree from a local university. Before completing that degree, he had taken community college courses previously and earned an associate in science degree. Happy also earned a certified nurse assistant credential at his current community college as a pre-requisite for admission into the medical sonography program. In addition, Happy possesses a phlebotomy certificate, a credential he earned during his first stint at a community college. He is a homeowner and enjoys a life where he and his wife earn enough income to meet the needs of his family.

Early Life

Happy was born into a small family, and both of his parents have higher education degrees. Furthermore, his father possesses a master’s degree in psychology. Socioeconomically speaking, Happy enjoyed a life of stability during his childhood. Happy credited his father for providing the comfort he enjoyed throughout his younger years. During the first interview, Happy discussed how "we never had to worry about the lights getting turned off or food on the table." His father was a long-term county-level employee who worked in that job for as long as Happy could remember. His mother worked on occasion when their family needed extra money, although most of the time, she did not have to work and mainly focused on raising Happy. Happy is an only child who, even to this day, enjoys his parents' undivided attention when needed. Consequently, he understands he possessed the privilege of accessing his parents when needed, and he noticed how that dynamic was a luxury that many of his friends and peers did not have.

Both of Happy's parents were only children, so he did not feel that relatives played a vital role in his current outlook or educational aspirations. He cited science-fiction films and stories as a source of career inspiration in addition to typically visible careers children will often list as jobs to aspire to, including astronauts and firefighting personnel. Although Happy did not actively pursue those careers, he still manages to enjoy films and stories that involve those fields of work. When it comes to his friends and social networks, Happy discussed how he has friends who went straight to university, community college, and work, all of whom have "done for the most part fine as well," which seemed to have little to no effect on his career aspirations or views towards higher education to any significant extent. Those neutral experiences, observations, and support from his parents during each stage of his personal and academic endeavors afforded Happy the ability, time, and socioeconomic resources to explore and re-evaluate his interests routinely.

Despite living a life of socioeconomic security plus high levels of parental interaction and guidance, Happy struggled in school at the K-12 level. Although he had an adequate level of competence in much of the academic regimen, evidenced by his ability to "ace all of the tests," Happy became disillusioned with traditional high school education and stopped completing homework, then classwork. His non-completion resulted in him failing all his courses during his sophomore year. Fortunately, Happy discovered a school in the city where he grew up that operated using a Montessorian approach to education. Montessori refers to a style of education based on completing assignments, tasks, and activities in a way that is self-directed, individually paced, hands-on, and collaborative (Marshall, 2017; Montessori Northwest, n.d.).

Although public opinion and the K-12 system's stakeholders in this metropolitan area presented this school as a last resort for students that experienced "pregnancy, failures, or

disciplinary problems," it helped to renew Happy's interest in education and enabled him to earn a high school diploma. If this type of institution had not been there, Happy discussed how he "would have probably dropped out and gone the GED route" after his 10th-grade failures. Despite the institution having a last resort label, Happy spoke highly of the school's teachers, the pace of learning, rolling admission, extra services to cater to individual needs, and the ability to test when one feels competent. He also stated how the learning experience at this high school was "transformative" because of its ability to allow students to explore their interests while reducing the "redundancy and boredom" that can occur within institutions that operate using a more standardized approach. As of 2022, the school that helped Happy complete his K-12 studies is permanently closed. Nevertheless, Happy's free-spirited exploratory approach to learning and education would continue to follow him while shaping his ideology toward education.

Current Status

As an adult, Happy started down the semi-traditional college student route by entering a community college and earning an associate in science degree. He then entered university-level studies and earned his bachelor's degree in geology. After completing that degree, a local excavation company hired him to scan topography for reasons ranging from natural resource allocation to corporate construction and excavation projects. Although that career was "interesting and came with a good salary and benefits," Happy found that he did not like the duties associated with the job causing him to re-enroll at a local community college to seek out new career options.

During this iteration of his higher education experience, Happy revisited his interests in the sciences due to his experience taking hard science courses he enjoyed a decade before his

current enrollment. However, at that time, Happy had limited knowledge of the varied career options in the healthcare field and hesitated to commit to being a nurse or doctor because of the time he would have to dedicate to earning the credentials he would need to enter those fields. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a "call to action" for Happy, who decided to actively pursue his medical career interests by enrolling in and completing his certified nursing assistant certificate. After working briefly as a certified nursing assistant and gaining more insight into the many jobs within the medical care field, Happy completed a phlebotomy certificate at his current community college.

While taking phlebotomy courses, an instructor that knew Happy suggested he consider enrolling in the institution's medical sonography program. After he researched the field of medical sonography, he applied and got accepted into the program. He started his studies in the summer of 2022. Happy chose this school because it was the closest community college to him that housed a medical sonography program. Although challenging to gain admission into this small medical sonography program due to them getting more applications than they have space, Happy credits his admission on his first try to his work as a certified nursing assistant, as well as his experience with geographic scanning tools, which he says, “operated similarly as the machines used in sonography.” "It's amazing how you can find similarity across disciplines," said Happy as he grinned proudly. The institution Happy now attends designed its sonography program so that each admitted cohort would complete a series of coursework and practice hours before they test for state certification purposes before graduating.

While navigating his academic studies, Happy works at a large-scale home improvement store full-time but will reduce his hours to part-time as the rigor of the sonography program increases as he progresses. In addition to meeting some of his income needs, Happy credits his

tenure working at this store for helping him understand the value of being an essential worker via "showing up to a job that gives me a sense of purpose and meaning," plus knowing more about the value of "having understanding management that allows me to schedule work around my needs." In addition, Happy's experience working at his current job helps him better understand what he wants in his next one, and since he likes it there, he wants to maintain that sense of appreciation and belonging during his transition to a new career that will "pay significantly more in order to create more surplus income."

Having some experience in the healthcare setting due to completing the phlebotomy program at this same institution, Happy knows many of his current instructors, and is aware of the variety of support services the community college offers. Although he has yet to use any of those support services, Happy did express appreciation for being able to access library materials. In addition, Happy has a good working relationship with his peers and teachers, although he has not developed a profound friendship or mentorship role with either group. However, Happy appreciated how community colleges tended to expose students to career opportunities throughout their learning experiences instead of exposing them to employment options towards or at the end of their studies. During our second interview, Happy discussed how, at his university, he experienced "having virtually no direct interaction with anything that prepared me to go into the workforce" until his final semester.

Personal and Professional Aspirations

Happy's relationship with his aspirations is complex yet simple to understand. During our third interview, I identified two distinct types of aspirations, concrete and abstract, which relate directly and indirectly to Happy's community college studies. In the area of concrete goal markers, Happy knows that he must complete the medical sonography program before working

in his desired health care setting in any official capacity. He discussed how "you have to pass the program in order to obtain the certifications" to gain entry. Despite having medical sonographer shortages in the United States plus an expected growth projection of 14% between 2020 and 2030, Happy stated how, "I'm not aware of any loopholes or ways to enter the field before certification" (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). After completing this degree program, Happy wants to work full-time near his home, either in a healthcare setting or for a medical equipment sales company. He envisions plans to stay in the area; however, Happy is open to traveling or relocating since he does not have children or any strong attachments to the community.

Happy also possesses some concrete, identifiable aspiration-related markers in his personal life. One goal directly related to why he attends the sonography program is to increase his income "so I've got more breathing room to get the mortgage paid off within a decade rather than 30 years." In addition, he discussed how the higher income and career change would help to improve his relationship with his wife by increasing his pay, thus "allowing my wife to change her career or go part-time" if needed once children came along. By completing this degree program, Happy also hopes that a new job will help him better align his work hours with his wife's availability so they can spend more time together. Currently, Happy discussed how he and his wife's work schedules conflict. He works the second shift and weekends, while she works within a traditional 9 to 5 block despite recently transitioning to a work-at-home schedule. Happy described how "our off time together is few and far between," to the extent that they may spend extended time with one another roughly two nights a week.

Happy's abstract aspirations seem to relate to his intrinsic desire to use higher education as a tool for self-discovery. As Happy's life and interests change over time, he uses the

community college system to explore new possibilities. Despite enrolling in the medical sonography program and being in his early 40s, Happy discussed how "I envy the people that know what they want to be when they grow up cuz I have no clue yet." While he finds this experience intimidating in some ways, he also sees his ability to have to not commit to a career, and to continue exploring, as a reflection of the life privilege he has enjoyed over time. According to Happy:

> I've been very fortunate and very privileged not to ever feel poor, even though I might have been technically poor at times, there's certainly been that support structure around me. That's helped keep me afloat and helped keep me, yeah, given me a lot more flexibility, a lot more time to discover rather than having to focus on getting out and getting into the workforce, even though that has at times been my focus.

Throughout our three interviews, it became evident that accessing higher education for self-discovery and sampling various potential employment areas was equally valuable as completing any credential to Happy. "I've dropped out, quote-unquote, dropped out half a dozen times or more, and I've certainly gotten much more from my time at community college than my degree from university," he said.

His short-term goals include finishing the program while working at the local home improvement store on a part-time basis. In addition, Happy hopes that he will be able to sample the various sub-specialties in sonography and ultrasound, including "cardiac abdominal, breast, OB-GYN, and fetal," to narrow down his interest. Post-graduation, Happy anticipates that he will have an opportunity to earn a full-time position, preferably with one of the clinics or hospitals he will work for as a student, a common occurrence.

Where Happy's personal long-term goals are concerned, he is focused on making sure that he can boost his income, change his work hours to increase time with his wife, and pay down his mortgage plus car balance while building savings. However, his professional goals lie within a grayer area. While he is committed to finishing this degree, Happy sees the education process as transactional without having much value placed on symbolic notions of earning a credential. Also, Happy sees the completion of the sonography program as something which will lead to a higher socioeconomic status, but also an expanded opportunity to "have a lot more freedom to explore both in terms of educational journeys after this one, as well as more career focused things." Happy has kept the door open to moving to higher levels of medical care, including that of a physician, different area of health care, and in his words, “who knows, come back here to teach at the college level."

Relationship with the College

So far, Happy has not had a chance to participate in any student engagement opportunities, nor does he interact at high levels with faculty and students outside of class. This limited interaction is primarily due to him having to work while trying to find ways to interact with his wife and friends as much as possible. However, because of his hard work and high-level performance in class and with practice scanning, he has earned respect and trust from faculty and the healthcare professionals who supervise his fieldwork.

Since the medical sonography program Happy attends uses a cohort model, Happy could form professional bonds with some students in the course if desired. He discussed how he notices that many of his peers approach the program with higher stress levels and career attainment priority than he does. Although Happy wants to complete the program to explore the medical sonography field, he does not seem to feel as if the situation is significantly imperative, and he

would be just as comfortable seeking out other opportunities or staying at his current work as he would passing the program and moving into the sonography field.

Participant Summary

Throughout our three interviews, Happy's responses tended to reflect the pseudonym he gave to himself. He is a reflective person who efficiently addressed each of my research questions which include an attempt to understand his aspirations, life influences that molded his thought processes, the role of the community college in his life, and how his studies will likely affect his future. Happy's most prevalent goal was to explore the world's professions through the community college system to find an optimal career. Although he may not have found it yet, Happy appreciates the community college system for providing him with opportunities to sample his interests at a low cost and schedule flexibility. "I don't think I'd be able to do the exploration that I've been able to do" without the community college, says Happy. He thinks fondly of the community college system and sees them as essential to his higher education learning experience. On multiple occasions, Happy discussed how he's fortunate to have a community college nearby that "certainly facilitates all the exploration that we've talked about while fast-tracking people who are more academically minded."

Happy became more interested in this research study as the interviews progressed and requested that he speak on issues of success and certification. Knowing that much of his exploration without earning a credential could result in him earning a dropout label from the institutional perspective, Happy discussed how "it's unfortunate when one person's success is looked down on by another, and I'm really privileged not to have been hindered by that." Instead, Happy talked about how he favored a success rating system that also considers "student satisfaction and their overall sense of well-being as a big marker of how successful the institution

is." Despite knowing the importance of metrics assessing whether students graduate within a specific timeframe and enter the workforce, Happy emphasized that higher education success metrics should also measure students' intangible benefits, including job and life satisfaction levels. "Even when the classes didn't go well, even when I dropped out, I was able to learn things about the world and about myself that have ultimately better equipped me to deal with right now," is how Happy responded to my question about whether he felt successful during instances where he did not earn a credential. It is difficult to think of a way to summarize or commodify Happy's journey through higher education; however, it becomes easier to see that he did experience growth regardless of his completion statuses. His progress seemed to occur primarily at the community college level. Nevertheless, Happy continues his journey towards finding himself in a way that adds complexity to understanding how credentialing plays a role in his progression. I appreciated learning more about his story of development, a growth that he and those he now serves undoubtedly appreciate.

Storm-Black Married Female in Early 40s, Nursing

Storm is a nursing student who came to her community college searching for new beginnings. She is African American, in her early 40's, married, and has two adult children plus two who are slightly under ten years of age. Storm was born in Gary, Indiana, a city roughly 30 miles from Chicago, IL, and has since lived in Lexington, KY, and Georgia before moving to the area where she currently resides. She earned dual bachelor's degrees in psychology and sociology, plus a master's degree in public health. Currently, Storm is enrolled as a part-time nursing student at her community college and plans to complete her studies in the fall of 2022. After completing her studies in the nursing program, Storm has a few goals in mind, which include working in the nursing field, attending more school to become a midwife, earning a

physician's assistant (PA) certification, or working in community outreach and research. Where outreach is concerned, Storm discussed the possibility of "creating or working with a non-profit organization that helps minorities gain access to the reproductive healthcare they need without experiencing socioeconomic barriers." It may seem like these goals differ, but Storm discussed how each role builds on the other in a way that gets her to her ultimate goal of helping people from underserved communities; an agenda that she says was fostered "as a result of taking a lot of sociology courses that taught me about all the inequities that exist."

Early Life

Despite being born in Gary, Indiana, Storm identifies as a Kentuckian because she was raised there until 2009. Both of Storm's parents were first-generation college students. She is the middle child of three and has a younger and older sister. Her parents divorced when Storm was around six years old, which prompted her mother to attend dental school. Storm then began living with her mother exclusively while keeping in touch with her father on occasion. Unfortunately, and despite completing the dental program, Storm's mother could not begin a career in dental hygiene due to a health issue that would impede her from serving clients effectively. Her mother then returned to school while also working in the field of higher education where she "would write a lot of grants and do programs for aspiring kids, particularly minority and Appalachian kids who wanted to go into medicine or dentistry and bring them to the university." As a result, Storm's mother earned a position as dean of multicultural affairs at a large university. At the same time, her father worked as a safety engineer for various big plants in the southeastern United States.

At an early age, Storm knew she would pursue higher education credentials, mainly because "my parents never really gave me an option. It was never if you go to college, it was

always when you go to college." Although she was never really involved with sports or other activities, Storm developed an interest in becoming a physician's assistant or athletic trainer specializing in football. However, while pursuing her degree as a Pre-PA student, Storm experienced what she calls a "snafu" in reference to her former marriage to her husband, who served in the military. Consequently, Storm did not complete her studies, got pregnant, and moved to Georgia, where military superiors stationed her then-husband. Storm credits her and her husbands' youth as the source of the dissolution of their marriage, having gone through these times when they were between 18-19 years old, respectively.

As described by Storm, "we did not know what we were doing," which resulted in their relationship lasting around one year. After that, Storm moved back to Kentucky with her small child, who had down syndrome, and re-enrolled at her original university to continue pursuing her Pre-PA degree. While there, Storm began a new relationship, got pregnant, and married again. Storm remained in school this time despite how her newest marriage was different and more challenging than her first one. In addition, her second husband dealt drugs and found himself in prison on numerous occasions. Nevertheless, Storm found fortune in this situation because she could stay in school and complete her studies due to his absence, which helped to reduce household distractions.

Due to the difficulties associated with raising two children and trying to work "mostly full-time, 30 hours or so a week," Storm changed her major from Pre-PA to psychology and graduated. When I asked how she graduated with a dual major, Storm responded, "my advisor towards the end of graduation was like, all you got to do is take one more class" to obtain a sociology degree, which she did. Storm also noted how she had trouble paying for daycare, thus prompting her to seek government assistance. To become eligible for government assistance in

Kentucky, Storm had to work continuously while in school, or risk losing her funds. "You couldn't just be a student. You also had to be working, so if you were a student, they didn't count that as employment," said Storm.

Despite her challenges, Storm felt the need to finish school so she could find a job that supported her family. Shortly after she completed her studies, Storm began working in the College of Public Health at the university where her mother worked. At that same time, Storms' mother had decided to pursue her master's degree in public health. It was within this academic program that Storm found a source of inspiration. "A professor that I worked for was in behavioral health studies just fell in love with me and pushed me to just apply" to the public health master's degree program said Storm. Storm took the advice and guidance of that faculty member and promptly enrolled. Even though she did not pursue the dual registered nurse degree option that accompanied the public health master's program because of her family obligations, Storm was able to work as a grant writer to gain experience in her new area of study while earning money part-time. She elaborated on her time in this master's program working with the faculty that convinced her to enroll by discussing how:

> He had written a big NIH grant. I think it was a $2 million grant in HIV and STD prevention for adolescents, African American kids. It was basically about condoms and STD prevention. So, they wanted to do a blinded study that was blind to me basically until I selected it. Only some kids would get the intervention.

Within this program, Storm developed a strong interest in research, grant writing, and pursuing her interests from within a career that allowed her to work towards alleviating social needs in underserved communities.

The city she currently resides in, which is the largest city within the region, and housed one county over from the community college she attends, was one of the sites for the research study. Consequently, Storm moved to that city and began helping underserved children with their reproductive health issues. After moving to her current place of residence, the faculty in charge of the grant and research project moved to another major city in the southeastern United States. He wanted Storm to relocate there so she could help start a grassroots campaign project in this new target city. Storm refused his offer because she did not want to move her children twice within a two-year timeframe, and because she now enjoyed her new home. Storm was also hesitant to raise a family in her mentors' new research area, "so that ended my career with that study," she said.

Current Status

After completing her university-level studies and struggling to find a job prior to the closure of the research project she was working on, Storm needed to earn income. She began doing odd jobs, such as bartending and serving in high-end restaurants. "I got stuck in those positions for a little bit because I was like, I'm making about the same amount of money," said Storm. However, feeling that bartending was not a promising long-term job because of her pre-existing education, Storm continued to apply for positions in areas that closely aligned with her desired career setting, which were institutions associated with medicine and social sciences. Along the way, Storm quit bartending, worked as a life insurance salesperson, then as an Uber driver.

While driving home two "suburban white women that went to some Snoop Dogg concert," Storm gave them one of the resumes she always kept with her after conversing with those passengers about careers. They passed along that resume to a healthcare administrator then

told Storm to expect to hear from someone that works in one of the two leading healthcare provider companies that serve this area within a week or two. The result was a phone call that included the following conversation according to Storm:

> Hey, I'm calling to see if, you know, we have a position in either registration or it's a psych tech. I wanted to see if you'd be interested in one of those. Which one you wanna do? You come in for your interview. But it was basically like, you're already hired. I hadn't even applied.

She then decided to work in the registration department of a healthcare clinic, which is the position she currently holds.

The combination of Storm working in a healthcare setting and having positive interactions with nursing staff during an experience with her daughter's unexpected viral illness reinvigorated her passion and interest in patient-level healthcare. "It just opened my eyes, and I was like, I need to either go back to do the PA or go to nursing school." She then applied to a few nursing programs in her local area, got accepted to a public institution that specialized in training students for health-related careers, and performed well until the COVID-19 pandemic derailed her work, home, and academic environments. Storm discussed this in more detail during the following portion of our conversation:

> We were in our last semester coming into our final year, and COVID hits. It was challenging because, at the time, my kids were five and six, so they were in school. They were really young, and we had to try to switch them to Zoom and work with them on Zoom but also in class and that was not able to kind of work together. I basically wound up failing one of my classes because I could not coordinate that well enough, and when I failed, I just knew that I wasn't gonna be able to do this at the same time.

After unsuccessfully trying to negotiate accommodations that would allow her to complete her studies successfully at this institution, Storm eventually dropped out and applied to community college nursing programs in her area in hopes of completing her studies. She chose her current institution because of the admissions staff's willingness to accept a portion of her previous work, and the school's proximity to her home. "She was only able to accommodate one, which was my intro class, but I figured that was better than none because none of the other schools would even consider the transfer credit," said Storm.

Despite numerous setbacks due to the COVID-19 pandemic, family instability, and sickness, Storm now enjoys the busy life of being a student parent who works part-time. Storm takes all the challenges she faces in stride and sometimes thinks it worked out for the better in the timing area. "Maybe God had plans, maybe I did not need to be around COVID with my baby girl being young and sick cuz I would've been thrown right into the first batch of nurses who graduated with COVID just starting," she said. Also, Storm's challenges led her to find an employer that accommodated her scheduling needs while helping to pay her education expenses where needed. Storm discussed this in more detail by mentioning how her employer gave her the option to pay tuition and then get reimbursed or have her employer prepay academic fees on the condition that she worked there for a certain amount of time. Storm selected the prepay option for her first semester but changed options so she could leave her current job without penalty if a better opportunity presented itself.

Personal and Professional Aspirations

Storm's aspirations are complex and layered. However, they seem to primarily revolve around first getting the nursing certification she is currently working to earn. Storm has what she calls her "ultimate goal," which is to work at a job where she is actively contributing to the

reduction of the maternal mortality rate among African Americans by way of becoming a registered nurse and certified midwife. However, Storm pursues her goals in a way where she has the option to serve her target population in numerous ways that extend beyond those stated goals, including that of a researcher. Storm also remains open to going back to graduate school to pursue her master's degree in a midwife program, which would require her to complete her Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree to gain entry. In addition, she does have contingency plans in mind if something in her social landscape, especially as it relates to her children, prevents her from pursuing further education after she completes the nursing program. "It may not be necessary for me to necessarily become a midwife to do some of the things that I would wanna do. I could just use my public health master's and potentially do that combined with my RN," said Storm. When I asked Storm if her stint at the community college is a piece to a larger puzzle as opposed to it being the pinnacle of her latest educational journey, Storm responded, "I would definitely say that."

When Storm and I discussed how completing her current degree program fits into her definition of success, she replied, "I may complete this degree, and I may aspire right now to hopefully complete others. It may not have to be my end goal to feel successful in what I wanna do if I come into contact with the right people and I'm able to do what I wanna do without that or feel like I'm making an impact without that." She then stressed that it is partially a marker of success presently, but also discussed how if other opportunities presented themselves, they could change her perspective. Below is an example of a scenario, presented by Storm, that could alter her plans irrespective of completing her current program:

> I might meet someone who already takes my background that I already have and say, oh, hey, I got some research I'm working on, you'd be great to do this. If that's enough and I

> feel like that that is achieving, or they're doing something, I can partner with them to help achieve the goal that I initially have in mind, which is to be instrumental in helping to be a part of some research or help with getting that those rates down or bringing that to the forefront, that would be enough success to me in an achievement there. I may not have to become a midwife to do that necessarily.

In a case like this, Storm's success marker would be to use her professional, personal, or academic interactions as a networking tool to meet people that may present her with opportunities to leapfrog over the credentialing process thus catapulting her closer to her broader goal of helping underserved communities.

Storm understands that without her nursing degree, "it would make it harder for me to do what I wanna do or to impact the communities that I wanna impact." I then asked Storm whether she would quit her community college studies without earning a credential if she had the opportunity to enroll in a Bachelor of Science in Nursing program. She promptly responded, "yeah." However, despite Storm's flexible ideas about degree completion, she became more adamant about the value of completing certifications that will allow her to work in specialty care first assistant areas, such as those involved with cesareans or other obstetric operating room needs (Mayo Clinic of Medicine and Science, n.d.). These additional specialties would allow her to work directly with patients and medical staff in the area she enjoys. It would also increase her work value, income, and ability to control her schedule.

Storm discussed how since she is in her early 40s, she feels pressure to increase her salary while moving in the direction of her aspirations quickly since she is closer to retirement than many of her peers. In addition, Storm recognizes the strain her current salary places on her husband to be the breadwinner. She thinks that once she finishes her studies and begins work

full-time, the additional income would relieve their economic tensions. Storm also briefly discussed how their family's collective income frustrations often lead to verbal friction between she and her husband, plus stress-related health issues. "Unlike me, who deals with stress very well, he is not a warrior," Storm said.

Relationship with the College

Storm first spoke of her relationship with the community college she attends by stating how her aspirations slightly shifted due to attending the institution. For example, Storm began her pursuit of a healthcare career with a desire to work in sports, research, or nursing. However, because of her work at various institutionally assigned clinical sites, Storm became interested in maternity unit work in a hospital setting as a nurse SIS. SIS, or saline infusion sonohysterography, refers to a scanning process that uses a saline solution inserted into the uterus lining endometrium area to assist in the clarity of an ultrasound image (Singh et al., 2018). As a result of her experience during clinicals, Storm narrowed her career interests to focus on helping underserved communities due to her observations of how patient's healthcare experiences differed based on their wealth status.

Storm has a positive view of the community college system and credits her own with providing students with a great learning experience at little to no cost. "Now that I've seen firsthand what type of education I'm getting in a community college for the money, I feel like it's a little outrageous to pay for some of the four-year college tuition," Storm stated. She also talked about how her current community college offers free tuition, which helps her avoid having her employer pay tuition. By not letting her job pay tuition on her behalf, Storm can avoid committing to working there for an extended amount of time via contractual obligation.

During her current learning experience, Storm took advantage of the student emergency fund program when she and her husband were away from work due to the deaths of two close family members. She discussed this instance in more detail by stating, "I used it, they helped me with my books, and then they helped me with rent." Storm has also sought help from her schools' tutors for academic assistance, and the resume writing service. The combination of a low costs plus comprehensive support system is why Storm values her community college experience despite having options to earn a bachelor's degree in nursing. "They have what's called an accelerated nursing program for people who have bachelors in other fields and wanna switch to getting a bachelor's in nursing. It's a two-year program, just like the community college program," stated Storm. However, she knew those programs are more costly than similar community college programs. In addition, Storm talked about how "they, I don't think, would've provided me the level of support that I felt like I got at community college just like, I didn't feel I got that at my old school."

Participant Summary

Storm has a clear starting point and end goal. Between those two points, she can take numerous routes or select various options based on the opportunities that present themselves. As a result of her training in the social sciences and clinical site work, Storm developed a passion for helping underserved minority populations get the care they need to thrive. Along the way, she decided to serve those in need by pursuing a career in healthcare. Whether she achieves her goals by conducting research, or by providing quality nursing and reproductive care, Storm seems unconcerned about the route to success she takes as long as she earns a comfortable income in the position that presents itself.

Throughout our time together, Storm also often discussed the responsibility successful educated minorities have for helping other black and brown people find opportunities to succeed. She articulated these sentiments during our third interview when she stated the following:

> My ultimate goal is for the generation after us, or two generations after us, to be better than the generation is now. This is a continuous battle. We are still in a battle from when we were first brought over here. At some point, as my kids get older, I want them to understand that. That's always been my goal is to make sure that as I leave this lifetime and I'm giving something forward to the next one, and you'll give something forward to your next one.

She also spoke of the high importance she places on making a social impact through service, which she thinks is more important than the individual financial gains she may experience. Storm believes anyone can positively impact society in their jobs and that her purpose in life is to get to where she can help people by combatting misinformation and poor-quality healthcare services in underserved communities. "I don't think that for the African American community, we're gonna be able to do that without more of us stepping in to help ourselves do that," she said.

Having traveled many different roads to get to this point, Storm makes sure that the many different paths that lead to how she defines success remain open. At the start of our interviews, I thought I was going to have three meaningful conversations with a nursing student about her journey to and through the program. I accomplished that, and I see now that Storm is also a social servant who has lived a life filled with examples of perseverance. Likewise, her attitude towards degree completion and certification at the community college level seems ambivalent in that she sees those as credentials complimentary and enhancing, yet not completely necessary depending on which success route she takes.

Ivy-White Single Female in Early 20s, Medical Sonography

Ivy, a medical sonography student, is a single white female that turned 21 in the summer of 2022, making her the youngest student in her cohort. She has no children and is not in any discernable relationship with anyone at the time of our interviews. Ivy was born and raised in the same geographic area as her community college. She has never lived anywhere else in the United States and completed her K-12 studies within the same district that her community college serves, which gave her some insight into what her current institution offered before her enrollment. Despite taking a semester off post high school, Ivy completed her associate degree in one year, then the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program, and is currently a full-time student who is heavily involved with her schools' extra-curricular activity scene. She also works part-time doing odd jobs as needed. At the time of our interviews, Ivy lives with her biological father and stepmother.

Early Life

Ivy grew up in a home where two parents were present during her early years. Her father had a limited education but found success by doing odd labor jobs while occasionally staying at home when needed to tend to parental duties. Ivy was unsure if her father earned a high school diploma or a GED but believes he might have. Ivy's mother works as a speech pathologist and possesses a bachelor's degree. Ivy discussed how "mom's side of the family is more educated, and my dad's side of the family is more like work with your hands." Despite her parents' education differences, Ivy talked about how her father is more successful than her more educated family members on her mother's side of the family in many aspects. However, Ivy credits her mother for being the person primarily responsible for exposing her to the healthcare field. "We

were always raised around visiting nursing homes and visiting nurses and doctors and seeing because she worked in nursing homes, just seeing how like the medical field works," said Ivy.

During her teen years, Ivy's biological parents separated, and she began living with her father exclusively. As a result, she has limited interaction with her mom and spends much of her family time with her father and stepmother. Ivy's stepmother also used higher education to get a high-paying job requiring a substantial time commitment, much like Ivy's mother. Despite her stepmother's financial success, Ivy discussed how she does not want to follow in her footsteps. "She had kind of lived the life that I don't necessarily want where you're chasing your career, you're making a lot of money, but you have a house by yourself. You don't have a husband, you don't have kids, she doesn't even have a pet," stated Ivy.

Ivy's perspective toward education seems to have developed from a mixture of her biological parent's professional backgrounds. During her K-12 experience, Ivy describes herself as a "you need to get a 110% on every assignment, or you're gonna fail" type of student with no room for sub-par performances. As a result of the pressure she put on herself, Ivy suffered from burnout and developed a negative attitude towards schooling. "I did not want to go to college," she said adamantly during our first interview. During her 8th grade school year, a counselor recommended Ivy for the New Century Scholarship she eventually received. Something or someone led Ivy to believe that the scholarship only covered her attendance at a community college, and as a result, "I didn't apply to college. I didn't even visit any colleges cuz I knew that I was gonna go to a community college," she said. Consequently, Ivy began her community college-level training not knowing which career she wanted to pursue, and ultimately started her journey towards the medical field with more commitment towards getting a good job than identifying with any specific medical care job or its social value. According to Ivy:

> Finally, maybe a few weeks in, I made a decision. You know, your career doesn't really matter at the end of the day. Just pick something, get your training, and start working. So, it's not a very, it's not like I grew up and I wanna be an ultrasound technician. It was just, I had education paid for, and I'm not gonna waste it. This is a good job.

The result was her pursuit of a higher education degree within a program that requires excellence, coupled with the practicality of wanting to take advantage of a free opportunity so she could begin working and earning a reliable full-time income.

Current Status

Ivy has two semesters left before she completes the medical sonography program. Currently she is enjoying working in a healthcare setting that shows her how to scan mothers at various stages of pregnancy. This current site she works at is her fourth, and she enjoys gaining exposure to demographically diverse groups of people while being able to practice various types of scans. "Certain sites are better for abdomen or fetal or whatever the case may be," Ivy explained. When I asked Ivy if her experience so far generated specific interest in any specific area of sonography, Ivy stated, "it's still pretty open. I've really enjoyed doing fetal ultrasounds, but we also haven't gotten to the portion of the program where we do maternal-fetal medicine and high-risk pregnancy."

On numerous occasions during the second interview, Ivy talked about how much she appreciates her community colleges hands on approach to teaching students, especially where the on-site training portion of her studies is concerned. "They're part of the program. You have to do them anyway, but just being able to get hands-on experience and meet different radiologists has opened a lot of doors for future jobs after I graduate," said Ivy. These clinical hours occupy much of Ivy's non-classroom time via over 30 hours of unpaid work duties. However, Ivy's

dedication seems to pay off via improvements in her scanning abilities, personal confidence, and engagement with peers, faculty, and potential employers. The varied interactions also helped her obtain more information about various sub-specialty fields. Ivy went into more detail about the advantages associated with her new networking possibilities by discussing how:

> Talking to those people have definitely influenced me. You don't have to just go to work at a hospital and be an abdomen sonographer. There's so many others, which I don't really have too much of a story to back that up because I don't know where I'll end up in a year, but that's definitely changed my perspective from coming into the program to now a year later, not really leaning towards abdomen, leaning towards one of the others. That's just talking to different radiologists and people in the field.

During the summer months of 2022, Ivy stated how the percentage breakdown of scholarly (book) work versus that of clinical (hands-on work) was around 50% book and 50% clinical with an estimation that the divide would grow to be "60% clinical, 40% book work" during her final two semesters.

Personal and Professional Aspirations

As a result of completing three interviews with Ivy, I could clearly identify her short and long-term professional and personal aspirations. Her most immediate professional aspirations center around completing the program, then finding a job with a level of pay that justifies her work as a student. Having told me that she did not have any significant career ambitions growing up, it was apparent that Ivy chose to pursue a career in medical sonography because of that profession's average salary. Once she completes the program, it is likely that Ivy will take and pass the required state exam, then quickly find a job.

Ivy became comfortable with the field of healthcare through her interactions with patient care settings courtesy of her biological mother. However, Ivy is not strongly dedicated to the medical field. Nevertheless, she is highly dedicated to gaining access to the financial security and the social stability that often comes with it. "I didn't wanna sign up to be a cashier at Target for the rest of my life, so finances did play a role in wanting to be in that field," Ivy stated. She also discussed how "when I went into this field, my heart wasn't really in it. It was more like you need to make a decision and start doing something, and I knew that it would be a good job."

Although she made her career choice largely based on monetary gains, Ivy did mention how being of service to others also played a role in her career choice. "I like helping people and anytime the kids on our street would fall down scrape their knee, I would always be the one to call to clean it," said Ivy. After getting herself socioeconomically stable, Ivy talked about her intermediate term professional goal, which is to "get one of those camper vans and become a traveling tech and just drive around for 13 weeks." Although Ivy discussed her desire to pursue this aspiration, she did mention how it would be secondary to her primary socioeconomic goals and is present because "I'm not attached right now, I don't have kids or a husband or anything like that," elements that would likely alter those plans.

In addition to Ivy's socioeconomic goals, she frequently discussed how she also operates in pursuit of her personal goal to have a flexible job schedule that would allow her to work and have time off to take care of her future family. She continued by mentioning how:

> My ideal schedule would be, I wanna work 12-hour shifts and do three twelves. I knew I didn't wanna do nursing because those nurses worked so hard, and they are so underappreciated. I knew that I didn't wanna sign up for a life of that type of burnout.

In addition, Ivy prioritizes the goal of being able to balance work with her home and social life. "That's more important cause what does it mean? You can say, oh, I'm a sonographer, but I haven't seen my family for 12 years," she stated. Instead, Ivy gravitated to her thoughts about a lifestyle that would allow her to enjoy recreational activities with her future family without feeling financial stress. For those reasons, Ivy tends not to consider beginning the personal relationship portion of her life until the professional part is stable. "I think that would be a goal for later in life right now. I'd have no time to even be in a relationship or be a parent or anything like that. I haven't put any effort forth into pursuing those goals, but it is on my list of things to pursue once I'm more set up," she said.

During the third interview session, I asked Ivy if she felt any pressure regarding her academic journey as it relates to socioeconomics, completion, or entering the job market and where it comes from. In response, Ivy discussed how the pressure to succeed tends to come from her stepmother in the form of encouragement that prompts her to "always drive for your next school, make more money, advocate for yourself." Ivy also discussed how she feels some pressure from people in her social circle to complete so she can avoid uncomfortable questions about her journey through higher education. During one portion of our interviews, she gave an example of the types of conversations she wanted to avoid. "Oh, are you working as a tech? No, I dropped out 12 years ago, and still bringing it up type of thing. So, I think that's been a pressure to finish," said Ivy. She also feels pressure to stay on pace with her cohort because if students fall behind the pace institutional leaders set for their cohort, they must start the program over.

Relationship with the College

Ivy has a robust relationship with her community college. During the 2022-2023 academic year, she served as the school's Student Government Association President, which

allows her to interact with peers inside and out of the sonography program in non-formal ways that foster student engagement. "There's fun things like lunches, and the days where they have games in the student hall and things like that, that's been more enhancing," said Ivy. On more than one occasion during our interview sessions, Ivy discussed how she appreciates these opportunities because they help to add engagement activities to her academic routine. Ivy is also aware of the value of her school's student support services, as evidenced during a portion of our interview when she talked about how "especially with physics I know a lot of people in my class use physics tutors," and that "if I have needed them, they've always been helpful," in reference to the school's library staff.

During our second interview, I asked Ivy about her knowledge of the labor market and her institution's role in that area. She talked about how she has not explicitly researched the field except for a surface scan of the schools' website to find out about the sonography programs 100% job placement rate. Ivy has never used student services to obtain information about her career field; instead, she learns more about healthcare jobs through her interactions with faculty, site location workers, and peers. "Our teachers have spoken to us throughout the program that your clinical assignments are your job interviews, so take them seriously," she said. According to Ivy, faculty in the program will often encourage students to maintain a sense of urgency during clinicals "because I think your senior year, that's when they pick you up, and you can sign contracts and get your job lined up", she said. This phenomenon allows Ivy to sidestep traditional forms of academic counseling and job placement assistance since "I have had it in the back of my mind that whichever clinical sign I like and who liked me, you know, I figured I would just apply there type of thing," she stated.

Ivy also talked about how her interactions with professionals at the clinical sites and peer interactions have helped her learn more about the field. These interactions also helped Ivy to develop improved work-life balance skills, plus a new outlook that lets her de-stress in areas concerning trying to be the top in her class like she did in high school.

Participant Summary

Ivy's aspirations are evident and straightforward. In her words, "I just wanna graduate and have a job that supports myself. I don't have to work 1700 hours a week. I just want a basic job." However, where there is simplicity, there can also be depth. Her academic journey seems transactional to the extent that counselors offered her an opportunity to attend college at little to no cost so she could get to a career that afforded her time flexibility and adequate income as quickly as possible. Since becoming a sonographer largely depends on credentialing, and because Ivy wants to avoid the potential social backlash of being a person that did not finish the degree process, she wants the credential.

Furthermore, Ivy clarified to me how her relationship with her parents helped mold her views about success and the role higher education plays within the meaning-making processes that foster her ideology. Ivy has her biological and stepmother's drives for excellence which bodes well for her in a sonography program structured in a way where students have a slim margin of error. During several segments of our interviews, Ivy discussed how she almost focuses singularly on immersing herself into the program's regimen but also manages to carve out time to engage with peers, faculty, and staff, plus the odd jobs she occasionally does to earn income. Although her current lifestyle leaves little room for personal relationships, she goes out with friends and would like to form a more personal relationship with someone later.

Ivy also displays tendencies that reflect her father's disposition. She has gained academic and personal confidence plus a sense of purpose by improving her ability to scan, form bonds with peers and professionals, and help others. Likewise, Ivy does not place a high social value on higher education credentials nor sees obtaining a degree as a means to move to a higher level within a social hierarchy. Ivy discussed how "I got the AA degree while I was waiting for sonography," thus putting that degree in a transactional category. Nevertheless, during the portions of our interviews when she talked about the intrinsic value of interacting with and helping others, she began to display emotion and a sense of appreciation for her father's words, "just because you have a piece of paper doesn't mean you can do life skills."

Ivy's short-term markers of success include earning her degree and finding job that will help her gain financial independence. If she meets those goals, Ivy would like to try her luck with a longer-term goal of becoming a traveling tech so she can see different parts of the United States in a traveling technician capacity. I asked Ivy if she would be satisfied with becoming a sonographer without a credential, and she responded, "yeah, that would be fine with me. I don't need to tell people, oh, I officially graduated from this program." Although Ivy has not eliminated the possibility of going back to school to explore new certifications and areas of study, she feels that a community college education is enough instead of a steppingstone. "I don't feel the need to ever go back to school or do this traditional education thing again," she said during our third interview.

I conclude that Ivy envisions a life where she earns an adequate salary working in a job that allows her to help people while giving her control over her time. By achieving these balances in her life, Ivy feels she will then exist in a situation that enables her to work, travel and begin a family down the road. She does not seem to care about having a degree or certification,

yet since she has committed to the field of sonography, which requires that she possess those credentials, Ivy, by default, wants to earn them as a means to an end.

Jade-Bi-Racial Single Female in Mid-30s, Early Childhood Education

Jade is a bi-racial 36-year-old female. She was born to a mother who is white and a father who is African American. Jade grew up in a single-mom household, and her mother was married three times during Jades' childhood years. Jade was born in the midwestern United States and has lived in several states, including Indiana, Tennessee, and North Carolina, where she currently resides. She has two highly educated sisters whom both earned valedictorian awards during their academic careers. Their educational differences led to a phenomenon where Jade felt that during instances when family members compared the siblings, she felt like the odd child out. She elaborated on this further by mentioning, "I had like two like really smart sisters, and there was me; I was like the rebel child."

Jade calls North Carolina and her current county of residence home since she lived there for most of her life. She is a single mother who lives alone in a two-bedroom apartment walking distance from the campus she now attends. Currently, Jade is raising four children between 8 and 13 with limited assistance from the children's father. Her initial goal was to complete her associate degree in early childhood education in hopes of teaching preschool classes "because I knew I could not do it without at least working on my two-year degree," Jade said. She is also open to attending university but plans to take time off between the two levels of study to build up enough savings to pay for school if a cost-effective way to pay does not present itself beforehand. Jade also discussed how she has other larger goals, including high school counseling, community outreach, and opening or working for a non-profit organization. She

currently works in community outreach through her church and her county's public school system. Jade has also occasionally served as a foster parent.

Early Life

In our first interview, Jade discussed how "education was not actually a huge goal of mine at all." She credits some of her disinterest and inability to establish a foothold in education to growing up in a structure of frequent changes to her households' makeup and location. "I moved around a lot, so there was a lot of changing schools, so I think it was really hard for me to connect well," stated Jade. In addition, Jade talked about her mothers' experience navigating higher education in pursuit of an eventual doctorate degree. However, as opposed to seeing her mother's journey as a source of inspiration to become educated herself, Jade discussed how during those times the sibling's access to their mother was severely limited. The lack of time spent with her mother led Jade to see the educational process as a family time barrier which further grew her dislike for schooling. "Part of that turned me off to education. I didn't wanna be that mom that was working full-time and then going to school full-time and didn't have time to be a mom," she said. As a result, Jade admitted that she did not perform well in school, and that "my mom was always very concerned that I wasn't going to be successful in school or in life at all." Jade eventually dropped out of high school, moved out of her mother's home, and began working full-time in ministry. She thought she "was gonna be a high school dropout, and I was gonna stay a high school dropout because I was working full-time, and I was never gonna have the time to get back to high school."

Jade continued her struggles related to deciding what she wanted to do in life and how education would play a role in her journey. Success pressures from her mother only exacerbated the matter, which Jade discussed during the next portion of our conversation:

> She kept trying to push me to do something like that. Pushing me to apply to schools in our area, but I never really felt connected to any of the things that she wanted me to do because they weren't really what I wanted to do. They were things that she wanted me to do. I really struggled for a long time trying to figure out what it was that I wanted to do and didn't really feel like I had a whole lot of influences in my life that really were helping me to get there.

Without having any concrete aspirations during her late teen years, Jade married her former husband and got pregnant shortly after high school, thus postponing her career and educational goals. Thinking about her childhood interactions with her mother, Jade doubled down on her parental duties because she "really did wanna focus on being a really present parent unlike my mother."

After having her fourth child during her late 20's, Jade enrolled at her local community college since her children were somewhat more independent. Jade also discussed how her job status played a role in her decision to enter college. "It wasn't until my career hit a standstill where I was at a point where I wasn't going to be able to move up, grow if I didn't get a degree," she stated. In addition to experiencing upward mobility barriers due to having limited education, Jade credits the COVID-19 pandemic with fostering social and family changes that prompted her to return to school. During the next portion of our first interview session, she elaborated on the impact of COVID-19 by mentioning how:

> I was working in ministry when COVID happened. COVID completely changed the way that everybody did everything. There were so many things we couldn't do ministry-wise that we were typically doing because we weren't having people come on our campus. We have all of this time now that we're not allotting to what we're usually doing, and how can

> we help the community with this time? Also, there came a time when I had to step away from ministry because I had to homeschool four kids, and actually, I was a foster parent at the time, so it was five kids. I had to step away from my ministry.

After some "soul searching to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up," Jade got a job working for the county school system as a homeless outreach specialist. After working there for a while, Jade found that she loved this position because it lets her do ministry-type work outside the faith community. "I've actually done more ministry in my role that I currently have than I ever did in six years in church ministry," she said.

Her experience serving those in need prompted Jade to explore educational opportunities that would allow her to grow in the field, thus expanding her ability to make a positive social impact. She chose her current school mainly because of its proximity to her home since, after her divorce, she lived within walking distance of the campus where she takes classes.

Current Status

As of the fall 2022 semester, Jade is progressing through her second to last semester in the early childhood education program at her chosen community college. Much to her surprise, as she progressed in her studies, Jades' community college informed her through email that she had taken enough classes to earn two certificates. However, she had not intended to pursue those credentials. She details the experience in the following portion of our interview:

> I did get an email notification like, hey you've reached your goal for this certificate. I was like, oh, I didn't know that cuz I wasn't trying to get these; I was just going for my degree, and I just happened to get these certificates on the way. I was like, oh, ok that works too.

She now possesses certificates in preschool learning and toddler care. Jade also talked about how her coursework has benefitted and complimented her workplace performance at the preparatory

school she works for by teaching her how to interact with young children. "When I first started, I absolutely thought that you don't need a two-year degree to be a preschool teacher, but I think I've definitely changed my tune in that regard," said Jade. She even discussed how her elective courses have benefitted her understanding of communities and how a child's social environment conditions at home affect their classroom behavior. "Taking social science courses and knowing the issues that affect families and affect different cultures can affect the way that you do your job as an educator; I think it's so much bigger than just teaching kids their ABCs and 1, 2, 3's," stated Jade.

During our second interview, Jade briefly talked about how her current community college experiences led to a change in her aspirations. Her goals now include pursuing a bachelor's degree in a different major, something that she never thought was possible considering her relationship with academics beforehand. Jade's experience in the community also led her to change her initial pace of taking two courses at most each term in favor of hastening her progress over the past year. She explains these two changes in the following excerpt:

> They have changed what I want to go to school for in the future. Although I'm finishing my degree in early childhood ed., I plan to pursue a bachelor's in a different field. Although it's not a completely unrelated field, it's a different field, and I plan to pursue either sociology, psychology, or social work. So that has changed issues in my personal life and have made me want to pursue my degree or made me want to finish my degree faster because I was pursuing it pretty slowly.

Jade credits her initial slower pace to her divorce, having to work full-time, and wanting to maintain a strong presence in her children's lives.

During additional portions of our second interview, Jade talked about how her current plethora of life experiences seemed to keep drawing her back to the world of social service, even as she experienced opposing views from those in her inner family circle. "When I went back to school, I had it narrowed down to do social work or early childhood ed., and my mom said don't do social work; it will break your heart, and by a strange turn of events, I ended up in it anyway," Jade stated. Through her service as a foster parent, ministry worker, and in-school resource staff for underserved children, Jade feels she must serve overlooked populations because "I have a heart for the kids and teens in tough places."

Another set of factors that have enhanced Jade's academic aspirations lie within her job interview experiences. Within many of these interviews, Jade often makes it through the initial candidate narrowing interviews, only to be turned down due to her dearth of credentials. Jade discussed how very recently she "was so excited, made it through three rounds of interviews, felt really confident that I was gonna get it." However, she then talked about how "they got down to two of us and in the last interview, asked about my education, and at the last minute they decided to go with the other candidate, and they didn't tell me why, but I have a feeling that my education was a factor," she said. In each of the instances when employers turned Jade down in the final moments of the hiring process, she discussed how "there was a look on their faces" regarding the point of the interviews when education became the subject, which let her know those potential employers would not select her. Jade's experiences, plus her desire to learn more about how to serve at-risk children, act as a motivator that pushes her to continue her studies.

Personal and Professional Aspirations

Jade's aspirations are straightforward and clear, although there are gray areas present that largely relate to her long-term goals. She now plans to complete her community college studies

within the year then apply to a university where she will major in sociology or social work. Jade also operates under the hope that her education and experience will increase her employability in areas that she would like to work in since her lack of credentialing there has historically been a barrier to her progress.

During our third interview, I asked Jade what her short and long-term goals were so I could gain a clear picture of her path to success. I asked Jade to think about short-term as a measurement that considers the next five years that extend beyond the date of our third interview and long-term from within the scope of five years and beyond. Regarding her short-term aspirations, Jade reiterated her desire to complete her current degree program while "working in community outreach and continuing to build the sense of community that I have." In addition, Jade discussed the value of the networks she has with community service organizations when she highlighted how those contacts might lead to new or continued job or aspiration assistance opportunities, an endeavor she sees as especially important considering her current work status. "The role that I'm in will not be around in five years from now because I am in a contract position, and my position will only be for another year and a half," said Jade.

In the long term, Jade sees a clear professional path but needs to develop more confidence to speak of those aspirations in concrete terms. In the following passage, Jade illustrated an example of her long-term goals:

> I do have dreams and ambitions of starting a nonprofit for unaccompanied homeless youth, whether that be a youth center or a wraparound after-school program. I don't know quite what it looks like yet. But I would really like the opportunity to do something great.

However, Jade sees potential barriers to her progress in the form of her current socioeconomic status and trying to stabilize the various challenges that arise out of being a single mother. "It is a

lot, and still wanting to have a quality of life and have a social life and, you know, date, other things like that can be a challenge to balance it all, but I just know it can be done, and I'm almost there," said Jade.

Jade also spoke of how her long-term progress would also impact her personal life as a single mother, which included a short synopsis of how income and the local economy play a role during this passage:

> I definitely would like to see myself rise up a little bit socioeconomically. I'm not a big money person. I don't measure my success by the amount of money I have. However, I would like to be a little bit more comfortable. With the housing market being the way that it is and being on one income, I'm renting, and if I ever wanna own a home I'm just gonna have to earn more income. I need the housing market to go back down to normal. So yeah, there are little things like that. I guess home ownership is not a little thing, but you know, home ownership is one of those things that I would like to see myself in at some point.

She also discussed how home ownership is significant because it will give her children, as she stated, a "consistent place to stay and call home, which is especially important since the divorce kind of threw things off."

Regarding education beyond a bachelor's degree, Jade became unsure of whether she would or should commit to furthering her education. "I don't know if I'm going to pursue anything past a bachelor's, but we'll see once I get there how I feel and if I need it for my next step. If I do, then I will keep moving forward, and if I don't, then I might not," she said.

Relationship with the College

Jade's relationship with the college is mainly transactional. However, she has found a mentor via a faculty member who concurrently serves as the program director of early education. When I asked Jade how her institution made the most significant impact on her educational journey, she quickly responded by discussing how the school's financial aid program and general affordability was its biggest asset. "I have not paid a dime to go to school, and I'm the kind of person that I probably wouldn't have gotten as far as I am, had I had to pay out of pocket, so that's been a huge resource for me," stated Jade. She also discussed the free daycare while you take classes benefit her school provides students. Although Jade could not take advantage of the program, she talked about how she felt it would play a vital role in helping students persist during the next portion of our second interview:

> I know that was an option; however, it was not an option for me because I was not enrolled in enough credit hours. Had I been enrolled in more credit hours, that might have been an option, but I actually was very fortunate because when my children were of daycare age, I actually just so happened to work at their daycares. I think it would really help us older students, though, and appreciate that they offer that.

Jade also told me that she was aware of some of the academic support services, such as tutoring and writing assistance, which faculty and staff at her school frequently offered and advertised in case students needed help. "I did know that resource was available to me, but I was probably just a little bit too proud to ask for help," she said.

In the area of mentorship, Jade talked about how two faculty experiences strongly impacted her aspirations overall. First, during her frequent interactions with the program director, Jade talked about how her new mentor "would love to see me pursue a bachelor's of education, and I'm not opposed to that." Jade continued by stating how "she has given me some

insight into what pursuing a bachelor's would look like at certain schools." As a result, Jade is now aware of that her community college has various articulation agreements with universities across North Carolina, which may simplify the student transfer and credit acceptance processes (D'Amico, et al., 2020; Hodara et al., 2017; Young-Walker & Okpala, 2017).

In addition, Jade spoke highly of one part-time social science faculty member who strongly influenced her desire to work in areas that allow her to address underserved populations' needs. She detailed that experience in the excerpt below when she spoke of these impactful in-class experiences:

> I honestly think it was when I took sociology. It was the second time I took it. I took it once in high school, and I really loved it, and I took it again in college and really loved it. Even though it was a required course I had to take for my degree, I didn't mind taking it. I honestly feel like that was a success because it instilled in me. I guess it didn't instill in me cuz I knew it was already there. It reminded me that I had this passion there. Although I have a passion for education as well, I have a passion for children. I have a passion for families. I think it reminded me that I have this passion for the downtrodden, the marginalized, and those on the outskirts of society.

These experiences pulled Jade back into the world of social and human services, a field that she has always loved reaffirming that her purpose in life is to help those in need even after trying to avoid these types of career fields at the advice of her mother. "I ended up in community outreach. I ended up as a foster parent. It's like no matter the fact that I went to school for early childhood ed., I went to work in early childhood ed., I went to work in ministry. I literally tried to avoid it in every way, shape, and form, and I ended up in it both personally and professionally anyway," she said. In Jade's case, her relationship with community college stakeholders and her

in-class learning experiences helped her rediscover elements of herself, careers that align with her disposition, and educational paths she could take to succeed in those areas.

Participant Summary

Jade's positive experience at her chosen community college led to an evolution of her short- and long-term aspirations. She initially entered school thinking that her primary goal was to earn an associate degree in early childhood education so she could teach underserved younger children. However, Jade's interactions with the director of her program, who frequently nudged her towards pursuing higher levels of education, helped her develop enough confidence to know she could reach any goal. Jade's ability to use the faith and support her community college faculty gave her regarding her abilities helped her overcome the lack of confidence she had due to her K-12 experiences.

In addition to Jade's positive interactions and learning experiences with education faculty, she praised the faculty member who taught her social science elective, which strongly impacted her change in aspirations. "I loved taking sociology, but it was not until a couple of years after I took sociology that I started feeling like maybe I was supposed to be doing something with that love," said Jade. However, her sociology course experience was less exploratory than many elective courses. Instead, it was reaffirming because it brought her back to her aspiration to serve those in need. Perhaps through a more lucrative career outside the world of ministry and its sometimes "toxic work environment," which was so "incredibly demanding," according to Jade, she could remain strongly involved in her children’s lives while finding a better balance between her personal, academic, and professional endeavors.

As a result, Jade feels that early childhood education is no longer an end-goal and that she is likely to pursue a career she initially thought was out of reach. Now, Jade aspires to start a

nonprofit for unaccompanied homeless youth in the form of a stand-alone youth center or afterschool program. Along with the evolution of her career aspirations, Jade's education aspirations changed. According to Jade, "when I first entered the doors of the school during my first semester, I went from wanting to take a few classes to getting my associates at a slow pace." Currently, Jade sees an associate degree much differently. "The community college would probably be a stepping-stone for me as I move forward to a university education, which surprised me and probably everyone who knew me from 17 and before," Jade stated.

Consequently, Jade began her community college studies with what she thought was a clear path and straightforward goal. Presently, she has a new goal, and her educational aspirations lie within a malleable area to the extent that she defines success at the community college quite differently from when she started. When I asked Jade if she would quit her community college studies if a local university offered her an opportunity to transfer her credits and complete the bachelor's degree cheaply, she said:

> If I had an opportunity like that, yes, I would because the associate's degree that I was working on is no longer my goal and my aspiration. If it was something that was still truly important to me and not just a stepping-stone to get to where I wanted to go next, then I would absolutely stay and finish it. But because early childhood education is no longer my goal, I was really just finishing my degree because I started it, and I wanted to finish what I started. But because my bachelor's is now my next priority, yeah, I would definitely take an opportunity if I had it.

I also asked Jade if she would still see her stay at the community college as a success if she left under those circumstances she discussed above, and Jade promptly answered "yes."

The data I collected in my three interviews with Jade led me to classify her as a student who has continually evolving professional aspirations, which then alter her educational goals. Jade spoke of multiple career possibilities and ways to define success. Each of her variations largely depended on opportunities that may present themselves, her financial ability to pay for school or attend at no charge, or her ability to balance single parenthood with education and work obligations. In all cases, whether she graduates and uses her degree, graduates and does not use her degree, or does not graduate, she sees her community college experience as a success. Jade's community college experience changed her from a person who disliked the schooling process to a young professional who considers herself a lifelong learner, an intrinsic and positive change that is hard to measure using current institutional metrics.

Michelle-Black Married Female in Early 40s, Early Childhood Education

Michelle enrolled in the community college's early childhood education program hoping to earn a certificate or associate degree. She is African American and just turned 40 in 2022. During the fall 2022 semester, Michelle entered her third semester at her chosen school and is enrolled part-time. She was born and raised in the midwestern United States and has lived in two different states in the southeastern United States. Michelle is married and has one child. She has also earned a bachelor's degree in business administration and a master's degree in education studies. Michelle currently works as a full-time language faculty member at her community college and is looking to explore new career options. She also works part-time at a local university, teaching introductory language courses to earn extra income. Michelle resides in the same county that houses the community college where she works full-time and attends school. In addition, she volunteers for her community in various ways, including translation services,

creating study abroad opportunities, and helping to plan early childhood in-class projects at a local K-12 charter school nearby.

Early Life

Michelle grew up in a major city in the midwestern United States. A single mother raised her, but her father was always nearby when needed. Neither of her parents earned a higher education degree, and both earned most of their income working for local utility companies. Her father also earned side income as a bass musician who traveled to many different countries with his band. Michelle's grandparents on both sides did not earn a college degree, yet they too enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle. Among her closest relatives, Michelle has an aunt who earned two college degrees and now works as a judge. Since she and her mother lived close to her grandparents, Michelle spent significant time traveling between both homes, where she was watched and raised partially by her grandparents while her mother worked.

During her childhood years, Michelle's only interest in higher education came from wanting to earn a truck driver's license so she could drive freight trucks around the country. She was also interested in dance and music but treated those endeavors primarily as hobbies during the early stages of her life. However, as Michelle grew older, taller, and more model-esque, her interest in dance increased. At the same time, she developed a new interest in modeling after receiving encouragement that prompted her to pursue a career in that field from friends, family, and people who worked in that industry. "I really wanted to be a dancer, model, or truck driver," said Michelle.

However, Michelle's mother and grandparents had different plans for their child. As such, they ensured she was educated in some of the better private schools in the city they lived in, took piano lessons, and participated in camps and sports. During our first interview session, Michelle

talked about how towards the end of her K-12 experience, "my mom almost forced me to go to college and that I should major in business" on the thought that a business degree from a private school would offer her the opportunity and flexibility to be successful within any field of endeavor. "I really did want to try that truck driver's license or go to culinary school instead," said Michelle. Michelle's culinary pursuit grew out of her work in the downtown restaurant scene in the city where she lived, which Michelle spoke fondly of through our interviews. However, Michelle's mother remained steadfast that she stick to her business administration studies, which resulted in her earning a bachelor's degree in four years. Michelle also briefly tried to attend culinary school. However, her professional interest waned due to the institution's costs and time demands, although she still loves to cook.

During the latter parts of her studies, Michelle met her soon-to-be husband, who had also just earned his bachelor's and master's degrees. After working at jobs they did not enjoy, the couple decided to search for an institution in a different city to earn more education, which would be in fields they thought they would find fulfilling. "My husband got his degrees in health studies and gerontology but hated working at a nursing home, so he decided to get into coaching basketball because he played it in college," she said. Likewise, Michelle stated, "I still did not know what I wanted to do, but I knew that I wanted to do something else." After having a conversation with her husband about what made them most happy and a pursuit to try careers in that area, Michelle and her husband found their choices. They then moved to a college town in the southeastern United States where they attended the same university. While her husband pursued a career in coaching basketball, Michelle decided to major in education in hopes of teaching language classes. Her seemingly out-of-nowhere choice to pursue a language teaching career came from two experiences in her past. First, Michelle's mother had signed her up to take

Spanish classes when she was in middle school, "and ever since then, I always loved the idea of speaking more than one language," she said. Second, she studied abroad in her senior year at her undergraduate university and loved her experience in Spain.

After moving south and beginning her studies, Michele found it challenging to learn a new language, yet her experience increased her desire to teach it to others. After five semesters and a couple summers, Michelle completed her studies and got her teaching license. Fortunately, during her pursuit of the licensing part of her education, Michelle was able to teach students at various levels within the K-12 system. She then accepted a full-time job teaching at the high school level and worked there for two years. During this same time period, Michelle talked about how, "my husband started coaching, teaching classes, then decided to go the teaching route full-time." After the couple collectively experienced some educational burnout, they decided to move to another state in the southern United States, where they both began teaching full-time at the college level.

Current Status

Although she enjoys the time flexibility and the opportunity to teach students while heading her new school's study abroad program, Michelle never lost her desire to teach younger children or own her own business. Her disillusionment with higher education's "shift towards only worrying about graduation instead of the quality of learning" further encouraged Michelle's desire to get out of higher education. In the private early education sector, she could create a fun curriculum while still being able to change the content or structure of her classes when needed or desired. After teaching full-time at her current institution, Michelle returned to school to pursue an early childhood education credential. Michelle enrolled at the same institution she worked for, since she can take classes there free of charge, and is now studying in that program while

planning her next step. Michelle currently desires to look for site locations and start-up funding so she can open an early education Spanish immersion center. Whether she opted for the certificate or associate degree, Michelle could complete either credential within a calendar year, depending on her work schedule and family needs.

Michelle describes herself as a "student that actually wants to know everything in her classes instead of completing work just because I might need that information one day." Also, Michelle "wants to get it right because it will be all on me," once she opens her facility she said. While searching for locations within the region, she and her husband use their interactions at work and within the K-12 system to network and advertise to gauge their community's interest in level in multi-lingual early education. Fortunately, Michelle's role as a teacher, peer, community volunteer, and parent of a young child allows her to network and market her potential business with residents in the county. Also, she uses those volunteer opportunities to learn more about the inner workings of an early childhood class space, a dynamic Michelle routinely discusses in her coursework. According to Michelle, "all of the people I know with kids in the area love the idea, and they think we really need it because there isn't one in this area." She anticipates that if she manages to open said facility, it will fill with students quickly. In addition to her early childhood education studies, Michelle discussed how she "might also try to take another grant-writing class in case I need it." She had taken a similar class during her graduate training and desires to re-learn the grant writing process.

Personal and Professional Aspirations

During our three interviews, it became evident that Michelle enrolled in her current program to explore the world of early childhood education to determine how to continue her pursuit of opening her Spanish immersion school. Also, Michelle hopes to use her time studying

in the program to network with others. These newly formed networks will help her progress because Michelle would be able to find enrollees through community marketing efforts quickly via word-of-mouth advertising by "getting to know the right people in the right places," she stated.

According to Michelle, "early childhood education certifications are not necessarily needed to work in daycare and pre-K settings, but each of them gives the recipient the opportunity to take on more responsibility." Consequently, Michelle is also pursuing a possible certificate in administration "so I can manage a facility, but I might try to get others if the classes line up" for enhancement purposes she said. On the other hand, Michelle's pursuit of an associate degree in early childhood education is, according to her, "optional and really there so I can learn more." In this case, her goals are semi-dependent on completion while being optional yet enhancing of her desire to manage a facility efficiently if her dream does come to fruition. In addition, Michelle's indirect goals is to build a community network that will help her find some start-up funding opportunities.

When I asked Michelle questions about whether she sees getting a credential as a marker of success, she said, "I want the one related to giving me clearance to be an administrator, for example, and the others would be nice just so I will know about those areas, but not really because I still could do most of it with the education I got right now." "It also would be nice to finish what I started and meet more people, so it has other benefits," she said. However, if this endeavor does not lead to Michelle opening a Spanish immersion early childhood facility, she can still rely on two more than adequate second and third options. "I always can continue teaching at the college level, or if I want, I can find a job working in the high school if we stay in the area or want to move, which would be fine too because it's not like I am desperate for money

or fresh out of college looking for work," said Michelle. Michelle's aspirations are complex because her education lies within an area of entrepreneur endeavor and enhancement of an optional transitional career goal.

Relationship with the College

Michelle's relationship with the college is rich and in-depth, having been employed there since 2013. In addition to teaching Spanish courses, she has served in the positions of Language Director, Study Abroad Coordinator, and Chair of the Multicultural Committee. Michelle has worked with numerous faculty on community school partnerships, including the early childhood education program director. “I love working with her, and she is the one who tells me about which daycare and pre-K schools to put my child in," said Michelle. The two routinely discussed the benefits and uses of early childhood education credentials and their role in opening a business well before Michelle enrolled in the program. "We talked about it at least a year before I decided to enroll, but I did not sign up until I made up my mind to try this and had the time to do so," she said.

Although Michelle has a high degree of expertise due to her existing higher education credentials, a teaching license from her previous state of residence, and experience teaching all ranges of students, she does seek the counsel of her instructors when needed. Her access to these faculty members within the sphere of peer, instructor, friend, or mentor gives Michelle the opportunity to talk co-workers within conversations that extend beyond classroom conversations. For example, the early childhood education program director goes the extra step to give Michelle information about grant opportunities and things to expect as she navigates through the process of facility selection and state approvals. In addition, the education department assists Michelle in her pre-marketing efforts by telling those who have young children in the county's school district

about the potential opportunity they will have to enroll students in this Spanish immersion program should it come to fruition.

Michelle has not needed to access any academic support services since she has extensive experience in education. However, she knows who to contact formally or informally if she ever needs assistance. However, Michelle discussed how she, "definitely took advantage of the employee tuition reimbursement program that pays me back for classes I take at this school, allowing me to study at no cost." She went on to say, "so far, my only cost is a $60 fee to cover the books in class, which is no big deal." Michelle's interpersonal relationship with the faculty and staff in her student and faculty roles has also been positive. "Even though I may quit teaching here, everybody wants to see me open this school because we need one so badly in the area, so I don't feel like they are seeing my education as wrong for trying to pursue something else," stated Michelle. Consequently, the only pressure Michelle seems to experience comes from her desire to try something else and pursue her long-time dream of owning a business.

Participant Summary

Michelle is thriving in her current position but has always wanted to pursue her dreams of being an entrepreneur. That, coupled with owning her own business seems to be one of the main drivers of her renewed interest in working to open a language immersion school for young children. Michelle's additional success drivers include a positive experience teaching at the K-12 level, having a mother who owned a daycare she helped run, and a desire to apply the skills she learned while pursuing her bachelor's degree in business to her current aspirations. In addition, her surrounding community fosters support for her endeavors by telling her how needed this type of program is in the region where she resides via various social media platforms.

Consequently, Michelle seeks to learn more about early childhood education through her classes. She treats the coursework as an opportunity to explore strategies for teaching workers how to instruct children. In addition, Michelle appreciates learning more about the financial support opportunities that may help provide the needed capital to assist in the opening process. However, Michelle feels she does not have to earn an associate degree to succeed. North Carolina requires early childhood facility owners to possess a certificate to work in an administrative capacity, thus making that credential the only one she must have. These things also depend on whether she decides to continue pursuing this goal. Michelle also can continue teaching at the community college level or in the K-12 system since she is licensed to teach in North Carolina.

Until she fully commits to her desire to open her early childhood language school, Michelle's journey through her community college education process remains exploratory. Fortunately, she considers the information she is learning beneficial to her as a parent of a toddler-age child, thus creating a dual value that would also benefit her in the area of self-help. In addition, she has a great support system and adequate income in her current state, so her socioeconomic goals, although present, did not seem to act as a means of pressure to succeed. Instead, as she navigates through the learning process, Michelle is also trying to determine her next steps, which depend on her family needs and start-up funding opportunities even more than the education she receives beyond the initial certification North Carolina requires. Regardless of the outcome, Michelle appreciates having the opportunity to learn in her chosen program at little to no costs. In that sense, having the opportunity to know more and using that information to decide what to do later is an act of success within itself.

Data Collection Summary

Despite these participants' diverse demographic backgrounds, in all cases, each of them spoke fondly of the community college system and its affordability, support systems, and ability to deliver high-quality education. Whether my participants talked about how they needed to complete their studies to access a career or planned to use what they learned to find or seize an opportunity that did not require a credential, the result was the same. Moreover, each participant confirmed that the lessons they learned at their school would likely positively impact their lives—an act that is a success in itself. The following section of this chapter features a thematic analysis where I present synthesis of the commonalities, thoughts, and ideas that exist across each participant (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012).

Table 2

Participant Profile Recap Table

Participant Name	Demographic Background	Prior Higher Education Experience	Major
Happy	White, male, married, no children, early 40s	Bachelor of science degree, associate of science degree, CNA certificate, phlebotomy certificate	Medical Sonography Associate Program (Full-Time)
Storm	Black, female, married, four children, early 40s	Bachelor of science degree, bachelor of science degree, master of science degree	Nursing Associate Program (Part-time)
Ivy	White, female, single, no children, early 20s	Associate in science degree, CNA certificate	Medical Sonography Associate Program (Full-time)
Jade	Bi-Racial, female, divorced single parent of four, mid-30s	None	Early Childhood Education Associate Program (Part-time)

Michelle	Black, female, married, one child, early 40s	Bachelor of arts degree, master of arts degree, grant writing certificate	Early Childhood Education Associate Program (Part-time)

Student Aspirations and Experiences

Entry and Aspirations

Entry

Jade, Ivy, Michelle, and Happy noted that the community college they attend is their first choice. Ivy, who thought the scholarship she received would only fund her attendance at a community college, did not apply to any other school. Instead, she deliberately sought admission to this community college near her residence. "I knew that I was going to a community college," said Ivy. Since Ivy knew she was interested in a medical career that she could enter quickly, a community college that offered certified nursing assistant and sonography training would prove optimal. During his most recent experience with higher education, Happy, upon acting on a desire to explore a possible career in the healthcare field, enrolled at the community college as a certified nursing assistant student. Happy then enrolled in the phlebotomy program. After completing that credential, he applied to the sonography program and got accepted following the suggestion of one of his instructors. Happy also spoke highly and in appreciation of the selective sonography program during portions of our conversations. "I think it's very prestigious to be in that small group, and I just lucked out being near them at the same time, and really need to credit my instructor in the phlebotomy program for directing me towards this," he said.

The community college was Michelle's first and only choice mainly because, as she stated, "I'm here, its free, and has the program I am interested in, so three for three." Further highlighting her reasoning, Michelle said, "the faculty here knows everyone in the early

education loop in the area, and I knew they would be able to point me in the right direction regarding funding, location, and maybe my first batch of kids." During our interviews, it became evident that Michelle's peer relationship was an asset to her learning experience and decision to enroll in the current program because it would give her access to veteran mentors in the county's service area.

Storm enrolled at her community college as a second choice after dropping out of a local non-profit health sciences school due to difficulties juggling shifting parental and student duties during the COVID-19 epidemic. "I had to decide whether I wanted to start over again at another school or not, and so I dropped out, and after about a six to nine-month hiatus, I did decide to start over, and I looked into the community college route," said Storm. She then chose the closest school to her that housed a nursing program, of whom were willing to accept credits from her previous school.

Jade entered the community college after discovering that she is unlikely to progress in her personal or professional life without receiving some sort of higher education training. She articulated such sentiments in the following passage:

> It actually wasn't until after my fourth child was born when I was about 28 or 29 that I actually did decide to enroll in school. It wasn't until my career kind of hit a standstill where I was at a point where I wasn't going to be able to move up, I wasn't gonna be able to grow if I didn't get a degree. So, I did apply for early childhood education, and I just started kind of chiseling away at it one or two classes at a time and just bit by bit started doing that.

Before deciding to attend school, Jade had been relying on work experience and professional networks she formed through her church to find employment. However, her experiences during

interviews where employers began to see how her limited education acted as an employment barrier, she decided to enroll at her current school.

Aspirations

While some of the participants laid out a clear path toward success along with ways in which to identify the role of community college education in that process, each of them told stories that illustrate complexities associated with the road to success. Most of the participants' goals were straightforward and easier to follow in the short term. For example, Happy, Ivy, and Storm wanted to complete their studies to gain access to state-level certifications and begin careers in their respective medical fields. Although Michelle discussed her short-term goal of "wanting to learn more about the field and being able to perform certain duties as an owner of a facility," her goals for completion lay within a grayer area since it is unlikely that certifications would lead to an immediate transition away from her current job and into owning and operating her Spanish immersion early education center. "I have a long way to go before I open the doors, probably over a year, so this is just a start," Michelle said.

Each participant's long-term aspirations were complex and dependent on a combination of social conditions, socioeconomic factors, found opportunities, and potentially shifting interests. Happy and Ivy, my two participants who planned to enter the field of sonography, desire to find an ultrasound technician job shortly after they graduate. However, Happy was less firmly committed to working as an ultrasound technician in the long term. When I asked him about his long-term goals, Happy discussed how he had a myriad of options, including pursuing higher-level degrees in the medical field, which centered around "certainly exploring as much as I can in this career," he said. I asked Happy a probing question so he could tell me how attached he was to the field of sonography, and he stated how, at the time of the third interview, his

commitment level was 50/50, mainly because he is willing to pursue other careers. Ivy was firmly committed to sonography, but she needed to figure out what type of job she wanted within the field. Her divide seems to be between finding work through opportunities she earns during the clinical portion of her studies, or pursuing an opportunity as a travel tech, which she explained with the following statement:

> I would take a traveling job. Now they're paying like crazy, which is also a nice factor, but that's not necessarily a dream I'm gonna like put 110% of my efforts in, but if I'm hitting my goals, the pipeline dream would be to out to Colorado or something and get a tech job. Yeah, that would be great.

Storm's goals were highly complex in that, unlike Happy and Ivy, who had clear short-term goals with long-term options, she has many short-term options with a few long-term goals. Furthermore, the path she takes highly depends on her seizing advantage of any favorable opportunity that might present itself. When I asked Storm about her longer-term five-to-ten-year goals, she said, "I should be a nurse midwife by then," however, she also discussed how she could pursue some additional possibilities. According to Storm, these additional possibilities include "maybe ICU unit, maybe the operating room, maybe one other unit, I don't know, I'll see how many, three to four and then see who offers me a position." In addition, she did not rule out working with a research team if the opportunity should arise. Despite these numerous options, it was clear that Storm wants to work to provide healthcare for the underserved.

Michelle's aspirations were the most optional of any participant because she already enjoys a successful career teaching at the community college full-time. Likewise, Michelle does need to get the credential she seeks to continue her pursuit of a bilingual early childhood center, because she could hire an assistant manager who has that clearance. However, Michelle sees

additional intrinsic benefits where additional education is concerned because she would then "know almost every aspect of what it takes to run that type of place without depending on what others tell me," she said. Consequently, Michelle's educational aspirations fit primarily within a minimally needed, and mostly optional but helpful category where knowledge, not the credential, reigns supreme.

Jade aspires to open a facility, that in her words, "gives underserved youths a positive space to learn and hang out where they can be themselves afterschool." Consequently, she now desires to learn more about the social landscapes troubled youths grow up in and how those environments affect their behavior "by taking more psychology and sociology courses at a higher level," she said about university training. As a result, Jade aspires to reach university student status, and although she would like to "finish my studies here, I would leave without that piece of paper if the time and opportunity was right," she said.

Life Experience Influences

Each participant spoke directly about how their life experiences impacted their current aspirations. For example, Ivy connected her childhood experiences growing up in homes where her biological and stepmother's heightened focus on career and wealth made her want to prioritize time flexibility in her professional ambitions. "I just did not want to be wealthy, alone, and miserable," Ivy stated. Instead, Ivy chose career aspirations aligned with her more informal father's ideology that prioritized family, friends, and taking care of oneself while also incorporating the medical care experiences her mother exposed her to during her childhood. "He made sure that he took the time to have fun with me and take me out to places and just be a dad, and he did not need to spend a ton of money to do it," she said. Ivy, whose career alignment uses her home life experiences as the primary source of inspiration, is a person that values the

intangible elements of life and family while working diligently to attain one credential she could access quickly and cheaply. By following that path, Ivy found a career that she finds fulfilling and fair paying. “People in the field also can control their schedules which attracts me a lot,” said Ivy. In a sense, her aspirations have risen out of a desire to fill the gaps that were present in her home life growing up.

Happy connected his life experiences to his current aspirations while he discussed how comfortable he was having grown up in a stable, positive, two-parent, middle-class home. As a result, Happy has the time and resources to find out who he is and what career matches his personality through affordable, flexible, local education, which does not interrupt his socioeconomic status. Furthermore, he does not feel a sense of urgency relating to transitioning into a new career. Instead, Happy discussed how he “would rather get life and career right before I start a family as my parents did me.” Like Ivy, Happy wants to change careers to better control the time he has for social activities, but he is also motivated by the idea of positively impacting society through his work efforts.

Storm’s strongest areas of motivation came from her desire to be an inspiration to her family. She also discussed her desire to “address problems plaguing the black community since we got here.” Since Storm currently has access to a job she thinks pays well, money did not seem to motivate her nearly as much as social and family impact factors. Storm was also strongly influenced by the higher education degrees her parents received. She stated how, “I knew I had to get at least as much education as they had for them to be satisfied with me.” Now she wants to extend the education she earned into possibly also helping her local community reduce black infant mortality rates. During one session, Storm talked about how she hoped to show her old and young kids that if they worked hard, they could create a more ideal life for their children. “It

is a such thing as stability in life by getting a good education then job and finding that one special person you can spend your life with even though I may not get there ‘til y’all grown,” stated Storm. Her statement came in reference to her and her mother's family and education instability and non-traditional student progressions where they did not experience stability until later in life. Finally, Storm stated how she wants to “put all the pieces of my life together to see what they all meant in one story.” She currently seeks a sense of purpose that aligns with her varied education and life experiences.

Jade, much like Storm, desires to work in an area where she can make a positive social impact in the lives of underserved youths. In addition, and much like Ivy, she grew up in a home where her mother was very involved in her career and relationships “instead of taking a lot of time out to raise her kids,” said Jade. Consequently, Jade discussed how she wants to engage heavily in all aspects related to parenting her kids, which led to her aspirations to pursue higher education at a pace that matched her social needs. In addition, Jade discussed how “sometimes negative experiences in the public school system, ministry, and personal relationships made me want to do more for myself in ways that might help me help others like me who were not academically gifted,” thus further fostering her interest in social service careers. Upon entering her chosen community college, Jade found a new support system via faculty and staff who helped her to realize that she can succeed in the academic arena, which changed her goal from wanting to teach young kids to aspiring to open an underserved youth support center.

According to Michelle, the life influences that played primary roles in her aspirations included "taking Spanish courses and learning to love the language, attending my undergraduate business school and always wanting to be my own boss, and teaching young kids back in Tennessee.” In addition, Michelle’s experience as a community volunteer, mother of a young

child, and faculty member at the same school she attends as a student play a strong role in her desire to contribute to her local community. The immense layers of networks around Michelle, which act to help to educate, support, and guide her as she continues to explore the processes associated with opening a Spanish language immersion center for young children, act as motivating factors and training processes.

Use of Education Experience

Exploratory and clearance aspects of education were significant factors during my participant interview portion of this research. In this study, exploratory refers to instances when students take courses because they are curious about the subject or careers in a particular academic area. Clearance refers to when students seek to pass courses to attain skills or receive a credential to gain access to a specific field of work. The exploratory element differed slightly across participants. However, each participant's statements illustrated how it was noticeably there. In the case of Happy, his experiences with community colleges were exploratory throughout his numerous stints at his current school and beyond. "The community college system allowed me to explore myself in ways where I could find out more about careers that reflect who I am and what I stand for," said Happy. Since he can attend community college at a lower cost than a university, Happy stated how he does "not feel any particular pressure regarding completing anything besides learning about how to build a better me," referencing his perception of how he uses the education he received and continues to pursue. Consequently, Happy uses community education to experience long-term personal and professional growth irrespective of whether he earns a credential or not. When I asked him to speak about his short-term view of how education affects his life, Happy said "I do plan on finishing it so I can try out

that field and also learn more about jobs in general in the healthcare system," a path that requires completion, credentialing, then licensing.

Storm and Michelle's stories were similar, and blended exploration and clearance motivations, because they already possessed bachelors-level and beyond degrees. Consequently, both participants discussed using the education they received from their community college to explore new career routes. They also hope to build professional networks while navigating their studies in hopes that possible credentials and newly formed professional relationships will enhance their current desired endeavors. "This program has helped me understand the need for the type of facility I want to open," said Michelle. "Just like I met those two in that car who helped me get my foot in the door of where I work, I am meeting people now that are exposing me to how bad a need we have for educating young black and brown people about their bodies in our area," said Storm. In both cases, completing a credential is optional and highly dependent on which of the numerous routes toward success each decides to take. "If I can go the research route, I will not necessarily need all the medical training except that it will be useful to know how the service end of medical assistance looks like," stated Storm. "All I need is that manager's certificate to open and there are ways to get around that, so the rest is optional for me, and I may need it and come back for it or stay to get it now, but it all Just depends," said Michelle.

Furthermore, Storm and Michelle discussed in detail how the routes they planned to take depended on whether a favorable opportunity presented itself along the way to completing their studies. For example, both discussed how they would happily cease their studies if an advancement opportunity presented itself before they completed their training. They also talked about how they still plan to earn a credential to help unlock credibility, certification status, and specialty status. "If I had an opportunity to work on a big grant and help someone open up a

facility to the extent where I had to quit school, I might, especially if the pay was right and it was long-term," responded Storm when I asked about scenarios where she could envision herself as a successful dropout. Likewise, Michelle stated how other than the state-required manager's certification she needs to begin, "I would try to start without the additional training or degrees because I can always come back and pick up those certifications later as needed." As a result of analyzing these seemingly dichotomous responses, I conclude that Storm and Michelle would like to complete their training because they know it will lead to them having more robust resume's that they can use to navigate their aspirations easier. Since they already possess higher education credentials, they are willing to cease their education for an opportunity to reach their goals more quickly. In addition, Storm and Michelle know that they could re-enroll at their current or another community college and complete needed training. In addition, both stated how they were more motivated to earn the credentials required by an employer or governing bodies since those requirements were a port of entry into the labor market.

Ivy's story gave me a much clearer clearance-oriented picture of how she plans to use her education. "I want to graduate, get a job, get out there on my own, build up some wealth, then hopefully start a family," she said. In addition, she hopes that within that time-based plan of events, she can experience the life of a travel nurse so she can work and visit other cities around the United States. Ivy is highly motivated to finish her studies since she is nearing completion, must earn a credential to work in the field, and wants to join the medical sonography culture to establish a sense of belonging. Elements of broader social, intrapersonal impact, and life course change-type factors were present but minimal during my interviews with Ivy. However, her desire to control her own schedule while not having to work beyond 40 hours a week were factors that appeared in numerous sections of each interview session.

Jade entered her community college studies hoping to teach children at the pre-K level. "At first, I was coming to school to earn the quickest certification I could get," she said. However, Jade's academic journey has evolved her career aspirations to the extent that now she desires to use her community college education as a base to springboard herself to university-level studies in hopes of opening her own non-profit organization. No longer is Jade's community college experience wholly an apex clearance endeavor, nor does she require a credential from her current institution to reach her newly found aspiration. "It would be crazy to pass up an opportunity to leave here and attend a university if I had the opportunity to, whether I graduate or not, because I need a bachelor's degree more than the things I am working on now," Jade said.

Meaning of Success

Each participant's definition of success was layered, largely dependent on whether they were talking using a short versus long term view, and highly dependent on homelife factors plus labor market requirements. Some of the participant's success markers were straightforward, for example, with statements like those from Happy, who stated, "you can't work in this field without the certification," versus Storm, who pointed out how her definitions of success were "in some cases dependent on the credential, while not so much in others." In situations where the employer or government entities required that workers possess a credential to work in a particular position or perform a specialty task, all participants confirmed that completing their studies in school amounted to success. In addition, each participant's confirmation of credentialing as a form of success was more pronounced when they spoke of their short-term goals.

Happy, Ivy, Storm, and Michelle stated that they initially needed a credential to enter their fields or levels of study. In the medical field programs Happy, Ivy, and Storm study within, each discussed how employers require that employees have various credentials in nearly all cases. Like Storm's pursuit of a nursing degree, Ivy discussed how "I'm pretty sure I can't work in this field without a license," while Happy reaffirmed those sentiments by stating how "no reputable facility would let you do potentially life-altering scans without the piece of paper." Echoing my medical arena participants, Michelle stated how in most cases, "early childhood center administrators need to have that certification present to open up." Initially, Jade expressed sentiments like the other four participants in this study when she focused solely on using her credential to work in the early childhood education arena. However, she did discuss how "once I started to want a bachelor's degree, finishing here became a little less important." Jade's new aspirations require that she earn at least a bachelor's degree.

When each participant discussed how they define success using a long-term perspective, their responses tended to become more abstract and personalized while still appreciating the role their community college would likely play in their journey toward those goals. For example, Happy discussed how his love of lifelong learning was a significant determinant of success that he attributes to the community college. Jade expresses similar sentiments while also discussing how community college helped her to gain academic confidence. "Now I know that I was not as dumb as I thought and that I can create something that allows me to help others," she said. Jades' change of perspective served as a significant intrinsic success marker for her primarily due to her early relationship with schooling. Storm and Michelle expressed similar long-term perspectives in areas of their interviews where they talked about how the education they receive at the community college helps them transition into new careers. "It will help me to change the

trajectory of my life to see what else I can do," according to Michelle. This education is "helping me change careers to get me closer to my ultimate goal of helping my target community," said Storm.

My sonography participant Ivy was unique in that she was my only participant who almost exclusively aspired to only want the credential she currently pursues so that she could become a sonographer and work there for the foreseeable future. "Right now, this career is the only one that is realistically on my radar," Ivy said. Consequently, both her short and long-term goals encompassed the idea of attaining a degree that would lead to a job that would allow her to pursue the intangible perks associated with being a medical professional. "I would be able to work my own schedule and get paid enough not to have to work 12 jobs so I can spend time with my family one day," stated Ivy.

Emergent Thematic Findings

Although the participants in this study had widely differing life experiences and came from varied backgrounds, I have identified four major themes that extend across each set of interviews during the thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Gardner, 2021). Each theme uniquely illustrates how the participant's past and present social experiences plus economic and lifestyle goals meshed to create their academic and personal aspirations. Readers should also consider that my participants majored in either healthcare or education. Consequently, this study and its findings may be limited to non-industrial career fields. Nevertheless, I present the linked themes and thematic analysis findings in the following synopsis.

Education and Program Fields

Each participant frequently spoke about the importance of attaining the credentials their respective career fields require as admission into work service. In some cases, the credentialing process ran complementary to degree completion to the extent that each participant had to finish school before they were able to take state licensing exams as a port of career entry, as was the case with Happy and Ivy, the two medical sonography students. In our third interview, Happy articulated the importance of completion when he stated, "you have to pass the programs to obtain the certifications, so there's absolutely no way for you to skirt the completion process and want to work in this career field." Ivy also spoke to the idea of completion by stating, "I don't know if I've met anyone that hasn't graduated from the two-year program." Storm, my participant who majors in nursing, was unique in that she talked about how not completing would make progressing in healthcare more complex. Yet, she did not think it was impossible to work in her desired area due to the bachelor's and master's degrees she already possesses.

In other areas of my interviews, each participant talked about how the community college degree or certificate completion process was helpful. However, the state-level certification programs were most useful in gaining clearance to perform specific work duties, which to my participants seemed like a priority for potential employers or project funders. This dynamic also reduced Ivy, Storm, and Happy's interest in the community college completion process beyond it being a means to an end. Storm also had slightly less committed thoughts about the importance of the college completion portion of her career when she stated:

> It may not have to be my end goal to feel successful in what I wanna do if I come into contact with the right people and I'm able to do what I wanna do without that or feel like I'm making an impact without that. I wouldn't say it necessarily has to be. It's just that

> right now where I'm at, I'm feeling like I'm gonna have to, but you know, I never know who I might run into if I start to become a nurse in maternity.

In all cases, the participants were highly motivated to complete their studies when employers in the labor market or state licensing bodies required them to do so.

The second area in which participants displayed motivation to earn a degree or certificate related to the necessity of completing their community college studies for easier admission into a higher degree of study at the university level. Happy, one of my early childhood education participants Jade, and Ivy acknowledged that if they wanted to pursue education beyond the programs they are currently enrolled in, completing a degree would be helpful or necessary. Moreover, the process of using one's community college education as a springboard was most pronounced in my interviews with Jade, who while completing her studies, has decided to pursue at least a bachelor's degree in hopes of opening her non-profit service facility. "Now that I have these new ambitions, the associates level work is good because it helps my resume but is less necessary, and I would go straight to the university if they presented me with a good offer," said Jade.

Storm and my second early childhood education student Michelle, the two participants who already possess bachelor's and master's degrees, had slightly different perspectives. Storm clearly articulated how her degree and any corresponding certificates she attains could help her progress within her various aspirations, including research, nursing, midwife, and community health service provider. On the other hand, Michelle did not discuss completion in relation to using it as a springboard to more education. Instead, she talked about how the credential she currently seeks could help her obtain state-required clearance to open a facility while solidifying her foothold in the childcare market. In addition, Michelle felt as if an added credential might

help her gain enough academic credibility to receive start-up grants. When I asked her how she views education beyond that which the state requires, Michelle said she sees it "as a bonus, especially since it is free education for me that will likely help anyway."

Despite fluctuating interests in their ideas about the value of completing a credential and how they planned to use their education based on which goals each decided to focus on at any given time, each participant did stress the importance of earning certificates as a critical component to establishing a port of entry into job placement or increased credibility. Storm, Michelle, and Jade, my three minority female participants, also discussed how certification plus a shortage of workers might also assist in overcoming potential demographic barriers minoritized groups face when attempting to enter CTE careers (Association for Career and Technical Education, 2022; Burris et al., 2022). “Even though I have seen my white counterparts get jobs much easier than I had after I got my bachelor’s degree, I don’t feel like that dynamic is present in the world of nursing during this time when there is a shortage at every hospital,” said Storm.

Professional Stakeholder Influences

During multiple areas of our interviews, each participant discussed how various stakeholders influenced their aspirations along the way. In some cases, influential stakeholders were institutional faculty staff and peers. While in others, professionals who worked in each participant's area of interest, for example, in a clinical setting, helped to guide the interviewees' thoughts.

Since Michelle worked full-time at the institution where she is taking classes, she relied on her faculty to teach the material and as mentors who frequently gave her advice about who to contact in their county to gauge interest in a Spanish immersion program. Michelle also used the networks she established at her child's’ K-12 school to gauge interest in her potential facility.

According to Michelle, she never hesitates to "ask other teachers and parents if they know about any funding opportunities" via her clinical work-based interactions and volunteer services. Michelle even enrolled in several local online parenting groups as suggested by her faculty, to learn more about the issues that surface within the early education community, which will also assist in her marketing efforts if she ever opens the facility.

Happy's journey into medical sonography began because of a positive interaction with a faculty member. He originally began taking his latest round of community college classes in medical assistant studies. However, a faculty member recommended him to the sonography program due to his strong performance in those classes. According to Happy:

> One of the instructors, which I mentioned in our first interview, is a medical assisting instructor, and the phlebotomy instructor is the one that suggested the sonography program to me and thought that it would be a good fit. I'm glad that she did cuz it wasn't even something that was on my radar when she mentioned it. I really owe me being here now to her suggestion.

It is instances like this that make Happy appreciate the opportunity to use the community college as an avenue of exploration that allows him to find new aspirations. He spoke of his appreciation of the community college during our third interview when he stated how "being able to go down a path a little ways and then turn around if I so chose is great." If the community college system was not there to provide inexpensive ways to explore majors and interact with stakeholders, Happy stated that his sampling was "not something that I could have afforded" otherwise.

Storm discussed how she used her new friends she met while driving for Uber to access the field of healthcare in areas where she struggled to find a job that would complement her educational aspirations. Once she enrolled at the community college, Storm relied on advice

from faculty, although she did not form significant mentorship-type bonds with anyone in particular. However, she did find sources of inspiration by working at various sites to hone her interest in specific areas of healthcare. "I was on an oncology unit and saw a lot of blood transfusion and platelet transfusion stuff and sound it interesting," said Storm. Shen then tied that experience into her desire to help the underserved by stating how:

> There's a few things that have kinda, like, I'm thinking about in terms of how can I incorporate it into the areas that I like and, looking at the populations and seeing if that's is a thing, because like sickle cell patients are most, you know, African American patients typically.

In addition to relying on her clinical site visits to better understand how she could use healthcare delivery to help the underserved, Storm discussed how her interactions with an ICU nurse she met while her daughter was sick formed her aspiration to pursue nursing. "She had another nurse that came in to help her nurse who I did feel was that good to be a pediatric ICU nurse," said Storm. During that same conversation, she continued discussing how impactful this nurse was by stating, "she was just awesome, and I was like, I really like her. It just opened my eyes, and I was like, I need to either go back, do the PA or go into nursing school."

Ivy seems to have a more impersonal relationship with her surrounding group of professional stakeholders. She described her experiences with the department by stating how, "they are very like, you come in, you do medical sonography. That is all that you do, and then you graduate, and you have a career, they're not necessarily like, maybe you could explore this opportunity." Nevertheless, she finds inspiration by emulating more seasoned sonographers. "I'll do something that I saw another tech do, and it works out and makes my image look better, and so that builds personal confidence," she stated. Ivy also talked about how she aspires to become a

part of the sonographer culture by purchasing a pair of Poco brand nursing shoes, which are popular among her mentors and peers. With those shoes she discussed how she can "pretend like I'm a successful sonographer, and it's like the light on the end of my tunnel is getting those fancy shoes." Although these acts may seem mundane, they help Ivy aspire to and identify with her future peers in a field she initially picked because of its pay scale.

Jade's primary stakeholder influence came from her school's early childhood education director, who she says, "taught me a lot about the ins and outs of how a classroom should run while also being the person that initially encouraged me to think about a bachelor's degree." In Jade's case these interactions proved to be significantly important since she needed extra encouragement. "I suffered from a severe lack of confidence when it comes to education, and she helped me get through that way of thinking," stated Jade "I definitely don't think I would have ever considered getting a bachelor's degree without going to this school and meeting her," Jade said about the program director. Consequently, Jade discussed how a positive learning experience in the education program in general and via "that sociology class which was one of the best learning experiences I ever had," have expanded her aspirations altogether.

Personal and Socioeconomic Influences

The third theme I identified across my participant interviews highlights how family needs, a desire to make a social impact, and economic motivations shaped each participant's aspirations. In many areas of our interviews, all participant's spoke of how their family status or social goals, as supported by a good-paying job, were equal to or more important than their academic goals. For example, during our third interview, Storm discussed how one of her life goals was to contribute positively to the progression of African Americans in the United States as a professional. "I just wanna be a part of the African American community that's part of the

solution not the problem. We can't keep waiting on other people to do that for us or expecting that other people are gonna come into our communities and do that for us all the time," she said. Michelle echoed this same sentiment during a portion of our interview when she discussed how, "there is such a need for bilingual education in this area, and it has so many benefits on student psychologically and academically that someone needs to offer it."

Happy also chimed in on this idea when he discussed how he is personally appreciative of the possibility being a part of the essential workforce in his career, a sentiment he developed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. "It would be hard to not take it personally if you hear something like that, and so being able to contribute in a way that's deemed necessary, yeah, is a real big factor for me too," said Happy. Jade credits her faith, being a mixed-race child in a mostly white family, and her experiences serving those in need as her sources of personal inspiration. In one area of our first interview, Jade discussed how “it’s my faith probably that made me who I was meant to be.” She continued discussing these influences in another area of our conversation where she said, “I’m just drawn to outcasts and so whether that’s the poor or the elderly or the child or the homeless or the black, the foreign that’s just where my heart is.”

While the initial extroverted responses were where the participants discussed how their aspirations manifested partially due to a desire to impact others positively, my interviewees also spoke about intrinsic family-related factors concerning their goals. For example, when discussing how social influences factor into her career aspirations, Ivy seemed to prioritize how she wanted her family to look as one of the primary sources of why she has her goals in place. Citing how stepmother, who often put career over family, Ivy stated how "she had kind of lived the life that I don't necessarily want where you're chasing your career, you're making a lot of money, but you have a house by yourself, you don't have a husband, you don't have kids, she doesn't even have

pets." In this stage of our interview, I could see how her father's more laid-back approach, where family and time to enjoy yourself were priorities, influenced Ivy to want a relaxed lifestyle that revolves around a career that pays a salary she deems satisfactory. Jade echoed Ivy's sentiments stating that she does "not want to lose even a second of being a parent at the expense of worrying about my career if I can help it, which is why the flexibility I have at this school is so important" during one of our sessions. There is no doubt that Jade's perspective came from experiences with her mother who she described as "so frustrated angry and not present" at times.

Each participant also stressed the importance of using their education for economic gains. Ivy and Happy discussed how learning the content in their programs and completing their studies would likely increase their pay upon exit. Their thoughts are undoubtedly due to their current employment situations, where they work in hourly positions and odd labor jobs. "Adding some more cushion to my bank account after I pay the bills would definitely be nice once I start working in this field," said Happy. "I want to make enough money not to have to work multiple jobs and work myself to death and this job will help me do just that," stated Ivy. Storm and Michelle's thoughts concerning how economic gains influence their aspirations were present. However, they differed slightly due to their possession of master's degrees and more extensive backgrounds working in a professional setting, which has earned them higher pay than my other participant's. "If I can earn as much or more than I do now, my family and I will be alright since we are doing good at that income range now," stated Michelle. Likewise, Storm talked about the importance of socioeconomics when she stated how "I just want to take some financial pressure off my husband and work in a career with benefits and security. But it will also help if that job will allow me to retire one day whenever that comes."

Micro Certifications and Customization

Each participant spoke highly of their ability to use certifications or customized learning strategies to their advantage. In these instances, my participants often talked about how gaining experience in a specific area would give them access to specialty duties in their places of work, which usually results in a pay increase. Storm highlighted the value of certificates when she talked about how one nursing certification could give her access to being a first assist nurse in hospital maternity wards. Also, according to Storm, other helpful certifications include “OB certifications and some women’s health certifications you could definitely do, be successful, and still be a part of the solution to help with those mortality rates." Overall, Storm uses her educational experience at the community college to create a custom-made resume filled with practical and educational training that will allow her to travel various routes toward her broader goal of serving the community through the healthcare system. As she moves forward in her education journey, Storm can shift her educational interests to align with opportunities that present themselves. “It’s the specialties that help you stand out sometimes and if I ever need them in the future, I would come back and get them as needed,” she said.

During our second interview, Ivy stated, "I also know that a certain side looks for certain credentials, like, oh, we have an OB and an abdomen tech, but we don't have a vascular tech. We're gonna screen the applicants and look for someone certified in vascular. From what I've seen, it seems like credentials are more important than skills." Happy credited his early success in the sonography program to the nursing assistant and phlebotomy certifications he earned. “Some of the processing techniques that I learned in that class really helped me to succeed in the orientation, CNA fundamentals class that we had to pass in order to actually get into the cohort, so, absolutely, I’m thankful for that,” he said. At the time of our interview, he had yet to commit

to any specialty. However, Happy did discuss one that piqued his interest in the following statement:

> There is one avenue, a vascular specialty where instead of just being referred to a patient and they come in and sit in the chair, and you take some video or some still images, and then send that off to be analyzed. You're actually participating in a procedure where there's a physician, and you're doing the imaging right there. They're, maybe, going in, sort of minimally evasive, vascular procedure. I think that sounds very engaging.

Overall, Happy has customized his entire academic journey around exploring various academic areas in hopes that he can, as he states, "find out what I want to be when I grow up." Nevertheless, Happy, referencing the sonography program, acknowledged that "a combination of certainly the completion and the credentialing are gonna be necessary in this particular case."

Michelle desires to use her degree or certifications to enhance her chances of gaining state-level approval to open her Spanish immersion early childhood education center. By giving herself the flexibility to pursue one or more degree or certificate options, she can customize her experience to maximize her chance of receiving start-up funds through increased experience, networking opportunity, expertise, and credibility. "If they see these extra things on my resume, it might give me a better chance of winning the grant, and also, the state would probably be more likely to approve me to set up a facility," said Michelle.

Jade's journey through the world of customization is complex, and in some cases, unintended. "I was not even trying to get those certificates, but I am sure they don't hurt my resume one bit" she stated about certificate-level training. In addition, Jade discussed how, "since I am going to school free or cheap, I might take more sociology, social work, or psychology courses to learn more about how people work and about those areas to see which one

I definitely want to major or minor in." Consequently, Jade is open to using her community college experience to explore new areas of thought and expertise before she commits to a major at the university level in a similar way as Happy who did the same in the past.

Chapter Five: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

I began this study with the goal of capturing the stories of North Carolina community college AAS students to understand better their educational aspirations and the social landscapes that help form them. To capture the information I needed to investigate this phenomenon, I collected data by interviewing five participants three times individually, a method informed by Seidman (2019), and conducting a six-stage thematic analysis of my findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). Each of the following research questions guided this study:

1. Why do students enroll in community college AAS programs, and what are their aspirations?
2. How do community college AAS students' life experiences influence their aspirations?
3. How do AAS students plan to use the education they gain through community college training?
4. What does it mean to AAS students to be successful due to enrolling at their chosen institution?

This fifth chapter presents a summary of my findings in addition to a discussion of how the information I gathered fits into the existing body of literature, implications, plus my recommendations for future research and practice.

Summary of Findings

Each participant in this study shared information that provided me with data which illustrates the complex processes they navigated during their formation of professional, personal, and academic aspirations. The participants discussed how their past influences heavily dictated their current worldviews and meaning-making processes. As a result, they used those socialization-based experiences to chart a path forward toward what they see as a state of

improved socioeconomic status and social impact. Each participant's behavior also illustrated how they formed aspirations and planned to use the education they received based on individually created interaction-based realities, which sometimes aligned with institutional metrics. This type of action thus exhibits the basic behaviors researchers associate with social constructivism (Creswell, 2013; Gardner, 2021; Jung, 2019; Patton, 2014). The findings also illustrate how these students viewed the role of the community college in relation to their aspirational endeavors and how they could accomplish some of their various goals, objectives, and success markers without completing their studies.

Each participant explicitly expressed a desire to complete their studies. However, they were more likely to want to complete them if it meant they could receive some required or helpful license or gain access to a higher level of education. Specifically, when employers or government entities tie a credential to labor market employment requirements, participants displayed higher levels of motivation to complete their studies, which was a significant factor in their educational aspirations.

The participants in this study prioritize hands-on learning, career exploration, and opportunities to network at their community college as much or more than completing a credential. These criteria then fit into each participant’s broader goals related to improving their job skill-related performance, which each one said was crucial to their overall success. All participants also discussed how they valued their community college education because of its ability to improve their chances of accessing a career or moving up within employment venues. The final factor that played a vital role in how each participant measures success is time flexibility as it relates to their personal life goals. All participants inextricably linked higher income and control of work schedule to improved family conditions by way of being able to

spend more time with their loved ones. As such, my emergent themes listed in chapter 4 include an analysis of students' planned use of their education, professional stakeholder influences, personal and socioeconomic factors, and how micro certifications and self-customized learning experiences play a role in their aspirations. These emergent themes served to synthesize my collected data while effectively addressing this study's research questions. Chapter 5 houses a discussion of four key themes, which include an analysis of students' reasons for entry and their ensuing aspirations, a synthesis of how their life experiences play a role in their aspirations, participants planned use of education, and their statements concerning what constitutes success. Each chapter's key themes directly align with this study's research questions and illustrate how my collected data addresses them.

Discussion

Entry and Aspirations

The entry profiles of each of my participants were consistent with much of the existing data regarding CTE students' demographic backgrounds (AACC, 2021; Carnevale & Smith, 2018; Cohen et al., 2014; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). My participant pool consisted of five students, four of whom were women and three of whom were African American. This minority participant dominance, which also appeared in the data collection application pool, illustrated to me that this community college serves as an entry point to a significant number of students from demographic categories that often go underserved (Carnevale & Smith, 2018; Fox, 2020; Ma & Baum, 2016). In addition, only one of my participants, Ivy, was under the age of 30, a dynamic that reflects data presented by Aslanian (2001), Fox (2020), and Zhang and Oymak (2018), who discussed how AAS and CTE community college students average age usually falls within the non-traditional 25 years or older

category. These data also echo points illustrated in the student characteristics section of information presented in the Hirschy et al. (2011) model, which highlighted how the characteristics possess upon entering their program of choice can significantly impact how they define success. In the case of my participants, four of them consistently highlighted how work, family, and service to the community highly affected their thoughts concerning success (Hirschy et al., 2011).

As of the fall 2022 semester, each participant takes classes within the program of their choice, and only one participant, Storm, mentioned how the community college she attends was not her first choice. Consequently, four out of my five participants fit within the 66% or more of community students who reported that the institution they were attending was their first choice (Jabbar et al., 2020; Laanan, 2003). In addition, all participants in this study stated how, in this current iteration of their community college learning experience, they are working toward a certification or credential, which makes them a part of the significant number of community college students that also desire to do the same (Jabbar et al., 2020; Laanan, 2003).

Regarding short-term aspirations, four participants in this study fit within the 75% of higher education students 25 years of age or older with degree aspirations lower than those of a bachelor's degree (Atwell & D'Amico, 2021). Ivy, Storm, Jade, and Michelle reported being primarily interested in community college-level education in the immediate sense, thus fitting within the 43% of participants who identified as having similar aspirations (Horn & Nevil, 2006). Happy also discussed how earning his associate degree was an immediate objective. However, he was unclear on his long-term goals and did not rule out any degree levels of attainment. In addition, Storm, Michelle, and Happy already possessed at least a bachelor's degree upon entering the community college, making them part of the one in 14 people who

attend community college who already possess a university-level degree (Krupnick, 2015). In this study, the youngest participant, Ivy, displayed the strongest desire to align with attaining a community college credential only, putting her in the 9.5% category of students her age who share similar aspirations (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Soobin et al., 2019). Consequently, if each participant decides to complete a credential then enter the labor market within a career field that requires the credential they received, they could fit into the relationship with other mechanisms section of the workforce development model presented by D'Amico (2016). Also, if any of these participants experienced gains in pay or unsubsidized training, their progress may fit into the use of success measures section of this same model (D'Amico, 2016).

Life Experiences Influence

During my interviews with each participant, each easily articulated their short-term aspirations and how education likely plays a crucial role in their longer-term goals relating to quality-of-life factors. Each interviewee also directly tied their upbringing with their personal, professional, and economic goals to the extent that I could then connect their life experience influences to the current short-term goals they possess. However, I also found that each participant's long-term aspirations were malleable at best and highly dependent on their changing current social landscapes, which included combinations of economics, network opportunity, family status, and labor market conditions. In addition, I found that each student's surface labels, such as major declaration and full-or part-time status, only told a small piece of their life and educational stories.

The Seidman (2019) approach proved to be an invaluable data collection tool for better understanding participants' lived experiences because it helped me connect each participant's past and present experiences with their projected future endeavors. For example, Happy,

Michelle, Storm, and to a lesser extent, Jade discussed how a significant part of why they wanted to attend the community college was to explore their options while figuring out how to use their education upon exit, thus reflecting aspiration data presented by Bailey et al. (2015), and Fox (2020). All participants' projected directions are also heavily dependent on life factors such as their ability to have time to raise their children, as discussed by Jade, Michelle, and Storm explicitly. These three participants also had dependent-aged children at the time of the interviews, which showed how increased social obligations significantly affected students' formation of aspirations and definitions of success (Cohen et al., 2014; Huerta et al., 2022). Although Happy and Ivy did not have children as of summer 2022, they too discussed how they wanted to use their desired careers to create a quality parenting space for their future offspring.

Authors such as Cohen et al. (2014) and Huerta et al. (2022) discussed how external social factors plus adjustments in how community colleges structure program offerings lead to differing behaviors of actual and would-be students. For example, added program offerings, economic shifts, and increased part-time program availability increased enrollment in older students (Cohen et al., 2014; Ma & Baum, 2016). That same dynamic was present among this study's participants regarding the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Jade and Happy discussed how the pandemic served as a call to action which prompted them to pursue impact careers that would allow them to assist those in need. Jade, Storm, and Michelle discussed how the pandemic gave them time to think about how to transition into new careers or different opportunities within the fields they worked in currently. Ivy did not think that the pandemic impacted her studies. However, she did discuss how new online and hy-flex offerings, which her school adopted during the pandemic, did help her by adding more flexibility to her schedule, an adjustment that Storm and Jade also celebrated.

Each participant talked about how their education would likely lead to their end goal of having higher chances of getting a job in their fields, opening an organization, and increasing their wealth, a result echoed by Liang et al. (2017), plus Lagemann and Lewis (2012). In addition, all participants spoke of how increased pay and control over their work schedules would also be a significant marker of success, a trend also documented by Hall et al. (2012) and Shockley et al. (2015). Storm and Jade also discussed how if an opportunity to sidestep the credentialing process and jump into the desired job presented itself, for example, because of the networks they built during their educational experience, they would likely discontinue their community college studies and accept that offer. This trend reflects data presented by Bahr et al. (2022) and Stevens (2019), who also discussed how CTE and AAS students report having successful outcomes without graduating. Three participants, Jade, Storm, and Michelle, who discussed the importance of moving towards their goals quickly, also talked about how their ages played a factor due to them operating in a shorter work window than traditional students.

All participants also talked about how their childhood years influenced their goals to create family stability socially and financially so they could be present parents. In the cases of Storm, Jade, and Ivy, their parents and guardians were not as present, which prompted each of the three to want to increase the time available they have for their children, thus not repeating their parents' patterns. Michelle and Happy had positive experiences with their parents and instead wanted to continue those trends in time and leadership while matching or improving the socioeconomic conditions in which their parents raised them.

The life influence-based considerations, as stated by my participants, were difficult to place with the D'Amico (2016) and Hirschy et al. (2011) models. For example, if one were to measure the economic improvements participants experienced from taking AAS classes, those

progressions would fit into the use of success measures area of the D'Amico (2016) model. However, portions of the participants' narratives discussed how education also comes with intangible benefits such as increased time flexibility, speedy paths to a career, network opportunities, and personal growth, which would go unmeasured within these models. The Hirschy et al. (2011) model does acknowledge many of the same completion metrics highlighted by D'Amico (2016) and found within many performance funding measurements, such as completion of credentials and training, persistence between terms, or transfer. However, it does not acknowledge non-completion successes with clarity. As a result, students attending community college AAS programs for skill-building purposes, resume credibility, or transient reasons may risk falling within the institution's dropout labels because of the limited scope of what these measurements present as success (Bahr et al., 2022; Guthrie, 2016).

Use of Education

Each participant's career aspirations directly impacted how they defined success as it relates to their community college education experience. Furthermore, their thoughts about how they planned to use their education, combined with labor market requirements, blended to significantly dictate whether they showed completion-based warming or cooling tendencies (Bowen, 2015; Clark, 1960; Kujawa, 2013; Nakamura, 2003). For example, Happy, Michelle, Ivy, and Storm indicated that they needed to complete a community college credential to gain access to state-level license exams, allowing them to enter their desired career fields upon exit. In cases like this, no person can enter the workforce until they complete, which caused those three participants to warm up to the desire to earn a credential (Bowen, 2015; Clark, 1960; Kujawa, 2013). As a result, participants were highly likely to prioritize completion when the labor market exclusively requires credentialing and licensing before entry.

Among the remaining two participants, Jade and Michelle, Jade did not need a community college credential to enter her career field post her change in aspirations. Consequently, she displayed reduced, although present, motivation to complete her studies. In their cases, Michelle's and Jade's motivation levels fluctuated with their thoughts about how education impacts salary, hireability, the strength of grant applications, a desire to complete what they started, and future education endeavors. These potential fluctuations echo existing data that highlights the importance of using a multi-faceted evaluation system to determine the holistic impacts education has on students' life experiences (Xu et al., 2016).

Happy, Storm, Michelle, and Jade's fluctuating levels of motivation to complete their studies also exhibit notions of demand elasticity in the sense that they had long-term goals that were more malleable (Langelett et al., 2015). Michelle discussed how she could easily use what she learns in school to enhance her personal life as a parent if she does not open a language immersion early education facility due to market conditions or financial barriers. Jade and Storm discussed how other opportunities, such as those associated with research or fundraising, may lead to a change of major and their desired level of educational attainment. Those shifts would then inevitably change the role and value of a community college credential that may not be necessary if they got an opportunity to attend university for free or cheap. Happy and Ivy, my two sonography major participants who were highly committed to their community college studies, discussed how the use of their degree and renewed confidence in themselves academically would change if they decided to go back to school to explore more opportunities in similar ways found in a study by Nielsen (2015). In their cases, their community college degree would shift from apex to stepping-stone. My participant's changes in aspirations plus their social landscapes created a situation where their use of credentials became a moving target, which then

controlled how strongly they felt about credentialing and the use of education, which reflects data also presented in other similar studies (Cohen et al., 2014; Grubs, 2016; Hall et al., 2012; Langelett et al., 2015).

My participants also displayed an altered form of persistence by using the education they receive to advance their agendas and aspirations, some measurements of which lie outside some of the traditional ways scholars conceptualize success (Davidson & Wilson, 2016; Fong et al., 2017). For example, current metrics might classify these three minority female respondents, Storm, Jade, and Michelle, as dropouts who have poor persistence rates if one were to exclusively observe their usage of education through a credentialing time to completion or salary increase lens (Ebanks & Francois, 2022; Walpole et al., 2014). By overlooking intangible assets and social progressions that do not readily fit into existing metrics, such as increased access to networks and confidence building, existing data may fall short of being able to comprehensively measure how students customize learning and find alternative ways to be successful, especially where qualitative considerations are concerned. Existing outcome measurements may also overlook ways in which minoritized groups may use their education in less traditional ways (Bahr, 2017; Hollifield-Hoyle, 2012).

Meaning of Success

When it comes to defining success as it relates to their education experience, each participant in this study displayed a combination of demand elasticity and elements of warming up or cooling out, as they are traditionally defined, primarily based on their individual circumstances (Clark, 1960; Bowen, 2015; Langelett et al., 2015; Moore, 1975). However, in all cases, each participant warmed up to the idea of using their community college education to meet their stated goals, even as their aspirations changed. Sometimes their definitions of success

aligned with traditional performance funding and outcome measure metrics, such as graduation and transfer, and sometimes not (York et al., 2015). Nevertheless, each participant conceptualized educational success as something that helps them advance personally or socioeconomically, irrespective of whether those progressions happened through credentialing or meeting performance funding-type outcome metrics.

In the area of external motivations, the participants in this study were more likely to align their ideas of success with completion metrics if labor market employers or state licensing boards required a credential as clearance upon entry, sentiments echoed by York et al. (2015). In addition, participants that felt as if a credential would boost their resumes or credibility, even in cases where employers did not require a specific credential as a means of employment, were motivated to earn a credential. This dynamic reflected a combination of elements in the attainment of learning success and career success arms of the academic success model presented by York et al. (2015). In addition, each participant stated how they were active in and supporters of future skill-building opportunities in the form of taking additional coursework without feeling the need to graduate if they saw such an endeavor as one that was personally or professionally advantageous to them, as also found in studies conducted by Bahr et al. (2022) and Guthrie (2016). Responses in those areas ranged from wanting to know more about where their career fields fit into the larger social landscape, what research in their fields looked like, and the various lesser-known jobs within their academic and professional areas. In these cases, when students find value in education that reaches beyond that which relates to careers or hard skillsets, authors such as York et al. (2015) classify those gains using the arms of satisfaction and acquisition of skills and competence within their academic success model.

Each participant also spoke of intrinsic ways to define success, which often related to their ideas associated with seeing things through for those stakeholders that put the time in to help then succeed, experience lifelong learning, being a role model to family members, or belonging to a larger professional community. In some areas of my interviews, these elements pushed students towards warming up to the idea of completing their studies when their immediate goal was to enter the workforce, much like findings in Bowen (2015) and Kujawa (2013). However, if the participant had goals that required education beyond that of a community college credential, or if a credential was not necessary to their overall goal, these intrinsic elements did not affect their desire to complete. Instead, they only served as enhancements to their bigger picture. While some research briefly discusses how such psychosocial integrations positively affect persistence, there is a dearth of data illustrating how such factors contribute to students' definitions of success beyond or besides earning a credential or seeking employment (Barnett, 2011; Fong et al., 2017). In addition, few, if any, of the broader PF measurements, including degree or certificate attainment, transfer, job placement, and socioeconomic gain, leave room for measuring students' intangible goals, benefits, and aspirations (Dougherty & Natow, 2015; Dougherty & Reddy, 2013).

In the case of the Hirschy et al. (2011) model of student success in community college, there are areas in which my participants' aspirations can lie within their points of what constitutes student success. These points include persisting to the following semester, attaining employment in the field, completing individualized customized training, completing industry or academic credentials, earning a certificate or degree, or transferring to another institution. Within the Conceptual Framework for the Future Study of Community College Workforce Development in the Student Success Era model, presented by D'Amico (2016), some of the students' stated goals

would align in the areas of transfer, increased wages and earnings, and several of the WIOA primary indicators of performance (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a.). The primary indicators of performance that may align include whether students work in unsubsidized employment, training, or activities up to four quarters post their education, plus credential attainment, measurable skill gains, and effective service to employers (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a).

Although these models provide stakeholders with invaluable insight into some of the ways students can experience positive gains because of taking community college courses, they stop short of being able to measure some of the stated goals and success indicators my participants discussed during our interviews. The unaddressed aspirations or success indicators include career exploration through education, personal benefits, professional network expansion, earning increased value or social status within the workplace, boosting resume credibility, or avoiding layoff or termination.

Implications and Conclusion

During their interviews, each participant illustrated how their aspirations sometimes aligned with those found within community colleges, state systems, and performance-based funding outcome measure metrics. When participants' aspirations aligned with institutional completion metrics, a third party, such as state license programs or labor market employer demands, heavily influenced each of their ideas about the importance of earning a credential. Each participant prioritized third-party labor market requirements over completing their community college degree, which they often viewed as a means to an end.

However, the participants' stories also included information that showed how they have significant and pronounced ways to measure success irrespective of whether they earn a

credential. In some cases, the participants measured success intrinsically by appreciating their community college education for allowing them to learn about and explore new areas of expertise. Within this sphere of intrinsic thought, interviewees discussed how they value the opportunity to form new networks that might uncover opportunities to move forward in their area of interest.

Some of my participants also mentioned how their educational journey had benefits potentially outside of completion in more concrete areas. For example, Storm and Jade discussed how if they encountered an opportunity to enroll in a university-level program or gain access to an opportunity that gets them closer to their ultimate goals, they would leave their current school while defining their community college stay as a success. This trend was robust when participants already possessed university-level credentials. The bachelor's and beyond degree holders were also more likely to sample various areas of study while having a reduced commitment to the jobs associated with completing those community college-level credentials. Four out of five participants discussed how they had bigger dreams that reached beyond the credentialing process, and they viewed their education as a steppingstone or opportunity to learn.

Also present in the stories of each participant is the interest each of them had in skill building (Bahr et al., 2022; Guthrie, 2016). All participants noted how they would be highly interested in non-graded or certificate-level specialty-type training pre, post, and during their educational process. In reference to skill building, each participant confirmed that they are willing to take courses sporadically if the additional training helps them access increases in employability or promotion due to them having a needed unique skill, gaining clearance and resume credibility, or funding opportunities.

Conclusion #1: Labor Market Demands Reign Supreme

All participants noted numerous times that when employers require licenses or specific credentials for applicants who wish to work within their desired fields, students seeking those jobs have higher motivation levels to complete their degree or certificate. Also, when participants felt that a credential would earn them increased socioeconomic capital in the labor market or related areas, for example, by strengthening their applications for grants, employment, or research projects, they displayed higher levels of motivation to complete their targeted credential. In addition, each participant confirmed that they would be motivated to seek new credentials, primarily in certificate training, if they helped them access career specialties, which would likely come with increased pay, knowledge, credibility, and employee value.

Conclusion #2: Peak Versus Piece

When students envision that the education they receive at their respective community college is the highest level they want to attain or is a terminal credential in their respective field, they exhibit higher levels of motivation to earn their AAS degree or certificates. Students who report aspirations that require credentials beyond an associate degree or certificate displayed lower motivation levels to complete their programs of study. However, these participants also noted how they possess equal appreciation and value for their learning experience as those who saw their community college studies as an apex. Furthermore, students who reported that they would immediately leave the community college if a university offered them a chance to earn a bachelor's degree also placed a high value on their sub-baccalaureate education despite not completing their degree or certificate program.

Among the three participants who had previously earned a bachelor's degree or higher, two stated how they would like to complete their studies unless an opportunity presented itself that would allow them to meet their goals without the credential. The remaining participant, who

possessed a bachelor's degree, said that he planned to complete it at the time of the interviews because he wanted to work in that field. However, if he changed his mind, he would value that education and use it as a tool for exploration as he sought other career and education opportunities. Consequently, when students had concrete goals they could attain by earning only a community college credential, they were highly motivated to complete their program. However, as participants' goals and objectives reached beyond a community college education, their commitment to complete a degree or certificate fluctuated while their appreciation and value perceptions concerning their education experience remained high. This trend may also be due to my participant's fields of study, medical care, and early education, where community college degrees and certificates are not typically apex compared to many other AAS areas, such as welding (Bahr et al., 2022; Raby, 2009).

Conclusion 3# Success and Stated Goals

It took time to definitively identify distinct ways in which the participants in this study defined success as individuals and as a group because each of their ideas of success fluctuated and could change depending on opportunity and social circumstances. The result was a situation where my participants discussed more than one way to define success within long and short-term goals that were abstract or concrete in some areas. Participants' short-term concrete success markers included receiving a raise or higher rank at their place of employment, earning a specialty status or new clearance, getting a job in their desired career field, or gaining a credential that unlocked their ability to access state license exams. Many of the participants stated goals aligned with traditional completion metrics and performance funding criteria if employers required a credential to enter the workforce. Students who seek higher levels of education beyond the community college use their coursework to explore higher education, seek

to foster network contacts, or want to learn a new skill only are more likely to cease education at the point in which they meet those needs and still view their education experience as a success. Non-completion success included transfer, entering the workforce, or achieving favorable results in their respective industries.

In addition, the participants all discussed how their primary goals were to get a better job or to start a new career. After that initial declaration, they talked about how by using education as a tool of clearance, credibility, or networking, they could achieve those goals easier than they would without going to school. All participants said they had a goal of completing the programs they started at the community college. However, their commitment levels largely depended on whether the labor market required those credentials to work. In career fields where the credential is not necessary, or students need a bachelor's degree or beyond to enter the market, students' commitment to completing community college studies diminished. In those cases, students stated that their career goals would supersede educational ones to the extent that they would seize a favorable opportunity whether or not they completed a program.

Participants' abstract success measures comprised of gaining knowledge and skills that they did not have before, exploring new career fields, building professional networks, adding credibility to resumes and applications, finding opportunities to attend university-level studies, and moving into a career field that would give them more time flexibility thus improving their social lives. Other success measures included symbolic factors such as being a college graduate, completing what you started, and being a role model for family members. Although current outcome measure and performance funding models would find difficulty in measuring these types of abstract measures, the participants in this study mentioned how they are equally, if not more, valuable than traditional completion and credentialing-based measures. In each case, my

participants saw their community college experience as a success whether their training resulted in a credential or not. Each participant's reasonings concerning why they felt this way included how their stay was successful if one's education leads to increased knowledge, higher quality of life, socioeconomic and educational progress, or new opportunity.

Recommendations for Future Policy and Practice

Tracking Students' Stated Goals

It is imperative for community college stakeholders and higher education governing bodies to create structures that assess an institution's impact on students and the broader labor market. However, it may be equally as essential to bring the student voice to the conversation of what constitutes student and institutional success. Adding students' voices may be especially important during instances where students experience positive outcomes without earning a degree or certificate. As such, institutions and community college systems may consider documenting and tracking a student's stated goals upon entry and exit from their respective institutions. By tracking whether students feel their experiences with their schools result in professional, personal, or socioeconomic progress, stakeholders can see a broader picture of how students progress or not in response to their training. These new measurements then potentially illustrate to stakeholders the various ways in which students experience positive gains with and without the presence of completion and credentialing. These data can also help institutions understand how and why students change their goals and objectives as they matriculate through the learning process. In addition, the new information may give institutions insight into the effectiveness of degrees and other micro-credentials so that they can continue to evolve their offerings to better align with transfer processes, labor market needs, and student preferences (Atwell et al., 2021). An adjustment to include students' stated goals may also generate a broader

range of considerations concerning what constitutes success beyond traditional notions as an act of institutional equity and inclusion (Chang et al., 2019).

Career Enhancement Coursework and Customization

Michelle, Jade, Happy, and Storm discussed how they used one or more courses at their community college to explore their interest or enhance their employability or credibility, irrespective of earning a credential. In some cases, they experienced positive learning effects in the form of increased networking opportunities, motivation to change the course of their careers, or the development of a skill that was useful to their work or personal performance immediately after they learned it (Bahr et al., 2022; Guthrie, 2016). However, each of these participants also stated that they were willing to leave the college after partially completing their studies if a more favorable opportunity presented itself. In addition, they also expressed the idea of using education to enhance their personal and career goals in ways that sometimes lie outside standard curriculum offerings. For example, Michelle and Storm discussed their desire to take a grant writing class in the continuing education department even though it is outside their major offerings. Jade also alluded to this trend when she mentioned how she would be interested in taking more Spanish classes later if the need should arise.

Institutions may want to allow students to identify courses they take to enhance their career interest, especially in cases where students take classes that lie outside pre-formatted program offerings but also in general. By tracking which courses students take to enhance their careers while not necessarily needing to move successfully through an entire program, institutions may gain insight into ways to offer more customizable labor-market-friendly micro-credentials (Atwell et al., 2021). In addition, career enhancement course identification may allow institutions to quickly find ways to design completion markers that are more malleable and able

to adjust to quickly changing trends. Career enhancement coursework also allows local labor markets to have an increased voice in the education process by assisting or partnering with institutions in designing AAS credentials, courses, site training, or program offerings that maximize students' chances of learning relevant skills (Workcred, n.d.). Finally, by tracking students' career enhancement coursework behaviors, institutions can also better understand how some students use curriculum coursework in similar ways to that on the continuing education side of a college's academic offerings.

Finally, stakeholders may want to consider adding to student success models, such as those presented by D'Amico (2016) and Hirschy et al. (2011), or found within prevalent PF 2.0 metrics, skill-building or intangible categories, which then allow room for students to identify goals and progressions that lie outside the credentialing process.

Labor Market Alignments

By tracking a student's stated goals, community colleges may better understand transfer or employment trends through the academic behaviors of the students they serve. For example, Jade felt she needed much more training in sociology and psychology to better understand young people's behaviors through an opportunity to learn more about their socioeconomic backgrounds. Jade's experience, coupled with her and Michelle's identification of the need to assess the benefits of learning a language to deliver services to underserved populations, shows the importance of using coursework to cater to potential market needs. It may be possible to add such measurements to the list of WIOA indicators or a credit non-completion mechanism, as presented by D'Amico (2016) and the U.S. Department of Labor (n.d.a.). By understanding students' behaviors, institutions may offer more applicable electives, certificates, individual

courses, and links to continuing education learning to help students enhance their chances of success in any instance.

Intangible Measurements

Higher education stakeholders, researchers, and legislators can easily find data concerning students' graduation, retention, and transfer rates (Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Kilgore & Wilson, 2017). Likewise, researchers produce significant amounts of data concerning the long and short-term, socio-economic, and job placement results of students that do, and to some extent, do not complete their studies (Bahr et al., 2022; Chen, 2021; Guthrie, 2016; NCES, 2022). However, more research is needed concerning the intangible benefits of taking classes. These benefits may include an opportunity to explore new interests, exposure to new professional networks and opportunities, use of information for personal gains, skill building to stay in a current job to avoid layoff or termination, or finding a promotion opportunity (Bahr et al., 2022; Dziechciarz-Duda & Krol, 2013; Guthrie, 2016). In some cases, investigators may not see a monetary gain. Instead, a student's progression may lie within quality-of-life areas.

Jade, Storm, Ivy, and Happy spoke to this when they discussed how additional perks such as control over their time, retirement packages, and being an essential worker job with security are also of high interest. Institutions may want to devise ways to measure their students' non-completion and qualitative progressions in life quality, plus how they align or not with those related to completion and quantitative metrics. These new measurements might help interested parties document intangible differences between individuals. For example, there may be long-term quality of life differences between a person who makes $15 an hour with no benefits versus one who took community coursework and makes the same amount of money while enjoying medical coverage, sick and vacation days, plus a retirement package. In addition, this new

measurement lets the student define their education's impact on their life in instances where graduation or salary changes may not be an indicator.

Recommendations for Future Research

According to Bailey (2017) and Bailey et al. (2015), roughly 40% of community college students earn a certificate or degree within their first six semesters of enrolling in their program, many of whom will face the possibility of reduced earnings as compared to credential earners. However, a need for more information exists in understanding how taking courses but not completing a credential affects students' quality of life and other intangible benefits. Intangible benefits can include access to a more stable job despite them paying a lower wage, benefits packages, and earning a specialty status. In addition, students may experience personal benefits that result from their education in the form of improved home life circumstances, increased knowledge, exploration opportunities, and personal satisfaction. By exploring these areas of possible success, researchers may better understand why students enroll, discontinue their studies, and still feel as if their experience produced tangible positive results.

Researchers may want to consider using this study's data to rethink how stakeholders apply and use prevalent outcome measures, found in chapter two of this study, which include input, output, outcome, and process-related markers (D'Amico et al., 2014). Input measures enrollment data, faculty pay, and fees, while output tracks students' short-term education-related results (Burke & Minassians, 2004; Burke & Serban, 1998; Education Commission of the States, 2000; Zarkesh & Beas, 2004). Short-term measurements often found in the output category include graduation rates, transfer data, retention numbers, and data that illustrate how long it takes students to complete their degree or certificate (Burke & Minassians, 2004; Burke & Serban, 1998; Education Commission of the States, 2000; Zarkesh & Beas, 2004). The outcome

category tracks students' longer-term education-related results using data such as transfer performance, licensure test scores, job placement, satisfaction surveys, learning outcomes, and employer feedback (AACC, n.d.; Burke & Minassians, 2004; Burke & Serban, 1998; Education Commission of the States, 2000; Itzkowitz, 2017; Zarkesh & Beas, 2004). Lastly, the process measurement tracks institutional activity such as faculty workload, remedial or development offerings, labor market partnerships, diversity initiatives, community service, noncredit courses, and staff impacts (Burke & Minassians, 2004; Burke & Serban, 1998; Education Commission of the States, 2000; Itzkowitz, 2017; Zarkesh & Beas, 2004). It may be possible for researchers to add the declaration of a student's stated goals to the existing measures that track students' entry reasons at the onset of enrollment and when they change course as a part of the input category. Likewise, tracking students' non-program-completion progressions within the output measurement might help stakeholders more accurately track and possibly count students' gains that do not involve transfer or credentialing. In terms of outcome measures, if researchers examine the value of recording students' long-term intangible benefits that do not involve acts of completion, it may give stakeholders a more accurate picture of how customized learning without completion affects students' lives. Long-term outcome considerations may include networking, receiving grants, increasing job status, or using education to reach a higher goal. An examination of the potential expansion of the data point process, to also include faculty mentor effects, on-site training influences, and student engagement factors, may also allow institutions to assess better how students’ interactions with faculty and staff induce warming, cooling, or change behaviors (Bowen, 2015; Clark, 1960; Kujawa, 2013; Nakamura, 2003).

In addition to the possible intangible benefits of education without credentialing, a community college population exists who experience tangible benefits as a result of taking

community college CTE courses without earning a credential. These skill-builders take courses to learn something new that they can use immediately in their personal or professional lives (Bahr et al., 2022; Guthrie, 2016). I saw elements of skill building in this study; however, future researchers may want to conduct similar studies that focus on CTE and AAS student populations not found here. For example, this study did not feature AAS students who work in or are pursuing industrial careers, which is the population much of the AAS CTE skill-builder literature highlights (Bahr et al., 2022; Guthrie, 2016). By investigating the stories of industrial and non-industrial CTE students alike, stakeholders can more broadly understand how students use their non-credential education and the life experiences that shape those decisions.

Finally, future researchers may want to examine whether student behavior patterns indicate changes in labor-market conditions and an ensuing need for institutions to re-examine their program offerings. For example, students may opt to customize their course loads in ways where they take courses outside an institution's standard curriculum offerings. These actions may result in students meeting their goals without completing a pre-designed program, perhaps indicating an institutional need to realign their program offerings (Atwell et al., 2022). In all cases there can only be benefits to studying student aspirations from a qualitative perspective because what they do with their education and whether they see their experience as a success or not is their choice in the end.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Interviewee: _____ Interviewer: Steven C. Smith _____

Date: _____

Interview Protocol
Project Title: Aspirations of Community College Associate in Applied Science Students: A Qualitative Analysis with Implications for Measuring Outcomes

The purpose of this proposed study is to explore the aspirations of community college students who enroll in career-focused Associate in Applied Science (AAS) programs to understand better their stated goals and ways in which that data might serve as implications for measuring institutional performance and outcomes.

The interviews for this study will be semi-structured, and the interviewer will interview each participant using an open-ended question approach with additional probing and clarifying questions present to be used as necessary. These interviews may be conducted in person or via the electronic communication system Zoom.

Procedure

1. The researcher will introduce the interview procedure which includes a brief overview of the study, points of consent, compensation, and information regarding the interview and follow-up processes.
2. The participant will be asked if the interview may be audio/video recorded and if they have any additional questions associated with the process.
3. If the participant, in written format and verbally, provides his/her consent, the recording will begin.
4. The researcher will ask the interview questions.

Interview Guidelines

Hello _____. Thank you for participating in this study, and welcome. My name is Steve Smith. I greatly appreciate you taking the time to participate in this study regarding community college AAS students' aspirations and the outside influences that shape those goals. I am going to ask you a series of questions. There are no wrong answers, so please answer as freely as you can. You do not need to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable with. You may stop or take a break at any time for any reason. If you need me to repeat or clarify any question, please ask, and I will do so. I will record this interview but will not disclose any personal information about you or the institution you attend in this study. It is your choice as to how you would like me to refer to you in this study and interview, however in the analysis of this study, you will be referred to using a pseudonym. Any data gathered during the course of these interviews will be

transcribed for data analysis without your identity being revealed. I will also delete any data that connects you to the responses you give. Would you still like to proceed?

- If no, the researcher will stop the interview and ask whether the participant is willing to be interviewed at another time.
- If yes, the researcher will begin the recording and continue the interview.

Interview 1

The in-depth interview protocol in this study adopts the guidelines set forth by Seidman's (2019) approach, which calls for three interviews that can last up to 60 minutes (Gardner, 2021). The first interview session will feature interview questions that encourage the student to narrate their life story and experiences. Specifically, this researcher is interested in gaining insight into the life journey the respondents have experienced, primarily concerning their decision to formulate higher education aspirations and enroll in a program.

The first interview in this series will be as follows:

1. Tell me a little bit about the program you are in.
2. Can you please give me a summary of your life story, and in your response please focus on the things that played a strong role in how and why you established your educational and career goals?
3. What kinds of jobs did those closest to you have when you were growing up?
4. What kinds of careers were you interested in as a young person up until now?
5. What personal and/or professional experiences got you to this point in your professional and educational life?
6. Can you tell me about your experiences with people who have affected your college and career goals during your life?

During the interview, when needed, the following prompts may be used to gather additional detail or clarification:

What are some other things that have shaped your professional and academic goals; Can you tell me about a time when ___ happened; Please clarify that point for me; Can you give me a bit more detail about _____; In what way did that experience affect your professional and academic goals?

Interview 2

The second interview features questions that focus on the respondents' lived experience according to guidelines and precedence by authors such as Gardner (2021) and Seidman (2019). This researcher will ask respondents questions that encourage them to reconstruct their experiences related to being an AAS student plus the labor market related to the career field associated with their chosen program. Although the second interview will feature questions that will prompt respondents to address specific phenomena, this researcher designed those inquiries to foster responses that result in extended uninterrupted narrative-type stories (Gardner, 2021).

As such, this researcher will strive to only intervene in the interviewee's responses for clarification, redirection, or elaborations. To begin this second interview, this researcher will start the process by asking respondents if "They could reconstruct in greater detail X issue of interest, as mentioned in the first interview?" Then, this researcher will repeat the process of requesting that interviewees reconstruct and elaborate on points of interest from interview one for each pertinent point of interest using this same language (Gardner, 2021; Seidman, 2019). In a process informed by Gardner (2021), this researcher will ask the following questions after this extended recap and elaboration of the interview one content:

1. What benefits have your community college education and training afforded you so far?
2. What community college resources have helped you move closer towards your goal(s)?
3. Have any experiences in your educational, personal, or professional life during this process changed your goal(s)?
4. Can you tell me a story of when something went right while pursuing your AAS degree?
5. Can you tell me a story of when something could have gone better while pursuing your AAS degree?
6. How does the job market and employment play a role in your definition of success?
7. In your experience, what are employers looking for when hiring in terms of skills and credentials?
8. What current social or personal obligations do you have that play a strong role in how you think about your goals and success?
9. What might be some things in your life that are more important than completing a degree or certificate?

Interview 3

Per the Seidman (2019) approach, this third interview in the in-depth approach typically focuses on processes associated with how respondents make meaning out of the experiences they detailed in the first and second interviews through a detailed reflection process. Thus, the interviewer will start the third session with a brief overview of the first and second interviews, followed by a request that the respondent explains how they make meaning of those experiences (Gardner, 2021). Specifically, this interviewer will mention to this respondent how “In the first two interviews they explained their life journey, socioeconomic circumstances, and influences followed by how that background information affected their aspirations and approach to higher education, and as such, I would like for you to make meaning of those stories.” In addition, the researcher will ask respondent the following questions, which Gardner (2021) informs:

1. Considering your life experiences and socioeconomic circumstances, how do you define success as it relates to your educational training?
2. In your experience, does the completion of a degree or certification impact your views on whether you are successful or not? Why or why not?
3. How important is completing a degree or program in your desired career field? (Probing question-Can someone be successful without graduating?)

4. Tell me about ways in which your personal or professional experiences made you feel pressured to complete your studies or not and why?
5. Can you tell me about ways in which your career or educational aspirations have changed since enrolling in the community?
6. Other than completing your degree, what other things are more important to your definition of educational and career success?
7. Tell me about some ways in which you feel that your education has led or will lead to new, continued, or higher levels of employment?
8. What are your next steps as you plan to move forward with your education and career?
9. What are your short and long term academic and professional goals?

Appendix B

Pre-Qualification Questionnaire

Aspirations of Community College Associate of Applied Science Students: A Qualitative Analysis with Implications for Measuring Outcomes

Qualtrics Based Pre-Qualification Survey Name: _____

Email: _____

Phone Number: _____

Are you enrolled in an AAS (Associates in Applies Science Program)?

- o Yes
- o No (Not eligible)

What specific AAS program are you enrolled in? _____

What is your enrollment status?

- o Full time Student
- o Part-time student

Please select your age range from the following:

- o 18-24
- o 25-40
- o 40+ years of Age

Please select your race/ethnicity from the list below:

- o White/Caucasian Non-Hispanic
- o Black/African-American
- o American Indian or Alaskan Native
- o Asian/Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- o Latino(a)/Hispanic/Chicano

- Two or more races
- Other_____

To which gender do you identify?

- Female
- Male
- Transgender Female
- Transgender Male
- Gender Variant/Non-Conforming
- Not Listed_____
- Prefer not to answer

Do you currently, or have you ever taken a sociology course at SPCC or elsewhere taught by Steven C. Smith?

- Yes (Ineligible)
- No

This study consists of three separate interviews that may last up to 60 minutes each. If selected to participate in this study, you will have the option to choose between conducting these interviews in person or virtually via Zoom. Upon completion of each interview, you will be asked to review the transcripts of each interview to make sure they represent your words accurately. You will be awarded up to $30.00 for your full participation in this study ($10.00 per interview) but may opt out at any time.

Do you agree with these initial terms and confirm that you are interested in participating in this study?

- Yes
- No