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Community College Student Success Among Non-Completers: A Narrative Exploration of The Phenomenon of Positive Attrition Through The Voices of California Community College CTE Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Community College Student Success Among Non-Completers:
A Narrative Exploration of The Phenomenon of Positive Attrition
Through The Voices of California Community College CTE Students

by

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Doctor of Education

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This qualitative research study investigated the motivations and perceptions of community college career and technical education students related to their reasons for leaving programs prior to CTE certificate or course completion utilizing narrative inquiry. Former students were asked about their background, education and employment goals, college and community environment influences in relation to their community college experience and their definition of student success. Data collection methods included identifying and interviewing ten former CTE students from two college campuses who had previously participated in a survey of CTE "completers" and "leavers" piloted at fourteen community colleges in California. Narrative data revealed that although students may not complete a CTE certificate or degree, they categorize their experiences as successful for advancing them on both career and academic pathways, indicating a need for expanded definitions of student success for community college CTE students.

This dissertation of Douglas Chelton Marriott is approved.

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2014

DEDICATION

To my loving wife Ashley, for teaching me about love and friendship everyday and for her patience and support with this educational journey. To my parents, Marguerite Marriott and Dr. Daniel Marriott, for teaching me about the value of education and learning and for modeling careers and lives of service to others. To my beautiful daughter Marlowe, for teaching me that everyday is a miracle that holds something new to learn and be grateful for. To all the teachers I have had in my life and will have in the future for opening doors and pathways of possibilities. To all of my current and former colleagues and students for helping me find my way. We make the road by walking and I am grateful for all who have shared and enriched my path.

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VITA

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"The Tale of Two Schools, From Urban Los Angeles to Suburban Nagoya," AVENUES, The Magazine for Central Japan, No. 105 December/January/February 2002-2003

CHAPTER ONE: A STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Traditional core measures of success at a community college are certificate completion, degree completion, and transfer to a four-year university. These are accepted definitions of student success in community colleges despite the multiple missions assigned to these institutions of higher education. In 2007, the publication of *Beyond the open door: Increasing student success in the California community colleges* (Moore, Shulock, Ceja, & Lang, 2007) cited successful completion rates for students completing certificates, Associates of Arts Degrees, or transferring to four-year institutions at just 24%. Does this alarming low success rate miss other variations of success at California community colleges? If accessed and interviewed, how would the 76% of "leavers" or "non-completers" describe their community college experience? This study explored the attrition of community college students from the core markers cited above, specifically, students who leave Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs prior to certificate or degree completion. Attrition occurs when students exit their course of study and do not return. The notion of "positive attrition" is considered as it relates to community college student behavior and traditional markers and definitions of student success. Within the context of the community colleges' multiple missions (including Career and Technical Education), "positive attrition" occurs when students have successfully completed their classes or made progress toward achieving personal goals but do not return to community college campuses the following semester (Fralick, 1993). What can be learned from a student who describes a successful community college experience but fails to fall into the three categories above? Policy discussions about increasing rates of completion in community colleges may miss qualitative markers of success as defined by the end users themselves, the

students.

Researchers in higher education have broadly studied student retention over the past forty years and extensive literature exists on the topic (Tinto, 2007). However, what is lacking from the body of literature on retention and community college outcomes is qualitative research on the "whys and hows" of community college student behavior and progress (Michalowski, 2010). A subset of higher education students that deserve "focused attention" are those in Career and Technical Education programs at community colleges. Compared with students on academic or transfer tracks, CTE students have a higher attrition rate (Bailey, Alfonso, Scott, & Leinbach, 2004) and much of the cited literature employs attrition theories not created with this population in mind (Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011). Understanding the distinct characteristics of CTE students and their goals and motivations in the areas of career-related activities and skill building for the workplace is important in developing effective approaches to improve both retention and other successful outcomes for CTE students (Hirschy et al., 2011).

There are multiple factors that inhibit completion rates of community college students as well as strategies and best practices that colleges can implement to improve these rates. For CTE students at community colleges, the factors and variables predicting completion differ from those of students who have academic majors and should be examined in consideration of those differences (Hirschy et al., 2011). Determining student success by simple completion rates, without explaining the variations of student success or the context, can give a negative view of community college performance (Bailey, Leinbach, & Jenkins, 2006). The sentiment that community colleges are unfairly criticized for low graduations rates without taking into account the multiple missions they have and that many students do not attend with goals of completion, but rather enrichment, is not new, but does take on greater importance in a national dialog of

increased accountability and increased completion rates. This chapter provides relevant background information on community colleges, introduces research that identifies attrition issues in community colleges, describes challenges with measuring success at community colleges, and identifies the role of Career and Technical Education programs as they may potentially relate to "positive attrition." The strategies and conceptual models colleges use to understand student success and completion rates of CTE students can be informed by research about positive attrition and student narratives focusing on perceived success.

Background Information and Current Context of the Problem

The California Legislature began authorizing high schools to offer two years of "post graduate" coursework in 1907. In 1917 the Junior College Act was passed and built upon "post graduate" coursework to include vocational training. The GI Bill of 1944 increased college enrollments and expanded the community college system in California. The 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education made community colleges even more accessible to Californians by banning tuition and opening community college doors to "every student who is willing and able to benefit from attendance." In 1978 budget deficits led to the use of "enrollment fees" that took the place of tuition. Since their inception, the community colleges in California have included vocational training, which, in the last few decades has developed from providing workforce education for entry-level and low-skilled occupations to preparing students for greater chances for advancing on career ladders in higher-skilled careers (Offenstein, Moore, & Shulock, 2009). The refinements of vocational training at community colleges "have been reflected in a change of terminology-from vocational education to career technical education" or CTE (Offenstein et al., 2009). In 2006, the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act was passed almost unanimously by Congress and signed into law. Among the

revisions of this legislation meant to improve the quality of technical education in the United States, was a change in terminology from "vocational education" seen in previous versions of the Act to "career and technical education" for the 2006 version.

Currently, the California Community Colleges are cited as the largest system of higher education in the world, serving more than 2.5 million students in 2005-06 (*Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in California Community College, 2007).* These colleges are open access institutions charged with meeting the needs of diverse learners entering with a variety of skill sets. The combination of access and affordability (the cost per unit is $46.00 in California as of fall 2012) "has made the community college the single most democratizing force in higher education" (Baker, Hope, & Karandjef, 2009). Yet for students, the state, and the economy to benefit from community college offerings and allow individuals to move up vocational and academic ladders, low student completion rates must be addressed (Coleen Moore et al., 2007).

At a time when many California Community College programs are threatened by budget cuts, measures of success become a paramount factor in budgetary and programmatic decision-making. Between the years 2009 and 2010, the California Community Colleges absorbed $769 million in cuts resulting in hundreds of thousands of students being denied access to the resources of the system. The consequences of the budget cuts have included the elimination of winter and summer sessions, course reductions, increased class sizes, reduced student services and more (http://www.cccco.edu/). Cost reductions resulted in an estimated 140,000 students being turned away from California community colleges due to cancelled courses between 2009 and 2010 (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 3/31/11). Choices of where to reduce offerings are often based on markers of student success that include certificate completions, associate degrees, and

transfer rates. These achievements and other milestones were highlighted in the 2010 report *Divided We Fail: Improving Completion and Closing Racial Gaps in California's Community Colleges* (Moore & Shulock, 2010). Current definitions of "student success" may not be giving a full scope of what community colleges are accomplishing, particularly in the area of Career and Technical Education (CTE). Students can access courses and programs for skill upgrades and work experience and not for degree or certificate completion. Students seeking short-term workforce training goals and skill upgrades may exit college when personal needs are met but prior to certificate completions. The "hows and whys" of their leaving and the experiences of the students should be examined through student experiences and a conceptual model that takes into account the characteristics and motivations of CTE students.

The Notion of Positive Attrition at Community Colleges

As described above, the phenomenon termed Positive Attrition (Fralick, 1993) occurs when students voluntarily leave colleges or courses of study when personal goals are met. At the point of enrollment, students may misstate their educational goal as one of the three markers of success noted above and be classified as non-completers despite personal goals being met. Community college applications list over ten choices of educational goals that include "Obtain a two-year Associate degree without transfer," "Obtain a Bachelor's degree after completing an Associate's degree," as well as "Prepare for a new career (acquire new job skills)" and multiple other descriptors. Community college officials and staff "have long asserted that many of their students put little cognitive effort into their response to the question of educational goal" (Hom, 2009). If the student misrepresents their educational goal at the point of entry, then the point of exit may be misclassified for students who see their time at a community college as successful. The literature that addresses attrition and persistence related to community college students will

be further explored in Chapter Two but there is limited literature examining CTE student narratives of those who may be classified as "successful" non-completers or who may fall into the category of "positive attrition."

The variety of influences that determine whether students persist with a course of study or leave an institution are challenging to identify and address in community colleges that are open access systems with multiple missions. Further complicating definitions of community college student persistence and completion rates are the varied ways in which students utilize community colleges. This varied use creates challenges to identify formal markers of success when persistence is "increasingly important as an accountability measure" (Marti, 2008) and also when the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education utilizes completion rates as core accountability measures (U.S., 2006). Substantial variation in community college students' experiences and progression makes it difficult to determine success in terms of traditional measurements of completion (Adelman, 2005; Bailey et al., 2004; Goldrick-Rab, 2006).

Moore and Shulock (2007) cited a 24% completion rate for California Community Colleges, noting the challenges of matching completion rates with students' stated goals at the point of entry. "Given the state's need to increase the number of college credentials awarded and its interest in supporting completion among students who have that as a goal, this study defined all students who indicate a goal of completion as likely degree seekers, though no assumption was made about students' specific completion goal (i.e., certificate, degree, or transfer). Many students check these goals without a full understanding of the implications of the degree goal or of their preparedness to achieve the goal" (p. 5).

Willard C. Hom, the Director of the Research, Analysis, and Accountability Unit of the

California Community College Chancellor's Office surmises (Hom, 2009) that at the point of entry (initial enrollment in the institution)… there is an overestimation by students who cite the goal of transfer when they enter a community college because of both the primacy defect and the social desirability effect of checking a box that is higher up on a scale of listed reasons for enrolling in the college (Groves et al., 2004). Self-reported educational intentions are often not reliable sources of data (Adelman, 2005), as these intentions may be inflated for the purpose of financial aid eligibility that requires definitive degree or certificate goals (Hirschy et al., 2011). Community college student intentions and attitudes are areas that deserve greater attention and study to inform institutional practices and better serve students (Hom, 2009).

Similar to Fralick's 1993 findings when she surveyed non-returning students, several studies (Berkner, Horn, Clune, & Carroll, 2000; Cohen & Brawer, 1989) point out that many community college students have goals that do not include degrees or certificates and these students may still be classified as (negative) attrition despite personal goals being met. The term "Voluntary non-graduates" has been used to identify students who leave for personal reasons that could be financial or social and may include transferring prior to completion or personal preference about the institution (Drew, 1990). Involuntary non-graduates would be those who leave because of academic failure or for reasons beyond their control such as financial reasons. In Fralick's study, 1000 students were surveyed who did not return for additional semesters of coursework. The findings showed 78% could be classified as positive attrition, meaning they considered themselves successful and had completed or made progress toward personal goals (Fralick, 1993). Other researches (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993) indicate that voluntary non-graduates on a national level make up 85% of attrition rates from two-year colleges.

Identifying the reasons community college students may not complete courses, certificates, and degrees related to traditional measures of success after they leave the college is challenging (Marti, 2008). Community college attrition is understudied compared to that of four-year universities (Pascarella, 1997; Somers, 2000; Townsend, Donaldson, & Wilson, 2005). This qualitative research study explored student narratives and perceptions to offer insight into student goal attainment at the community college level, particularly in the context of CTE for students who chose not return to college, where skill building and exposure to intended work environments may take priority over certificate or degree completion and transferring to a four-year institution.

Community College Career and Technical Education and Positive Attrition

President Barak Obama has cited community colleges as key players in upgrading skill sets for the today's economy, "community colleges play an important role in helping people transition between careers by providing the retooling they need to take on a new career." How can we determine if a community college student has been "retooled" for career advancement if they do not complete their program of study? An area where students may leave community colleges prior to certificate completion but may deem themselves a success is the area of Career and Technical Education (CTE), a core mission of the community college. In Fralick's study (1993), an example of positive attrition in CTE is described where a student dropped all coursework and received failing grades for the semester but when surveyed said that the automotive course he had been enrolled in provided him with the skill sets to gain full-time employment in the industry. The student felt that his training was a success. CTE is one of the primary missions of the California Community Colleges "to advance California's economic growth and global competitiveness through education, training, and services that contribute to

continuous work force improvement" (Education Code Section 66601.1-66010.8). To meet this mission, CTE programs are charged to provide relevant and real world training leading to employment and career advancement. Often the goals of students enrolling in these programs are short-term and directly related to employment and salary advancement rather than the traditional markers of student success discussed above. The recent recession and changes in labor needs have highlighted the role of community colleges as "first responders" to retrain workers who have lost their jobs and to meet new labor market demands in a changing economy (Levin, 2001). Students seeking short-term workforce training goals and skill upgrades may exit colleges when personal needs are met but prior to certificate completions. This phenomenon exists in those seeking to transition to new careers and to those building on established transferable skills. As cited above, these students may not return to the college they were attending for a subsequent semester, but, when surveyed about their experience and needs being met, evaluated the experience as a "success" (Fralick, 1993). Such studies indicate that "success" may need redefinition and be individual to the student.

For CTE students self-defined success may be securing full time employment or gaining the skills needed for salary and career advancement, not necessarily traditional markers of success or other metrics of completion. The January 2012 release of recommendations from the California Student Success Task Force emphasizes the need for common metrics of success and "momentum points" to help students achieve their goals. The recommendations include increasing college and career readiness and aligning course offerings, to meet student needs, among others, but "due to time constraints, career technical education" was not addressed directly by the Task Force (pg. 12). A review of relevant literature in Chapter 2 will explore student attrition and persistence at community colleges, CTE programs, as well notions of

student success and community college student behavior (Hirschy et al., 2011).

Studying the Problem through CTE "Leavers" Narratives

To investigate other definitions of success in community colleges, studies may examine the educational impact of CTE courses and programs from the students' perspective. In a time of decreasing college budgets and increasing accountability around student success (defined as certificates completed, AA degrees awarded, and documented transfers achieved) researchers need to reach out to the students who were part of the courses to assess perceived value and relevance. Although it is logistically challenging, community colleges can reach out to "leavers" ("non-completers" or "skill builders") to learn from their experience at the institutions and determine if other versions of "success" were achieved. This study sought to learn about the conditions that lead students to enroll in CTE programs at California community colleges and then exit prior to completion. It built on the CTE Employment Outcomes Project with the goal of providing employment outcomes information for students who have participated in CTE programs at select California community colleges. Specifically, it sought to determine if coursework positively affected students' earning potential and transferable work skills, even if they chose to leave before completion.

This investigation intended to add a qualitative component to the CTE Employment Outcomes Project and increase our understanding of attrition and persistence behavior among community college CTE students. A model of inquiry constructed for CTE students (Hirschy et al., 2011) and composed of constructs that include student characteristics, college environment, local community environment, and student success framed the qualitative research. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What do CTE students who do not persist to certificate completion say were their reasons for attending a specific course/program/community college?
2. How do CTE students who do not persist to certificate completion view their community college experience in relation to their career goals?
3. What do non-persisting CTE students identify as the important factors that influenced their decision to withdraw?
4. To what extent were students' initial desired educational goals met, despite the decision to withdraw prior to certificate or degree completion?

Research design / Research sites and populations

To address the four research questions, this qualitative study employed narrative inquiry methodology that included interviews with selected participants and document study. Narrative inquiry is particularly suited for this qualitative study as it allows for participants stories and experiences to provide insight (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and inform an understanding of how and why CTE students may view success and completion at community colleges. As described above, the study built on the 2011-2012 CTE Employment Outcomes Project (www.rpgroup.org/projects/CTE-Employment-Outcomes-Survey) piloted in spring of 2012 at 14 California community college campuses. This statewide effort of the RG group is an outgrowth of work originally done at Cabrillo College. In an effort to inform CTE program level planning, while also meeting Perkins Act monitoring requirements of charting completions and industry training related to job placements, Cabrillo began surveying both "completers" and "leavers" of their CTE programs in 1998 (Willett & Luan, 2000). More detail on the project will be found in Chapter 3, but the goals of both the Cabrillo work as well as the scaled up work of the RP Group

in 2011-2012 are consistent; to provide data from CTE students for local improvement and to show the potential impact CTE course and programs have on both "completers" and "leavers" in terms of workplace and wage advancement. By utilizing two of the 14 pilot campuses for this study, "leavers" will have already been identified, providing baseline data about students and potential participants for interviews. These "leavers" will have been surveyed, but not met or interviewed or allowed to share their story in a narrative form. This study, through direct contact with participants, sought to gain student perspectives on issues related to why students may leave community college programs prior to completion as well as student's self definitions of "success" at community colleges.

Impact on Practice / Need for the Study

As California Community Colleges seek to quantify and improve student success in a time of fiscal constraints, this study examines student perceptions of success in CTE programs. Such perceptions may provide insights into what is being done well at community colleges and what courses and programs meet student needs not falling under traditional metrics of success. Such insight can help more fully understand attrition. By interviewing "leavers" individually, this study builds upon literature identifying CTE student behavior and assess CTE course and program relevance to the participants. This research should provide qualitative data on how to better understand and serve CTE students in California community colleges. As is shown in the literature review in the next chapter, community college students use courses and programs in a variety of ways with a variety of goals, goals that may not always match institutional performance indicators (Bahr, 2011). To build on previous literature, researchers have recommended more qualitative studies on non-returning students to better understand variables

that lead to persistence. Many researchers have examined attrition and persistence, but there exists limited research on the variables that predict success for CTE students and understanding why they leave could lead to both improved policy and practices (Offenstein et al., 2009).

CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the need for further exploration of attrition and student success among CTE students at community colleges. This chapter reviews relevant research on attrition and persistence issues in community colleges, challenges with measuring and defining success at community colleges, and the role of Career and Technical Education courses and programs in community colleges as they potentially relate to "positive attrition". Additionally, this chapter explores concepts concerning student behavioral patterns in two-year institutions, and introduces the reader to a conceptual model of student success focused on CTE students in community colleges and the Community College Abundance Model (CCAM) as a theoretical perspective for examining the CTE student attrition within the community college system. The purpose of this study is to examine CTE student attitudes regarding completing and leaving CTE programs and to assess if goals were achieved even if certificates and degrees were not completed. Interviews and dialogs with students could uncover more than merely reviewing intake documents and exit surveys and add to existing research literature on attrition and persistence.

Background on Attrition (Positive and Negative) and Persistence Research in Higher Education/Community Colleges

As cited previously, the phenomenon termed Positive Attrition (Fralick, 1993) occurs when

students voluntarily leave colleges or courses of study when personal goals are met. Although the Fralick article is not recent, it still provides a blueprint for defining "positive attrition" and addresses concerns of student success that are still valid areas for exploration in the community college system. The Fralick work also took place at a community college in Southern California, which served as the region for this study. Also, CTE students may be interested in specific skill building, unrelated to program or certificate completion, yet to be eligible for financial aid, students must have a certificate or degree completion goal (U.S., 2006) and may cite completion as a goal even if it is not their intention to complete. Research has shown that student-declared goals may be unstable markers and that they may change after the initial point of entrance into the college (Bailey et al., 2006).

At community colleges, attrition results when students leave or do not return to the school where they are enrolled prior to achieving their self-declared educational goal. Persistence is the term used for students who continue or stay with their course of study toward their goal. There are multiple variables that contribute to students deciding to continue a course of study or to leave. Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975, 1993) and Bean's Student Attrition Model (1985) are often cited as foundations of frameworks on attrition and persistence in higher education. These models point to the need for the further development of social engagement and connections of students with the institution to increase persistence and success rates. However, 2011 research regarding CTE student success (Hirschy et al., 2011) summarizes five additional models to the two cited above and synthesizes the findings of all seven models to justify the proposal of new model that focuses on the unique characteristics of CTE students. The seven models will also be summarized in this literature review and the proposed model explained as it directly relates to the purpose of this study.

The first theoretical model of student retention explored is Tinto's student integration model, despite subsequent researchers (John M Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; John M. Braxton, Sullivan, & Robert M. Johnson, 1997) questioning the "explanatory power" in relation to community colleges. To address the wide variety of reasons students continue or leave colleges, Vincent Tinto (1975) developed what he described as a predictive theory of student attrition. In this model, student persistence is seen as a longitudinal process of interactions between the academic and social systems of the college and the student. According to this predictive theory on attrition, students persist when there is integration into the college and a commitment on behalf of the student to engage. Tinto (1975) also identified external influences as playing a role in a student's decision to persist and that students are continually weighing the benefits and costs of staying in college. This model was developed to look at the variables that contribute to student attrition and allowed Tinto to predict that students who had less invested in and fewer connections to two-year public institutions were more likely to persist in higher quality four-year institutions.

Other researchers (Bean, 1990; Pascarella, 1997; Tinto, 1993) have shared that the above model is less applicable to nontraditional students, who comprise a large percentage of those who attend community colleges as it looks at the populations of community college students and four-year students similarly. At community colleges, there are inherently less opportunities for the interactions that Tinto cites as being important for integration and for that reason Bean and Metzner (1985) suggest that the model is less relevant for that population and provide the second theoretical model of student retention explored by Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano in 2011.

For Bean and Metzner (1985), it was important to distinguish community college students from four-year college students and acknowledge that assumptions of student behavior vary

based on context. A student's persistence is impacted by their degree of satisfaction with the school, their performance, their background, as well as external forces (finances and family). In this work, a "drop-out" was defined as a student who did not return from one semester to the next and did not complete a program of study. The researchers recognized this definition did not encompass other reasons for students "stopping out" (taking time off prior to returning) but recommended that researchers themselves define "dropouts" based on the objectives of their studies.

Bean and Metzner's (1985) attrition model was built upon by Bean and Eaton (2000) and was the third theoretical model of student retention summarized by Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano in 2011. Bean and Eaton offered a model that focused on both Tinto's integration model as well as psychological theories as a way to examine student behavior. The psychological theories integrated into the model included coping behavior, attitude-behavior, locus of control, and self-efficacy. Coping behavior refers to how students handle new conditions and challenges. Locus of control identifies how students view their role in successes and failures. For Bean and Eaton, the four psychological theories would be an influence on a student's college experience and thus influence behavior that would include "completing" or "leaving."

Continuing with the chronological summaries of theoretical models of student retention, after examining the theoretical model of Bean and Eaton, researchers Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano look to the 2003 work of Swail, Redd, and Perna. These researchers propose a "user-friendly" model that places the student at the center of the discourse and focuses on the attributes the student brings to college and asks what the institution can do to increase persistence. The student experience is framed in this geometric model on three sides by cognitive factors, social

factors, and institutional factors (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Equilibrium is the term used to indicate the factors affecting the student, and if in balance, likely to increase persistence. The authors then build on the triangle of interacting factors (which are non-linear in how they impact students and can be both positive and negative) to create a student monitoring system surrounded by the following five components: recruitment and admissions, academic services, curriculum and instruction, student services, and financial aid (Swail et al., 2003 p. 91). The report in which the model is proposed concludes that for retention efforts to be successful multiple factors should be in place at the college. These factors include funding, institutional leadership, a faculty reward system, flexible planning and college affordability.

Vincent Tinto wrote the forward to the 2005 text where the fifth model of retention is found (*College student retention: Formula for success*). He writes that despite the vast amount of research dedicated to student retention and student success; there is a lack of developed models that could practically guide institutions in developing policies and practices to increase student success (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005). The model offered by Nora, Barlow, and Crisp examined students at a four-year commuter college who had persisted into the second year of their studies. The study used a model of student-institution engagement and found that characteristics relating to persistence included SAT scores, high school performance, educational costs, course taking patterns, full-time versus part-time enrollment, demographic information (gender, race, ethnicity) and early performance in college. The model is shared in the form of a flow chart leading to persistence, but proves difficult to transfer directly to community college students as the site for the study and development of the model was a four-year institution.

The sixth model builds on Tinto's original model but infuses variables that proved relevant at commuter institutions (John M Braxton et al., 2004). This model examines students'

persistence through the interplay of background characteristics (e.g., academic ability, gender, race, motivation, parental education) with the internal campus environment and the external life environment of the student (e.g. family and work). The model proposes that a student's ability to integrate and persist in college is determined by both internal and external environmental factors.

The final theoretical model of student retention explored, prior to providing the model created for CTE student success, comes from Reason (2009) and includes a wide range of variables and influences relating to student success. Reason explained that student persistence should be understood through examining the many relationships between the college environment and the student, including the influence of personal experience with coursework and peers, pre college characteristics, and the unique qualities of the college itself. This wide range of variables would provide a "more nuanced" look of student persistence (Hirschy et al., 2011) yet the wide variety of variables would make it challenging to identify which specific influences contributed to persisting in or leaving a college.

Argument for a Conceptual Model of Student Success focused on CTE Students

As noted in Chapter 1, traditional metrics of institutional effectiveness in community colleges and markers of student success are certificate completion, the completion of A.A. Degrees, and or transfer to four-year institutions. For CTE students, success may look different than these traditional markers indicate and students themselves "remain the best source" regarding their goals and providing colleges information to assess success and improve practices and service (Hirschy et al., 2011). To address the unique characteristics and variables CTE students bring to their community college experience, the Conceptual Model of Student Success for CTE students in community colleges proposes to build on the seven models outlined above.

Career integration and educational intentions are constructs added to other variables to enhance the theoretical framework when examining CTE students and their educational outcomes.

Academic and social integration are components of all seven of the models of persistence listed previously. Tinto's research has demonstrated the importance of students feeling part of both the educational community and social systems of an institution of higher education in relation to persistence (Tinto, 1993). The authors of the CTE conceptual model build on these variables to include career integration for CTE students. This variable addresses specific career goals students may have and the level of access to direct career related activities (e.g. job shadowing, internships, meeting professionals in the field) to meet their initial goals. The authors propose that the higher the level of career integration, the increased likelihood of program completion. In addition to career integration, this model adds CTE students' educational intentions. These variables include the stated goals with which students enter programs, as well as level of commitment to those outcomes. When assessing student goals and intentions, researchers may benefit from interviewing students to capture their narrative experience, as was the proposal of this dissertation with a select population of CTE "leavers," because self-reported data on intake sheets may have been influenced by financial aid considerations and thus miss information on student behavior that could be instructive to CTE and community college practitioners.

In terms of structure, the Conceptual Model for CTE Student Success is built on four sets of constructs: student characteristics, student success outcomes, college environment and local community environment (Hirschy et al., 2011). The model seeks to take into account that all constructs influence each other and that the reality of community college students is that they "are members of multiple communities." Student characteristics include the demographic

information and disposition and skills categories of previous models cited and add employment intentions and goals as well as work commitments. These characteristics are "malleable" and influenced by both the college environment and attainment of educational goals (student success) in this model. For a CTE student, the college environment encompasses academic and social integration, student services, and career integration. Career integration includes how students may be socialized into and supported on chosen career tracks through real world and relevant workplace training and meeting industry practitioners. For CTE students the local community environment is also considered as support services for working students (e.g. transportation, child care) support completion and success. In this model, success may take the form of attaining employment in the field, completing industry credentials, persisting from one semester to the next (Hirschy et al., 2011), as well as the traditional markers of success previously stated.

The benefits of utilizing the Conceptual Model for CTE Student Success are that the model builds on traditional retention models while addressing the specific issues that influence CTE students. The inclusion of career integration and students' educational intentions can yield qualitative data to help inform programs and policies to better serve CTE students in way other retention models, focused on academic and transfer programs, may miss in the ongoing pursuit of increased "student success" in community colleges.

Definitions of Student Success in California Community Colleges

Student success in California community colleges is a paramount issue among college administration, faculty, and policy makers. In the state of California, there is a Center for Student Success, a Fund For Student Success, a Student Success Task Force, a Community Colleges Student Success Stories Project, a Student Success Institute and multiple other projects and initiatives to address the topic (a Google search of "student success California community

colleges" yields 44,200,000 results). Student success is central to the mission of community colleges, yet being able to measure and define this "success" is problematic (Baldwin, Bensimon, Dowd, & Kleiman, 2011). The traditional performance indicators have been cited as degree attainment, certificate completion, or transfer to a four-year institution. These three metrics of success (in addition to "students completing their educational goals") are also the focal point of the 2012 recommendations of the California Community Colleges Student Success Task Force. The reasons for students enrolling in community colleges often differ from students in four-year institutions and may include reasons beyond the completion of a certificate or degree (Ishitani, 2006). This may of particular relevance to CTE students, as this study explored. It is the varied motivations of community college students that requires performance indicators to be student driven, and for success to be measured by personal achievements of students (Polinsky, 2003). Certainly measurements of success and completion rates are institutional imperatives for community colleges, yet there is considerable dialog about how these metrics should be examined in two-year institutions (Bailey et al., 2004; Bailey et al., 2006; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Wild and Ebbers (2002) argue that community colleges require a retention definition other than the degree completion definition taken from four-year institutions. Like Polinsky (2003), they advocate measures of student retention in consideration of individual student goals. For community college students, there may be multiple pathways to these individual goals (Marti, 2007). As demonstrated in the persistence models outlined in this chapter, literature on persistence in community colleges exists, but the area has not been extensively studied (Ishitani, 2006), particularly the area of CTE.

Community colleges have multiple missions, but outcomes and accountability are issues of importance as these institutions promote their relevance as providers of higher education in the

public sphere. While graduation and completion rates tell one aspect of the community college story, many other student narrative and "successes" are left out of these numbers. The following quote, originally published in the American Association of Community Colleges electronic newsletter and quoted in the working paper *Is Student Success Labeled Institutional Failure? Student Goals and Graduation Rates in the Accountability Debate at Community Colleges (Bailey et al., 2006)*, captures a sentiment of community college practitioners and leaders regarding "student success":

> I continue to be discouraged that these articles do not ever account for the students who come to the community colleges with different goals. While I agree that the students we get whose goal is, or should be, a degree or transfer need more focused attention from us, I am always discouraged that community colleges are made to look like failures when the number of students who come to the community colleges to gain particular job skills or some similar goal are not separated out when the percentages are run…I think this continues to be one of our challenges: to remind university researchers of the multiple missions of the community colleges and to define success by the students who met their personal goals. Then we would be in a better position to talk about how much more community colleges need to do.

Student Swirl and Behavioral Patterns

Further complicating traditional metrics of success is the notion of student swirl, or "the reality that that the majority of 18-to 24-year-olds, not to mention older students, do not experience college in a linear fashion" (Borden, 2004). The terms "student swirl" and "double-dipping" come from the 1990 work of Alfredo de los Santos and Irene Wright and show that students attending community colleges often move from one institution to another or take

courses concurrently at multiple colleges (Borden, 2004). Other behaviors that are non-linear and "non-traditional" include students who "reverse transfer" or transfer from a four-year school to a community college or students who experiment with "independent enrollment" where they may take a course for personal or professional interests unrelated to degree or certificate completion. The reality of student flow patterns makes not only measuring success problematic but also academic planning and support programs (Borden, 2004). Unlike "traditional" four-year students, community college students are typically allocated fewer resources than university students (Grubb, 1996). In addition to less support, community college students often face lifestyle challenges that adversely impact academic success and are cited for the phenomenon of swirling (Hunter & Conley, 2007; McClenney, 2004). For community college students, these challenges often include full or part-time work commitments. Proscriptive measures to address swirl include identifying and acknowledging its reality (Borden, 2004) and collaboration and dialogue among faculty and administration to create conditions and programs that demonstrate an understanding of the environmental factors and behavioral patterns of swirling community college students (Wang & Pilarzyk, 2009). Swirl is a phenomenon to be considered when examining CTE student behavior, as occupational programs vary from campus to campus and CTE students may jump programs to meet individual goals of skill building.

CTE in Community Colleges

When policy makers refer to the intersection of workforce development needs and higher education they are often speaking about Career and Technical Education (CTE). In a February 2012 address, U.S. Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis cited the importance of looking toward community colleges as a response to national economic and industry training needs,

"Community colleges are at the frontlines of education in America...If we are serious about meeting the challenges of the 21st century global economy, and if the promise of fair access to higher education is to be realized, then it's going to happen at community colleges." Community colleges are a primary provider of CTE programs that are meant to be responsive to industry needs and relevant and lead to a more educated and skilled workforce (Grubb, 1996). CTE programs are also offered in California high schools, but often with the goal that they will lead students to higher education. The California Department of Education defines these programs as a " program of study that involves a multiyear sequence of courses that integrates core academic knowledge with technical and occupational knowledge to provide students with a pathway to postsecondary education and careers" (www.cde.ca.gov/ci/ct/). The notion of postsecondary institutions aligning training with industry needs has been around for centuries and has been labeled vocational education, workforce development, or CTE (Wonacott, 2001). In community colleges, these programs were initiated in the 1920s to address workers training needs and are still considered essential for keeping the U.S. competitive in today's global economy (Vaughan, 2000).

In today's economy, community college CTE programs are vital in preparing students for the workforce and seen as key trainers for "middle-skill" jobs. The 2009 report *California's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs* defines these occupations as those that require more than a high school diploma but not requiring a bachelor's degree and states that they represent the largest share of jobs in the state (an estimated 49%) and will make up the largest share of future job openings.

In the California Community Colleges there are more than 270 occupational programs that lead students to licenses based on industry standards or skills certificates. CTE certificates

are intended to provide specific workplace skills for the student and help them advance in the workforce. Although many CTE programs are combined with general education and allow students to obtain an AA/AS degree or transfer to a four year institution, there are also many exit points where students can leave to pursue work equipped with new skills. Research shows a positive credentialing effect when students target specific skills sets in CTE certificates or degrees in a one-to-two-year period rather than swirling without a concrete academic goal (Grubb, 1996; Ernest T. Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Looking to the future, CTE programs in California will continue to be needed to meet labor market needs and help train students middle skilled jobs. The CTE mission of the community colleges differs from the missions of AA/AS degree completion or transfer (although in many programs is aligned with these programs) but success is still often measured in completion. In, *The New Vocationalism in American Community Colleges* (2001), Debra Bragg states: "It is important to take stock of postsecondary vocational education and examine its changing focus and evolving goals. Through the collective experiences of community colleges, we may gain insights into how vocational education plays an increasingly prominent role at the postsecondary level… Through our collective observations and insights, we seek to increase understanding about the new vocationalism in U.S. community colleges." (Bragg, 2001)

Career and Technical Education and the "new vocationalism" in community colleges may also be informed by a study of the narratives of students utilizing these offerings that employs a theoretical model created for this student population. It is important to examine reasons for early exits and persistence in consideration of the unique goals and characteristics of CTE students.

Introduction of the Community College Abundance Model (CCAM)

This study's research questions seek to explore the following, how CTE students who do not persist to certificate completion view their community college experience in relation to their career goals, what non-persisting CTE students identify as the important factors that influenced their decision to withdraw, the extent students' initial desired educational goals met despite the decision to withdraw prior to certificate or degree completion, and what CTE students who do not persist to certificate completion say were their reasons for attending a specific course/program/community college. In examining CTE students' narratives and why they leave or complete programs to address the above questions, a focus is on what is working well for students and value is given to the voice of students to make recommendations for improved practices at community colleges.

A framework that provides a lens for looking at and building on organizational strengths, i.e. new vocationalism and CTE opportunities to serve students and advance their career options is found in the Community College Abundance Model (CCAM) (Shults, 2008). This model draws from the fields of positive psychology, positive organizational scholarship, and positive organizational behavior to appreciate human capital, build on strengths, and to seek to add value to stakeholders. Although the CCAM is model for organizational management of community colleges, it is based on valuing the human element, and, from its basis in positive psychology, interested in finding out where strengths are and what processes are working to build on those for improvement. Martin Seligman, a pioneer in the field of positive psychology, determined that by focusing on the discovery and nurturing of strengths, optimal health can be obtained and illness avoided (Seligman, 2003, Shults, 2008). The CCAM has a spectrum of a community college's "health" that rates them in three categories. On the lower end of abundance there are Colleges of

Challenge, where there is an absence of health and the institution operates on a deficit model in relation to resources. In the middle there are Colleges of Choice, where there is an absence of illness and a moderate leveraging of resources. At the higher end of the spectrum exists Colleges of Abundance, which display a presence of vitality, have developed leadership and a strong leveraging and development of resources (Shults, 2008). Abundance is not simply related to financial health but to organizational states and mind-sets. Maintaining a state of abundance or health requires a consistent effort. According to the CCAM, community colleges need to continually strive to improve leveraging of resources and improve organizational performance to adapt during changing environmental conditions. In this model valuing the human element is of the utmost importance.

The CCAM lens, combined with the theoretical components of the Conceptual Model of Student Success for CTE students in community colleges, can provide qualitative information to better understand CTE student behavior and notions of CTE student success. Outcomes of a study that focus on narratives of CTE students framed by strengths based approach to improved practices and a model constructed specifically for CTE students may assist community college practitioners in improving programs that support CTE student success.

Summary

This chapter looked at literature related to attrition and persistence, introduced a model of persistence relevant to CTE students, looked at definitions of student success in California community colleges and career and technical education in community colleges and concluded by outlining the Community College Abundance Model. All of the topics relate to the exploration of "positive attrition" in community colleges and CTE programs. What are missing from the literature review are qualitative studies incorporating student perspectives specific to

the CTE experience. As California Community Colleges seek to quantify and improve student success in a time of fiscal constraints, examining student perceptions of success in CTE programs may provide insights on what is being done well to meet student needs that may not fall under traditional metrics of success. In the next chapter I outline the study's research design.

CHAPTER THREE: THE DESIGN OF THE STUDY/METHODOLOGY

Introduction and Research Questions

Policy discussions about increasing rates of completion in community colleges may miss other markers of success as defined by the end users (students). As discussed previously, "positive attrition" occurs when students have successfully completed their classes or made progress toward achieving personal goals but do not return to community college campuses the following semester (Fralick, 1993) and may not "complete" the metrics of certificate or degree completion. At a time when many California Community College programs are threatened by budget cuts, measures of success become paramount factors in budgetary and programmatic decision-making. When considering areas to reduce services, are there other markers of success, as identified by students utilizing the community college offerings that do not correspond to traditional completion markers? The goal of this study is to examine student perceptions of their experiences and definitions of "success" from the CTE (Career and Technical Education) student perspective of those who do not fall into traditional metrics of "completers."

This qualitative research study explored the motivations and perceptions of community college career and technical education students about their reasons for leaving programs prior to certificate completion or course completion through narrative inquiry. The study built on the work of the RP Group's CTE Employment Outcomes Pilot Study and use the following definitions for "completers" and "leavers":

Completer: Students who earned a Vocational or a CTE certificate consisting of six or more credit units during the academic year of 2009-2010.

Leaver: Students identified as non-completers, who during the same time period, met the CTE

"concentrator" criteria of successfully completing twelve plus units in the same vocational area of study, but did not enroll the following academic year (2010-2011).

To guide this exploration, the following research questions were examined through a qualitative research design employing surveys, in-depth interviews, and document review.

1. What do CTE students who do not persist to certificate completion say were their reasons for attending a specific community college CTE program?
2. How do CTE students who do not persist to certificate completion view their community college experience in relation to their career goals?
3. What do non-persisting CTE students identify as the important factors that influenced their decision to withdraw?
4. To what extent were the students' initial educational goals met, despite the decision to withdraw prior to certificate or degree completion?

The Research Design

This study used qualitative design with narrative inquiry specifically to address the four research questions. The design used the conceptual model of student success for CTE students in community colleges (Hirschy et al., 2011), a theoretical model of student persistence outlined in Chapter Two. The theory posits CTE students bring unique characteristics to their community college experience building on previous models of persistence in higher education by adding the constructs of career integration and educational intentions. The authors propose that career goals and access to direct career related activities (e.g. job shadowing, internships, meeting professionals in the field) increase the probability of program completion. The structure of the conceptual model for CTE student success is built on four sets of constructs: student characteristics, student

success outcomes, college environment, and local community environment (Hirschy et al., 2011). The interview guide (Appendix C) seeks to address the variables included in this model. A qualitative research design using individual interviews provided community college students' own voices on how they use CTE programs and how the courses and programs effect their skill development and career advancement by examining the variables that led to early departure and perceived experiences in the courses and programs. Examining student stories and understanding the perceptions and motivations of students who leave community college CTE programs prior to completion warrants a deep qualitative study and exploratory approach to move beyond numbers of "completers" and available statistics. Allowing former CTE students (leavers) to share their narratives opens up the possibility of garnering greater understanding of students' experiences and needs and is an approach validated by literature on qualitative designs. "…research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives" (Merriam, 2009, p. 1).

In addition, a qualitative approach built on quantitative research data already done by the CTE Employment Outcome Project taking place in selected community colleges in California (first piloted in the spring of 2012). The Research and Planning Group for California Community College (RP Group) is scaling up the work of Cabrillo College (Aptos, California), a school that began surveying CTE program "completers" and CTE program "leavers" to assess if coursework positively affected earnings and why students dropped out of programs. Cabrillo College used these surveys to look at student earnings and gauge effectiveness of CTE programming in relation to labor market indicators. It is the stories of the "leavers" that are of interest to program improvement and that are the focus of this qualitative study, designed to learn from student voices and narratives.

The RP Groups concept paper for the CTE Employment Outcomes project identifies a goal of creating a common survey instrument for CTE "completers" and CTE "leavers." This survey instrument was used at 15 pilot community college sites in California in the spring of 2012. The survey uses both enrollment data from these pilot sites and data from the California Chancellor's office to survey CTE "completers" and "leavers." Core survey questions were asked at all campuses and campuses also could customize additional questions for more college specific data. The pilot phase began in fall of 2011, with the sites administering the survey in the spring of 2012. The outcomes of this statewide project allowed the RP Group to produce a report looking at CTE trends with results from the pilot in 2012. The CTE Employment Outcome Project REVISED Concept paper from July 2011 describes the purpose of the project as follows: "This project seeks to gather information on the outcomes of CTE programs in California community colleges, including whether students became employed within their field of study, if their community college coursework positively affected their earning potential, and why students dropped out of CTE programs. It builds upon completer and leaver surveys that are being conducted at several colleges to create a common outcomes measurement tool and report" (p.1).

The results of the 2012 report showed that statewide there were wage gains for both completers (39% increase in hourly wage) and non-completers (26% increase in hourly wage). The pilot report also demonstrated that "the vast majority of both completers and non-completers were satisfied with the education and training they received at their community college" (The RP Group, 2012). This data partially addresses the third research question of this study that asks about initial goals being met despite not completing the certificate or degree program, but does not offer the depth of individual interviews to assess additional factors and perceptions for not persisting. The size and scope of the CTE Employment Outcome Project survey tools has

generated extensive quantitative information on the number of completers versus leavers, courses and units completed, wages, and more. To add a more varied and human understanding of the outcomes and give a voice to the quantitative survey responses of the CTE Employment Outcomes Project, a qualitative "drilling down" of the student narratives of selected "leavers" or non-completers captured personal stories in what has been labeled "positive attrition" of students previously enrolled in CTE programs.

Narrative Inquiry and Analysis

Collecting narratives and employing narrative analysis were appropriate methods for this study for several reasons. "The study of narrative does not fit neatly within the boundaries of any single scholarly field" (Huberman & Miles, 2002). The stories of "leavers" are varied and complex and require methods to capture nuances that may lead to greater understanding. Narratives "structure perceptual experience" and "organize memory" while the listener can analyze the content and why the story was told the way it was told (Riessman, 2002). Narratives are meaning making structures that follow levels of representation in the research process: attending, telling, transcribing, analyzing, and reading.

After a primary experience has taken place (e.g. attending a CTE program or course at a community college), the person reflects on and remembers specific aspects of the experience and constructs a reality around the experience, a way representing the experience (Riessman, 2002). Next, the subject gives voice to or "tells" about the experience, which is influenced by personal characteristics, cultural background, and context. After the narrative is captured by note taking and recording, transcription takes place, moving the language into text form in a detailed manner to maintain the voice of the storyteller. The transcriptions are of the experience are then analyzed, allowing the researcher to create a metastory about the told experience (Riessman, 2002). The

final component of representing the narrative is the reading of the report, where the reader brings their background and understanding to the interpretation of the narrative. The limits of the five levels are that the representations of the narratives are selective and therefore limited, and that reality has been "recreated." The benefits are that stories have structure that allows for meaning to be constructed. The boundaries for coding the narratives depend of the framework of the investigator (Riessman, 2002). For this study, the conceptual framework was described in Chapter Two, a model for success in community college occupational programs that include the variables of student characteristics (e.g. socio-demographics, educational and employment goals), college environment (e.g. campus support, career integration), local community environment (work and family), and student success (attaining educational goals). Categories allow for selecting aspects of longer narratives to interpret in meaning (Riessman, 2002). Narrative work is validated by persuasiveness, correspondence (confirming with study participants), coherence, and pragmatic use (Riessman, 2002).

To capture narratives interviews took place with students identified as "leavers." Since the former students were no longer at the "site" or college where they took CTE courses, interviews involved a protocol of open-ended questions based on the four overarching research questions to elicit views and opinions from the participants (Creswell, 2009) relevant to the reasons students left prior to completion. By listening to "leavers" share their community college stories, other ideas or insights may arise that can serve to complement the data obtained from multiple individual interviews. Reasons for leaving courses of study or a community college CTE program are personal to the student. Individual interviews and shared narratives with a researcher who is also a CTE community college faculty member and practitioner may yield meaningful qualitative stories. Thus, individual interviews of "leavers" who have already been identified by

the CTE Employment Outcomes Project served as a rich source of qualitative data to explore the notion of "positive attrition" within select California community college CTE programs.

Narrative inquiry provides a view of CTE "leavers" that has not been explored and the data gathered and analyzed serves to broaden understandings of the lives of students (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The value and "contribution of narrative inquiry is more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42).

Rationale for Site and Sample Selection

Of the 14 colleges participating in the pilot of the CTE Employment Outcomes Project, I originally intended to work with colleagues from three of the campuses to access CTE "leavers." Originally the CTE Outcomes Project was going to allow 15 schools to self-select into the project and then determine the ten that would be the best representation of the California community college system. As the project developed, the regional leads decided to keep all 15 schools in the pilot. One school withdrew from the project, leaving 14 schools in the original pilot. A document analysis of the CTE Outcomes Project and the websites of the 14 pilot colleges and their CTE programs identified the three sites selected. The size of the student bodies and the variety of CTE offerings served as criteria for selection. The three campuses represented different areas of Southern California and were chosen in part because a review of documents demonstrated that the campuses have extensive CTE offerings. Large student bodies (over 14,000 students at each site), combined with the spring 2012 CTE Outcomes Pilot Project generating over 35 responses at each site from "leavers" were favorable conditions for the proposed study. Participants who had already participated in the "leaver" survey were identified to participate in follow-up in depth interviews about their experiences related to the topic. For the spring survey, there was no incentive used.

For this proposed study, monetary (gift cards) incentives were used to encourage participation. These campuses have already participated in the RP study and therefore were logical choices to build on that study. The sample selection was to be between five and seven "leavers" at each site. Ultimately access was gained at two colleges for the study allowing for a total of ten interviews, with five former CTE students representing each campus. The small number of participants allowed for in depth and personal interviews to capture narrative experiences. I contacted the lead researchers from the RP Group assigned to the CTE Outcomes Project and also contacted the southern California campuses mentioned above. I believed that this proposed study and the RP Group study had parallel missions and focus, lending credibility to both endeavors and I was encouraged by colleagues at the sites who shared that the qualitative data gathered would benefit their programs.

The two colleges participating in the study were located in southern California and offered distinct CTE offerings and student profiles. Five former students from Wallingford College participated in the study. Wallingford is located in Serrania County, and served by the Serrania County Community College District (SCCCD). This public community college district includes three colleges in Serrania County: Orange Grove College, Wallingford College, and Serrania College. All three offer programs for transfer to four-year universities and colleges; career technical training and occupational programs; basic skills instruction; as well continuing education for cultural growth, life enrichment, community service, and economic development. As of Fall 2012, SCCCD served over 30,000 students. The three SCCCD colleges are accredited by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, an institutional accrediting body recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation and the U.S. Department of Education. The SCCCD states on its

website that the primary mission of the District is to "produce student learning in lower division level academic transfer and career/vocational degree and certificate programs. Effective, efficient student support services are offered to assist in the accomplishment of the District's primary mission based on need and available resources." Serrania County Community College District works to bolster economic growth and global competitiveness. Additionally, "workforce and economic development activities and services are offered based on need and available resources." (SCCCD website) The two schools that were part of the CTE Outcomes Project are Serrania College and Wallingford College. Serrania College had 51 "leavers" respond to the CTE Outcomes Project survey while Wallingford College had 36 "leaver" respondents. Wallingford College, which opened in 1967, has a minority population over18 percent and enrolls 15,000 students. Wallingford College offers over twenty "Career Pathways" or CTE programs that include Solar Energy, Web Design Media, and Child Development.

In contrast to the SCCCD Wallingford site is La Reina Community College District (LRCCD). LRCCD is a one-college district (La Reina Community College) that serves 24,000 students and offers 33 CTE programs. Ethnically, La Reina College's student enrollment is 16 percent African American, 14 percent Asian, 44 percent Hispanic, and 16 percent White Non-Hispanic. For the CTE Student Outcomes Project La Reina College had 50 "leavers" respond to the survey questions. The three sites selected for follow-up interviews differ in ethnicity and CTE offerings and are representative of California Community Colleges with enrollments of over 10,000 students. The sites have varied CTE programs and provide significant pools of "leavers" who responded to the original survey to capture meaningful follow-up interviewees for the research questions of this study.

Data Collection Methods

The researcher worked with the CTE deans and administrators as well as researchers at these colleges as well as lead researchers at the RP Group to gather contact information of "leavers" who participated in the original pilot study of the RP Group. Document analysis and conversations with the CTE deans provided added knowledge about the campuses and CTE student bodies. These "leavers" who participated in the CTE Outcomes study in the spring of 2012 were invited by both the school and the researcher to be individually interviewed to further discuss their community college experience in CTE programs and incentivized with gift cards for their participation. Many of the interviews were conducted in person, but in cases where this was not possible, telephone interviews were conducted and recorded. Before the interviews were conducted, participants completed a profile sheet (Appendix B), were provided the interview guide (Appendix C) and had the opportunity to read and sign a consent form (Appendix D).

Interviews

Data collection methods took the form of both electronically recorded individual interviews with five participants from each of the two sites as well as field note taking by the researcher. These interviews added depth and nuance to an understanding of why students may voluntarily leave CTE programs prior to completion and used the conceptual frame previously cited to add structure and meaning to student narratives. The interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. The analysis and coding of the data using the variables of the CTE conceptual model of student success took place within 48 hours of the interviews to inform subsequent interviews and will allow for greater depth and analysis from each interview. The two colleges participating in the study provided the email contact information of participants from the CTE Outcomes study. The potential participants received an email invitation to take part in this study directly from the

researcher (Appendix A) briefly describing the research, time commitment, and compensation.

The quantitative project results from the pilot CTE outcomes survey also provided background information on the "leavers" from each cite in a general sense, and helped inform interview questions as pertaining to variables in the CTE conceptual model for success.

Data Analysis Methods

The transcripts from the interviews were coded to identity trends and themes based on the variables of the CTE conceptual model cited and relevant to the research questions of the study and following the process cited in regarding narratives, as well as the foundations steps of reducing the data, displaying the data, and drawing conclusions from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The choice of having former "leavers" from two different community colleges meant the data was gathered from separate sites and conditions but that universal themes were allowed to emerge in response to the original research questions. The variety of subjects and analysis methods allowed for triangulation of the findings. Specifically, the CTE conceptual model allowed for coding of interviews in the areas of student characteristics (examining backgrounds educational and academic goals), college environment (examining campus support and academic integration), local community environment (examining career integration and work and family commitments), and student success (examining the attainment of educational goals).

Role management

I am currently the Director of Cooperative Education at Los Angeles Valley College. This position in the Los Angeles Community College District means I am a CTE faculty member. Since 2007, I have attended and presented at California Community College Association for Occupational Education (CCCAOE) conferences and understand the mission of this organization

in promoting and enhancing CTE programming at California Community Colleges. I presented myself as a colleague to community college site partners as well as a graduate student researcher, which, in initial conversations, appeared to increase the probability of gaining access to the sites and former students. Being a colleague of site partners may have helped access, but throughout the study I needed to be cognizant of my role as a researcher in implementing the proposed study. My current campus is geographically far from the two prospective sites in other districts. As a faculty member I had hoped to build on my working relationships with community college students to gain honest feedback to benefit both the system and future students. My work in community college specially funded workforce projects and with CTE students in Cooperative Education, has demonstrated to me that many students benefit from community college offerings and advance in their workplace without "completing" certificates or degrees. My experience as a CTE faculty member hopefully added insight into the participant experiences shared and also created a space for open and honest dialog to inform the research. Narrative inquiry, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), can be seen as an act of reciprocity between the researcher and participant. The interaction between a CTE community college faculty member and a former CTE student can bring together experiences to be interpreted and to thoughtfully inform the research. I was aware of this bias and understood the potential for this influence in my research throughout the study.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

As a qualitative researcher, I needed to ensure credibility and trustworthiness throughout the study. As a community college faculty member, and CTE Director, and former Workforce Development Special Projects Director, I came to this research with an understanding of the

students who are part of the system seeking to build career skills. Although coming from this position should add credibility to an understanding of the issues and an ability to create rapport with both site colleagues and research participants, as cited above, I had to guard against my own bias during the process. I worked to follow protocols in contacting students and during the interviews and to be mindful that these activities were to collect data and not to infuse my bias into conversations. The questions for the interview protocol were evaluated prior to implementation and vetted with experienced researchers who have studied community college attrition.

Ethical Issues

Former students participating in the study were assured of confidentiality and to have their privacy protected. Pseudonyms were used for the two sites and codes used for participants to ensure confidentiality. This was made clear to both participants and partnering community college partners, and followed the precedent set with the CTE Outcomes Project. Prior to conducting the interviews, the participants will have already participated in the CTE Employment Outcomes Project and hopefully felt secure in sharing narratives in the interests of informing community college CTE practices. Consent forms related directly to this qualitative study were used to ensure understanding of confidentiality and limits of the study. This was explained verbally at the start of the interviews and will also provide in writing. Interview protocols were shared with the community college campus offices of research for approval, prior to the study. There were procedural variances for research approval across at the two participating colleges, and all efforts were made to ensure compliance with campus policies. I did not use my own college in the study. To ensure all data was secure, it was as kept in a locked file cabinet, and I will be the only person with access to the cabinet.

Summary

At the conclusion of data collection and the analysis of the feedback from participants, I had data to be able to share information on motivations and perceptions of community college students who have left CTE programs prior to completion. Student goals in relationship to their participation in community college programs were identified as well as factors contributing to leaving programs. Conferences focusing on Student Success and CTE in California community colleges may provide forums to share findings and continue the dialog of how to best serve student needs. Student voices are vital to an understanding of positive attrition in CTE programs and this qualitative data should be shared to assist community colleges in better serving the needs of students.

CHAPTER FOUR: CTE STUDENTS TELL THEIR STORIES

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the motivations and perceptions of community college career and technical education students related to their reasons for leaving programs prior to CTE certificate or course completion utilizing narrative inquiry. As I began contacting former community college students, conducting interviews and collecting stories, I was grateful for the rich data provided. Within this chapter, each participant's story is presented individually following narrative inquiry principles (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To maintain a consistent structure, the findings which emerged from each story are presented in three areas: (a) personal background, education and employment goals, (b) college and community environment influences, (c) reflections on "student success." These areas emerged from the interview guide (Appendix C) based on the research questions and the framework provided by the conceptual model for student success in community college occupational programs summarized in Table 4.1 below. This chapter consists of former community college CTE students' reflections on their experience and definitions of "student success."

Table 4.1

Conceptual Model for Student Success in Community College Occupational (CTE) Programs Summary

Student characteristics	*College/ Community environment*	*Student success*
Sociodemographic	Academic/ Social Integration	Attain Educational Goals
Academic Preparation	Campus Support	
Commitments and Responsibilities	Career Integration	
Dispositions and Skills	Community Support	
Educational Intentions/Goals		
Employment Intentions/Goals		

Locating and contacting former CTE students who had attended college and left without "completing" proved a challenging task. The gatekeepers at each institution required varied research approval processes and, once approved, supplied distinct methods of accessing these former students. In the case of La Reina College, the recruitment email (Appendix A) was sent to "Leavers" from the school's Institutional Research Office and interested participants contacted me directly by email. From this group I was able to interview five students who represented five different CTE fields, age groups, and outcomes (Table 4.2). For each of the two sites a table is provided prior to the individual stories being shared. In the case of Wallingford College, once approval was granted, I was provided with raw data from the study and consulted with a Dean of Institutional Research to identify "leavers" or CTE non-completers from the original RP Group Study. There were thirty-nine potential interviewees according to the criteria assessed that looked to verify they had actually responded to the RP Group study and that a CTE certificate or degree was not completed. From this group I made phone calls to a sample group that represented different disciplines and then sent emails to those open to participating in the study to arrange interviews. From this outreach effort I was able to interview five former Wallingford students who represented various CTE fields, age groups, and outcomes (Table 4.3).

Table 4.2

Demographics – La Reina Community College

Participant	Age	Gender	CTE field of study	Certificate/AA or transfer	Goal Met
Maria	40	Female	Nursing	No/Yes	Yes
Bill	57	Male	Computer Science	No	Yes
Olivia	51	Female	Architecture/Horticulture	Yes/No	Yes
Ruth	25	Female	Business/ Gen. Studies	Yes	Yes
John	24	Male	Administrative Justice	Yes	Yes

Table 4.3

Demographics - Wallingford Community College

Participant	Age	Gender	CTE field of study	Certificate/AA or transfer	Goal Met
Maggie	27	Female	Graphic Design	No/Yes	Yes
Sean	27	Male	Business	No/Yes	Yes
Nicole	27	Female	Animal Science	Yes	Yes
Claire	56	Female	Nursing	No	No
Alexander	25	Male	Business	Yes	Yes

Introducing Maria: Background, Education, and Employment Goals

Maria, a pseudonym, chose to meet at a coffee shop where she had spent many hours studying to achieve her goal of becoming a nurse. At 40 years old, Maria described herself as a "single-mother, head of household" with two children, one twenty-three year old son and one eighteen year old daughter. Originally from Guatemala, Maria attended four different community colleges in pursuit of her goal. Her time at La Reina proved challenging for her and it was there that she took the CTE Outcomes Survey that had classified her as a "Leaver". Since that time she attended another community college in Southern California and completed her Nursing degree. She currently works in the field of her study and has goals to continue her education. At the beginning of the interview she expanded on her background and what led her to her educational and employment goals as well as challenges that face immigrants accessing higher education in a new country.

> As an immigrant I didn't know much about colleges. I went to school in my country, Guatemala. I was at the University of Guatemala, but when I came here I didn't know I could transfer my units, I didn't know that I could validate them so I started from scratch

and I was working as a housekeeper. And my boss, he's the one who told me to go to X College, and that is why I choose X College, because my boss advised me to do it.

Maria had originally planned to study Accounting and Business, but changed her mind while taking the required coursework. She said that she had a realization in a course she took at the first community college she attended.

> I dropped Accounting, I only took an Economy class and that was it. Because the reason that impacted me was that a teacher said who is more important or who did more for society, Bill Gates or Mother Teresa? I'm never going to forget that moment because that was a moment of clarity in my mind. Ah, she said that actually the person that did more for society was Bill Gates, with his money, than Mother Teresa. And then I thought, I thought I wouldn't be able to choose money over people. So, that is what made me change my mind.

During the interview Maria shared that she faced learning challenges and did not complete her first attempt to enter a community college nursing program but credited community college courses with helping her confirm her intention to pursue this career goal for reasons not related to income.

> To be honest, it is going to sound funny, mainly I am the radical side (and) far away from the statistics, but I don't see the money.

She also elaborated on her main motivations for continuing to pursue her vocational goals despite being a "non-completer" in her first attempt. "Determination and I think I love to take care of people…for me caring is the passion that leads my profession."

In addition to her motivation to pursue a career in nursing, Maria's parents also played a role in her desire to advance both academically and in this particular field. During the interview

she mentioned enjoying seeing how proud her father was of her academic advancement and also what she had learned from her mother who had worked as a nurse in Guatemala.

> I saw the personal satisfaction that I would get from my mom who is a retired nurse, my grandmother, my great great grandmother, and she was a mid-wife in Guatemala. And then my grandma, she practiced everything about herbs, so kind-of like alternative medicine so I grew up taking care of people and when I thought about nursing, I never thought about if I am going to get a job right away. I thought about accomplishing my goal, I am a goal oriented and very structured mind, and I thought, I want to be a nurse because I want to take care of people.

Maria originally came to the United States at the age of 21. She is the youngest of 12 children and the first generation in her family to pursue higher education. She described culture shock and language as initial barriers and how and why she chose work as a housekeeper and a nanny. It was in this area of work that she had an encounter with another housekeeper and nanny which also would help lead to her seeking out opportunities in the community college system in California and the goal of a career in nursing.

> It was a culture shock, I don't think I had acculturated yet, it's tough a lot of American culture, things I didn't understand…when I came I needed to work, I had my kids back in my country, and I needed to support them. And the easiest and the fastest way was as a housekeeper. And then I worked as a nanny. But one day I met this lady walking in the street and she was 55 years old, and we were talking and she said that she had been working for the same family for 25 years, pretty much half of her life, and she still didn't know how to speak English, she took care of the mom, she took care of the kids, now she's, well she was taking care of the grandma, and then I thought, I don't want that for

me. So I need to continue here and go for school that is how I started. And collecting information, asking where I could go, how I could do it. And that is when my boss, he advised me and started telling me how to do it, where to go, and he pushed me to do it.

Maria's employer pointed her to a specific community college in southern California that was known for a high transfer rate to four-year schools. Maria began her community college journey there but would attend four different community colleges before completing her nursing degree. It was actually at the college where she was unable to pass the required courses to enter the nursing program that she took a test and discovered she had a level of dyslexia that had been impacting her studies. She shared how she dealt with this realization and the label that came with it.

> At the beginning, learning that I had a level of dyslexia, I didn't want to accept it, I was in denial. I didn't want to accept it because know that I would have a title would make me feel uncomfortable, it makes me feel…labeled, I would carry that…but then I learned that Einstein was also dyslexic, and Bill Gates also is dyslexic, so it's not like something that will take away being smart and capable. But it's just slowing me down in a way. And then also knowing that I can push my limits and continue, continue in moving on, it makes me stronger.

Maria's interview for this study came two years after she had completed her academic goal of becoming a nurse and three years after taking part in the survey that labeled her as a "non-completer". Maria's interview included her sharing how her journey was also impacted by both college and community environment influences.

Maria's College and Community Environment Influences

As cited above, Maria attended four different community colleges and worked full-time while she took courses. She shared that the experiences varied from institution to institution and that it was a progressive process moving from one school to another. She also shared how her time at the college where she didn't "complete", and was identified for this study, had both a negative and positive impact on her community college CTE journey.

> There were positive experiences and there were negative experiences, some of them I don't want to remember. "X" College was a wonderful experience, I had one of the best advisors over there and I think that she led me wonderfully and I took a lot of classes that were very useful for me right now. In "Y" I took one class, it was one summer… it was Sociology, and the teacher was very nice, it was tough, but it was a class only. And the second (third after X and Y colleges) one was at La Reina, which I think impacted my life negatively, because, sadly, at that time, I think it was about 2009, the teachers for nursing classes, they were very mean, cold, rude, and I even felt stupid in that class, I even doubted myself to continue. And I am not the only one, I even have classmates that ended up going to therapy and taking anti-anxiety medication because that's how bad they make the classes. And that is one of the reasons I didn't continue at La Reina.

Maria disclosed that there was stress and anxiety from the challenges of passing the prerequisites for the nursing program at La Reina. Twice she failed a gateway course with the same instructor and appealed to have another opportunity to take the course a third time. She did not pass on the third attempt and it was then she decided to try a new college. An ex-classmate of Maria's had also had challenges in the program and left to "Z" college and was having success. It was around this time that Maria had been tested and it was discovered that she had a

level of dyslexia, as mentioned above. She had requested this assessment herself because although she felt there may have been challenges with her learning due to English being her second language, she also felt there may have been other issues. She does credit La Reina with helping with understanding her dyslexia but felt that other challenges were too much to overcome at the same institution and moved on.

> So since then, they gave me more time to take a test, and sadly it was time to leave La Reina, it was…the nursing classes, they were too much, it was too much stress and anxiety and I was crying way too much and in the clinical rotations the teachers were putting too much stress. That was in 2009–2010. So then I transferred to "Z" college.

The informal networking done with former classmates of Maria's proved to be helpful in identifying an institution that would help her meet her academic and career goals.

> When I went to "Z" college in June 2010, I applied; I took classes, my first semester I got 4.0 GPA. I transferred the papers I had for the dyslexia. And in the fall of '10, I was taking already my first nursing class. I got an A plus in the class and then, up until I graduated. All I have to say about "Z" college is that was my best experience in college, community college, that I've had…The Director of Nursing, she is a human person, she treats you..She listens to you like a person, she listens and I noticed they don't basically just want to have students; they want to keep their students, and be successful. And I graduated with a 3.4 GPA I believe from "Z" college.

Maria spoke of individuals at the various colleges impacting her experience and also shared how her family life was challenged and changed during her time in community colleges pursuing her goals. Her two children came to Los Angeles when she was in the midst of

working and going to school and the amount of time needed to succeed in her goals also impacted her marriage and social life.

> They came during the period of when I was at school, they came and I graduated when they were here. So, it was hard, community college, I lost my marriage because I spent so much time studying. As I said at the beginning I have dyslexia, and so I need more time to study than usual, regular students, and I needed to spend hours and hours at school, besides I am kind of obsessed with school. I ended up divorcing. So it actually impacted (me) a lot. Then I lost a lot of time with my kids. My kids came in 2007, I was already going to college, and I missed time with them. I missed work time too, because there was time when I needed to study more to do short (work) days. I didn't go to movies, I had no social life. I lost friends, some friends stayed; some friends did not stay, because I didn't have time.

In identifying individuals who influenced her journey, Maria cited a nursing advisor at La Reina who encouraged her to continue to pursue her nursing goal even though she was not having success at the institution he worked at. She shared that she still maintains a friendship with this individual.

> My nursing advisor at La Reina, he encouraged me not to stop, and (said) don't give up. And he said if it doesn't work here, to continue at another community college.

Although this nursing advisor was a positive influence, Maria felt her academic life was negatively impacted at La Reina by very stringent faculty and gateway courses. She shared there were very low pass rates in the program and that this, in addition to her failing a prerequisite course three times, led to her leaving La Reina.

Maria and "Student Success"

Maria did not complete her original goals at La Reina College. She did however complete her goals at another community college. When asked to define "student success" and how she viewed her experience, she identified both degree completion but also the ability work in one's chosen field of study.

> I think I am a successful story, because first of all, not just because I graduated and have a degree and I have that paper hanging on my wall, I don't even have it hanging on my wall it is somewhere filed. I think that I am a success story because I am working, in the field that I chose…I have classmates that by now they still haven't found jobs yet, and they graduated with me….They haven't found jobs yet. So you can say you're a success if you get a degree, but why is it useful to get a degree, say to have in your house or a cabinet or something when you are actually not practicing what you studied and at the same time helping your family and providing for your family?

Maria also cited lessons learned that helped her from the institution where she was a non-completer.

> Even though at La Reina it was negative, my most important lesson was "don't give up." And don't lose faith in myself. Even though it looks bad, it looks dark, don't lose faith in myself that I can do it. And if one door closes, look at another one that will open.

When asked about how her community college experience had affected her view of herself as a learner and how it influenced her future plans, she enthusiastically shared she wants to continue pursuing more education to one-day become a director of nursing.

> And I love classrooms! It was affected indeed, I learned, I learned about listening, I learned techniques, I learned the importance of a nurse, skills, and as I said, that even though La Reina was hard, negative, negative in a way, I learned that I need to push

myself a little more. Not just do the job, but do the job fine and perfect. I'm kind of obsessive compulsive actually but…because we are dealing with people's lives, it's not like sitting at a desk (or) passing food, it's not like managing a company even though it is important but I am dealing with people's lives.

As a potential future director of nursing, Maria said she would use all of her community college experiences, both positive and negative to help other students. She said she would take steps to keep and encourage students and not make them run away from challenges. She also talked of the need for respect from faculty when working with community college students and again cited her experience at the institution where she earned her nursing degree and reflected on life-long learning.

When I was sitting in there (at "Z" college), in the desk, at the classroom, they were my teachers, they treated me with respect, they helped me to be successful, they understood my needs and helped me to accomplish my goal, I think that is one of the success or good stories I can tell you in general about my teachers…one of the teachers there said, "the day that you think you know everything, that is the day you should retire" …because you're not good anymore….I think that community college teachers are not just classroom teachers but also a life teachers because they need to understand that the way they treat their students is going to impact their life, is going to (help them) move on and continue or is going to make them stuck, and make them go to cry and be depressed in their home and not continue school. Because that is what happened to a few of my friends, because of La Reina, they didn't continue with nursing, they thought they were stupid.

Maria concluded the interview by sharing the importance of the human element that is required in both her field of nursing and in working with students at a community college. She felt community college faculty may not all be aware of the impact they have and also shared her feelings on the training going beyond preparing someone for a career. "Making a better person, not just a professional, because in the end, we are people."

Introducing Bill: Background, Education and Employment Goals

Bill chose to be interviewed at a coffee shop not far from the La Reina campus. Bill is 57 years old and described himself as self-employed doing "web development" and said that he anticipated starting a full-time job with a company in this field the month following our interview. Bill had attended La Reina over 25 years ago to complete undergraduate prerequisites and returned for specific courses and skills that would help him make a career switch. Having worked 25 years in the fitness industry, Bill saw his business slow during the economic downturn of 2007 and decided to pursue a new field and enroll at La Reina. He started his second period of study at La Reina by meeting with a counselor.

> When the whole recession thing was hitting my business was slowing down, and I had been thinking about changing careers anyway and I'd always had an interest in computer related things and technology. And I'd actually done a little bit of work, kind of, for friends and stuff and a little bit of side kind of stuff, but I didn't have any formal training. So I went to La Reina and I talked to one of the counselors about what…"what do you think I should do if I want to change careers?"

Bill's goal of gaining skills to be successful in web development and computer related fields led the counselor to recommend that he enroll in an A plus certificate program that Bill described as

"computer hardware repair." Bill spent close to six years at La Reina taking different courses while working and did not complete the original certificate he indicated was his original goal. The journey to a new career and set of skills took time because it had to be done while he was still working with his business and beginning to enter the new field with part-time projects.

> That would have been probably 2006, 2007. I think that is about the time the recession hit…somewhere around there. And things weren't looking so great. So I started taking classes, I was running the business. So I ran the business, took classes, and then I gradually started doing freelance work in web development. At the same time I was still running my business. So I sort of had both together, I was taking classes but I started to work in the field.

Bill's motivation to change careers in his 50s meant he would also have to look beyond La Reina for practical and applicable skill sets needed.

> But, along the way, I felt like not everything that helped me to do that was at La Reina. I had to learn a lot of stuff on my own because La Reina didn't offer all of the things I needed to learn. So there was a lot of self- learning. I had to do a lot of teaching myself on the Internet, like finding other resources to be able to do what I needed to be able to do.

In discussing his academic preparation for higher education, Bill felt prepared academically but switched universities in his first venture into higher education as he struggled to find a career of interest. His second entrance into La Reina, despite taking close to six years and not culminating in a certificate of completion, he felt more directed and able to apply learning to his career.

> The second time I went back I think work prepared me to be more disciplined, to appreciate school more. Because the first time it was sort of like I just went through and

> I need to do this, I need to get my degree but I don't know, I didn't really feel it. The second time I went through I think I appreciated a lot more. I appreciated that "Wow, I'm really getting…this is going to…I can see how this is going to apply to a career, I know what I need to do, I'm more disciplined now, I'm more motivated." The whole experience of being just a better student after I had been in the workforce and been out on my own versus the first time I was just still a kid, I was almost like I was still in high school.

An added positive reinforcement for Bill to continue taking career related coursework was the feedback he received from friends and family. With the exception of one girlfriend who felt he was taking too many years to "get through," Bill felt supported pursuing his career and educational goals. "I think most of my family and friends were supportive …and almost like they said 'Wow, I wish I could do something like that.' Several people told me that."

Bill's College and Community Environment Influences

As Bill shared in quotes above, the economic challenges he faced with his business influenced his decision to gain new skills for a new field. When asked about why he chose La Reina he said "because it was close" but also because of what he had heard about computer related certificate programs there. His initial visit to the counselor on that campus also influenced his decision on coursework although he would change his emphasis during his time at La Reina based on his interests he discovered after exploring other coursework.

> I had heard they had some good certificate programs, computer related certificate programs. And I didn't really know what I wanted to do. The counselor talked me into…his suggestion was to take the hardware classes, which I never really liked that

much but I thought "well this is what I need to do because that is what he told me to do." I got about 95…90% through, I took most of the courses, and then I stumbled onto…I just took and extra class one semester thinking I want to see what this is like. I want to see what the software side is. And I took a class in Javascript web development, and as soon as I took the class I said this is what I need to be doing I shouldn't be doing that other stuff. This is what I want to do, this is what is interesting to me, and the other stuff I wasn't that interested in.

In discussing the relevance of the coursework, the resources in the field he wanted to pursue, and ability of an institution and program to stay current in a field, Bill felt there was room for improvement at La Reina.

I think I had maybe a little bit of a mixed bag in terms of my experience there. Some of it was really good I felt like, I was getting exactly what I needed. Other times I felt that… there were I couple of times I had a couple of teachers that I felt they were either not very motivated in terms of helping the students succeed or they weren't up with the latest (technology)…like the course was maybe a couple of years behind what was going on right now with…and really not up to speed in terms of what I needed to be knowing. I'd say my other maybe negative thing was, I don't really want to say it's the school's fault…but technology is changing so fast, I think the school has trouble keeping up with what, what students need to learn, especially in the field that I'm in.

Despite the mixed reviews of courses and teachers he experienced at La Reina, Bill did feel there were benefits from each course he took and when asked about coursework applicable to his career transition he saw a "100%" correlation to needs in the field.

Actually I am going to say 100%, I think every class I have taken over there has had some kind of career (connection)

The needs in his field and for ongoing learning to stay current were also cited as a reason why he did not ultimately complete a certificate in this field. Although he was aware of what was needed to complete, work conflicts and the actual relevance of the certificate meant he did not see himself completing the one course he is missing. He described what led to him not completing and his view of the need for the certificate as follows:

I have been debating (completing the certificate). The Computer Science certificate, I have actually taken all the classes…but I have one and I didn't realize I did this until afterward…I had a really heavy load a couple of semesters ago, between work, and I was taking a heavy load and I couldn't do it all. And I thought I dropped, I was like halfway, probably two thirds of the way through one of the classes, I thought I dropped it and I didn't. Because I didn't realize I didn't do that, I got an F in the class… but I know probably 70% of the information in the class but I didn't actually complete the class because…well I actually got an F in the class because I didn't drop the class. So I have been debating, that's the last class I need for this Computer Science Certificate, I have been debating should I go back and take that class, even though I know most of the stuff just so I can get the units and get the certificate? But, I don't really need that, I don't need it for any kind of (work), there's nobody asking me "let me see your certificate" when I am going out interview clients or looking for jobs nobody is asking me "let me see your certificate" they're asking me "what can you do, what have you done, show us what you can do and show us what you have done". So, if I leave, it's basically because my time is

better spent now working in the field more, and learning things that La Reina is not going to teach me anyway. There are things I still need to learn.

Bill and "Student Success"

Bill left La Reina without a certificate or a degree. When asked to assess if his goals were met, despite the long years of coursework, he was quick to reply that not only were goals met but they also led to employment in a new field.

> On the one hand I would say they were…in one respect it was 100% met. Because I was able to freelance while I was going to school. And also it ended up landing me a job in the field that I knew nothing about before I started.

Bill would classify himself as a "success" because he has been able to work in the field he pursued for his "career switch." He also expanded on what he defined as student success during the interview.

> I would say I would categorize it as either the ability to work in the field that's related to CTE or to transfer to a school where you're going to go and get a higher degree in the same (field).

Although Bill did not persist to complete the certificate in his field of study, he did cite persistence as a skill learned in his coursework that has positively impacted his new career.

> There were several times when I was in a class, and I had a project to do, and I was convinced "I'm never going to be able to do that, I cannot figure this out, I can't figure this out" and eventually I figured it out and I finished. And, so I think that was one thing, just, it showed me how much persistence plays a role in whatever you're doing. And I

> already knew that just from having life experience but I think this really reinforced that persistence. I think also what it brought out in me was the fact that, I'm not like that in all things but in this case it reinforced that I'm in the right field because when I have a problem, an issue, I don't give up in this field. There are other things where it's like "it's not that important" but when it comes to what I have been working on, in the computer science, web development field, if I have a problem, I never give up until I've figured it out. And I think that was a lesson that it taught me. Not so much that I am like that all the time, but in this particular field or environment I am. And that transfers over. I've been able to talk when somebody is interviewing me for a job or I'm talking to a client that is something that I emphasize. I think for a lot of people that is important. If you're working with somebody, you want somebody that if you have a problem, they're not going to give up on the problem until it's solved.

Success was defined as gaining skill sets in his new chosen field and also learning about transferable skills and qualities like persistence that would help his employment outlook. Bill felt the resources provided through his coursework were valuable and cost effective for his career switch despite the fact that the he did not finish with a CTE certificate.

> I'd say overall just, it's been a good experience, and to me obviously it's been a very valuable resource to have. To be able to do that, to be in the middle of my life to go "okay I'm going to need to switch careers what am I going to do" and what am I going to do at a place that isn't that expensive, it's a heck of a deal in terms of cost.

Introducing Olivia: Background, Education and Employment Goals

In her 40s, after years working as a school teacher Olivia chose to return to college to gain skills that would allow her to transition to a new career. She chose La Reina because of its proximity, price, and its reputation. At the time of the interview she had moved to another part of the state and shared she was still taking course work at a local community college to enhance her skills and continue pursuing her goal of owning and operating a business in landscaping. Olivia described herself as a single mother raising an 11 year-old daughter and working part-time as a substitute teacher and also in the field of landscape irrigation. She shared that she has chosen to be a teacher as a practical profession while raising children but had always wanted to work in the field of landscaping and that the community college afforded her the opportunity to pursue this career change. Olivia's career transition employment goals included new skill sets but also tangible preparation for examinations in the new field.

> I definitely wanted a skill set and wanted to improve what I already had talent towards. And I wanted to get a certificate and I also wanted…it also helped me prepare for my contractor's license. Right after finishing school, I took the contractor's license and passed it very easily and I know it was directly related to classes that I took at La Reina. Because I took contract law, I took a lot of the horticulture classes and then of course the architecture and drafting helped out and I'd already had four years of experience, in concrete, physically lying concrete. I was doing that while I was going to school.

La Reina did not offer the specific degree or certificate that Olivia would have chosen for her career transition. It did however offer coursework that she was able to put together to help her on her new career path.

> They didn't have Landscape Architecture, what I wanted to study, so I did the certificate for Architecture and I took the Horticulture, and plus I added other classes, various classes, photography, art. Various classes, contracting and what not, I just made a hodgepodge of everything that would be useful for my own business.

Olivia credited her academic experience and "maturity" as a returning student with helping her focuses on courses and content that would help her in her new career venture and also her background in teaching with understanding how to excel with coursework and exams. She shared that there were a variety of ages represented in the Architecture program. There were practicing architects that would return to take certain classes to update their skill sets and also younger students interested in entering the field. Olivia said that her experience as a classroom teacher helped her work with and counsels the younger students on study strategies and effective collaboration.

Olivia did complete an Architecture certificate at La Reina but did not complete a Horticulture certificate while she was there. As shared above, she is still taking coursework at a different community college that she feels will help with her goal of being a business owner in the field of Landscaping. She provided details on her ongoing learning.

> Actually this last semester I took a construction management class and I am also currently taking Quickbooks, and more photography, this semester I will be taking photography and more computer photography, illustrator, and photoshop, that kind of stuff. I have already taken some but I am going to keep moving forward. Because right now my goal is not only work but be planning for my own business.

In addition to the local community college, Olivia has accessed state workforce development resources to add to her ongoing education.

> And I am doing some of the course work at a One-stop, it's called a One-stop to help unemployed people gain skills and also find other resources. And so it's paid for by taxes and I can take all these Accounting classes for free, I am just grabbing everything I can while I am unemployed. Well, not unemployed, but underemployed.

Olivia's College and Community Environment Influences

Olivia cited a life-long desire to work in the field of Landscaping but also was aware of economic and employment challenges for an individual transitioning careers, particularly during the time of her enrollment at La Reina.

> As far as there being jobs, it was right at the point where the economy was just collapsing, where we went into a depression, if…unless you don't want to call it that. It was right at that time, so there could only be hope that the economy would pick up, and it's hard to know what would be available for anybody at all at that point, 2008, and 2009. That was a horrible time.

Although the college did not have a certificate in her specific area of interest (Landscape Architecture/Design), she was able to gain transferable skills through the Architecture coursework in which she enrolled and also took advantage of multiple resources and scholarships to help with the process. She identified a campus group called Women in Technology (WIT) as strong source of support.

> There was also on campus a women's support group, something for women in non-traditional careers and so I got extra support from them. Including financial, and they bought me supplies…bought me expensive boots and work tools because one of the

> classes we had to actually build a design…they also had special dinners and ceremonies for single mothers or single parents (as they) tend to drop out because of pressures.

Olivia felt the faculties in the Architecture department were very concerned with student success. She shared that both in and out of state field trips were arranged to visit and experience Architecture in the field, and that the faculty were "very competent…practicing Architects" and that the courses benefited from other working Architects in the classes there to refresh skill sets. In particular she felt the Design Build class provided practical and hands on skills she could apply to her work.

> We worked in groups and that was really a great experience and it influenced the way I draw and design and that's the purpose of the course. That's also a course that is expensive to teach. But when you learn how to draw a plan and then you go out and actually build them then you realize the importance of drawing them in a certain kind of way and fashion so that it is easier to communicate to the person in the field what needs to be done.

When asked about course relevance Olivia was quick to respond that she found all the coursework applicable to not only what she is doing part-time now but for what she plans to be doing as a business owner.

> Absolutely, yes, yes, I use everything. Well now I am doing irrigation so I am doing some of it, but I will definitely be back into it very soon, as soon as I get my next job. And I am going to be running my own business, and that was also part of the reason I need experience now working for people to get a good sense of running the business, ultimately it is not to be working for somebody it is to be running my own business.

Olivia and "Student Success"

As previously shared, Olivia continues to take classes at a local community college as a way to upgrade her career skill sets and during the interview shared that her feeling was that community colleges were "really, really great" as a resource that accommodated those seeking new skill sets at an affordable price and as a place that brought working professionals into the classroom to share relevant career knowledge. Although La Reina did not offer Landscape Architecture, Olivia defined her time at La Reina was a "success" as it prepared her to pass a contractors licensing test and gain valuable new skills. Olivia took advantage of many resources and faculty suggested learning opportunities, which she identified as part of her definition of student success.

> For me success is taking advantage of all the opportunities and when teachers make suggested readings, even if you don't get any extra-credit or grading for, or suggest outside activities or they suggest field trips that you go on your own, it is successful in my opinion to go off and do it all. And to be reading on your own and to gather what you can and to not wait for just a teacher to be teaching you, to take charge, whether or not the teacher is competent or not for getting you to what you need.

Introducing Ruth: Background, Education and Employment Goals

Ruth met in person for the interview at a coffee shop not far from La Reina. She had grown up in an upper-middle class suburb not far from the campus where she described the K-12 school system as "high stress" and "high performing." In the interview she credited her middle and high school education with helping her avoid remedial classes during her time at La Reina, but community college was not originally her intended destination when she graduated high

school. Ruth had applied to 10 four-year colleges and ultimately decided to attend the small, liberal arts college in Southern California that was alma mater of both of her parents. Despite having her brother and friends also attending this university, Ruth decided within two weeks of starting classes that "this place isn't for me" sharing that she was unsure what she wanted to pursue and did not want to waste her parents money on tuition. Fall of her freshman year, she left the university and was able to enroll at La Reina the same semester. The community college offered a route to explore potential fields of study but also gain career skills.

> So I used La Reina as a safe way to discover my interests. I mainly went there for business I guess, like an admin position. I didn't actually get the business degree but I would've gotten the business admin one, if that makes sense…I wanted to discover what kind of career I want in my life, or, for the rest of my life, right? And then also just to be prepared for a career.

Ruth currently works in an administrative capacity in corporate communications for a federally funded research development center. In terms of transferable skills gained in college, Ruth credited La Reina for helping prepare her for the workforce in a tangible way.

> I took this Microsoft Word class and so that was the most helpful for me. The skills I learned in that Microsoft class or the Microsoft Word class I've been using for years and if I didn't know that stuff I wouldn't be prepared for the job I have now. I think that was the most helpful class I took was Microsoft Word 2007. And I never got certified. They do have the certification test there but I didn't, I never got certified in Microsoft Word, but, I did get like my AA or whatever… and other business classes, I took Written Business Communication and Oral Business Communication and both of those classes have been great on my resume. The Communication class, I also took Business

> Communication, all those classes I think prepared me for the job I have, more my classes at La Reina and not classes at (the four-year state university).

Ruth shared that she did earn enough "general studies" units after approximately three years at the community college to transfer to a state university where she completed her Bachelor's Degree in Language and Linguistics. In the interview she explained why she did not complete the Business degree and or certificate she originally had hoped to complete at the community college. Her commitment to supporting a friend out of state meant she missed a semester that would have allowed her to complete her business studies at La Reina. Ruth opted to receive a "General Education" transfer degree after realizing she would have to spend more semesters to complete the required business courses.

Ruth shared that she viewed La Reina as a place to gain workplace skills and that she has considered returning for certain coursework to gain new skills. She has considered taking Japanese courses that may help in future work settings or Library Sciences, which is a field that was once identified on a personality survey she took aligned with her skill sets. When thinking about upgrading her skills she felt the face-to-face setting of an in person class at La Reina would be best suited for her.

> I mean, whenever you think about a skill I don't have, I don't think about going online, I think about going to La Reina College and taking a class there.

Ruth's College and Community Environment Influences

Ruth cited the resources the community college provided and made accessible in terms certain careers exploration and fields as helpful but also shared that one needed to be "self-driven" to know how to navigate the college and understand units to complete and transfer. As shared above, she felt that coming from a high performing middle school and high school was helpful and also the fact that she did not work while she was attending the community college because she was receiving financial support from her parents. She said she was at times frustrated with the system in terms of accessing transcripts and getting information from counselors but appreciated the real-world workplace lessons she learned from faculty.

> I guess teachers, I think, were helpful…all my business teachers were in the field of business, they had (real world) experience. They knew what would fly and what wouldn't. The teachers are fine. What I don't find helpful are the counselors and the people behind the windows, for (example) the transcript office. So the teachers, I think they're a treasure. One of my professors, he was my teacher for all business communication, and he kept up with me, like "oh, are you going to go to Toastmasters?" So I thought that was really sweet that he even went further (to ask) where are you now?

There were other community colleges geographically near Ruth's home when she was choosing where to continue higher education after leaving the original four-year school she was enrolled in. She chose La Reina because she "just heard it was better" and "liked the campus" in addition to having friends who were attending. She did say that there was a stigma attached to attending a community college for those from her high school, as many went directly to four-year schools and were conscious of colleges and their rankings, but said it was an environment that helped changed the way she saw herself as a learner.

> I guess it made me think of myself as more focused, because notes from high school work were never exemplary. At La Reina I've had so many things turn into the teachers examples. They saved my reports and have used them for other classes. So I guess that helps make me feel like, I don't know, that I wasn't, you know, wasn't as dumb as people think you are when you go to La Reina.

Ruth and "Student Success"

Ruth did not complete a CTE certificate or an A.A. degree with an emphasis in Business, but she cites the transferable skills gained in her community college studies as directly related to her current work. As shared above she had been close to completion but chose to support a friend out of state, which impeded her from completing the necessary course for degree completion.

> I mean, even though I didn't finish like the Business Associate, I'm now a business admin basically and I would not be able to have this job without my La Reina experience, (the state university) experience didn't do anything for my job right now.

Without the community college business associates or business certificate, Ruth was quick to define her community college experience as a "success," in part because she eventually completed all needed general studies courses to transfer and also because of the career and work applicability she gained in the coursework she took at La Reina. The Bachelor's degree she completed was in English with a focus on Language and Linguistics. When reflecting on community college success and skills gained in higher education, she again cited the community college experience as more career applicable.

> All my upper-division courses are in English. I enjoyed the classes but they don't apply into the job I have and the jobs I'm more looking into the area in Admin (not) English. I

> mean I have a degree, but none of the skills I learned at (state university) helped me like La Reina's did. At La Reina I learned the skills that I use every day for work, so I think I'd be successful. So I guess finishing isn't always…I mean finishing might not be the entire answer but I think it is finishing and applying skills that you learned.

Ruth does realize her degree will be helpful in her career and that credentials are needed for advancement, but again emphasized being able to put education and training into practice as a key component of student success. "So, to me success is finishing but then also being able to then do a job once you have the credentials for it."

Introducing John: Background, Education and Employment Goals

John and I met at the La Reina campus for the interview. He had spent three years at La Reina before eventually transferring to a state university. John shared that he was the youngest of six children, and, at 24 years old, was living at home with his parents but that he may be moving out soon. He had recently been hired as a police officer in a coastal city in California. He credits his journey to a career in law enforcement with a conversation he had with his father 10 years earlier, when he was 14 years old.

> When I was 14 my dad was like "hey you need to start thinking about what you want to do." Which I thought was weird. But he was right. There should be more focus on what kids want to do in that earlier age; I think I had no idea. I always got good grades but I disliked sitting in the classroom all day and learning or learning in things I wasn't interested in…and that's about when the internet was coming to, so if you wanted to learn about something you could. So that being said, he said "Hey, you know police and firemen have a job that's up and about pretty much and you know you make good money

and good pay" and I was always a good kid. So I just gravitated towards police right when he said it.

While still in high school, John was able to explore his field of interest by taking an elective course that was an introduction to Law Enforcement and also volunteering as a police explorer. While in college he would become a paid police cadet for a local department and cited that as an experience to get his "foot in the door" in the field. Even though he had a fairly defined career pathway, John shared that he was not encouraged by high school counselors to pursue coursework in this field at a community college. John shared he chose the community college experience because of the price and also because it afforded him the opportunity to stay at home, in the community he enjoyed living in.

> I would say primarily in high school most of my counselors were urging me to apply to a four-year school but I wasn't sure what I wanted to major in because I wanted to be a police officer and they were like "you can major in whatever you want as long as you have a degree." That's all they care about. And I wanted to live at home and my parents were going to pay for school...and I really like, I love it here…So I really disliked the idea of half my friends (who) were like "oh yeah I can't wait to get out of here and go to a college" and I was like "you're stupid. It's way too nice here." So I specifically wanted to stay close by and save my parents as much money as I could. I mean my dad could have definitely afforded it. I was like "okay" and the counselors were like "go ahead apply to a four-year school" and I was "nah I don't think so. I think I'd rather just go close by and just transfer, its going to save money." (La Reina) was close by I felt like it was kind of convenient because it's La Reina (and) was pretty prestigious for their transfer rate and just in general being a really good community college so I was like "oh

sweet!" I have a real good community college right near me, so and a lot of (people) I knew in older grades did that. A lot of my old classmates who got good grades with me were like "yup, sure I'll come and I'll transfer."

John also cited a community college as a place to explore potential career options. Despite being focused on law enforcement, early in his community college experience he also explored Fire Safety courses and had, because of recommendations from family and peers, looked into pursuing a career as a fireman.

> Lots of kids aren't sure what they want to do and it kind of sucks to go trial and error. I think I want to do this and then you start taking classes and you get a little bit into it. And you're like, "ugh." I'll give you an example. One summer after I graduated high school, I kind of got a lot of, not a lot of crap but, uh, just "oh you want to be a cop?" "You're so nice." And I was like, "I don't care. I want to catch bad guys." And then they were like, "Oh, you should be a fireman, you know, it's the same thing, you have to have a really clean record." And I was like, "Okay, now let me see." So I took a couple of fire classes over the summer. And I was just like "no I want to be a cop." I don't give a damn what they're going to say. At that point I was concerned about (what) people (were) thinking, negatively about it and I was like, you know, "screw that." So I took a couple of fire courses and I was just like "I know I want to be a cop, screw this". But …I had to register for class, take it, and it was kind of a big commitment.

John said he took two classes in Fire Safety as part of a CTE certificate he chose not to pursue and complete and returned to his goal of studying Administrative Justice courses and preparing to transfer to a state college for a four-year degree.

John's College and Community Environment Influences

John repeatedly cited the benefits of having faculty who worked in the field he wanted to pursue at La Reina, naming some and explaining that the field of Law Enforcement required real world experience and not just theory. For John, the faculty at La Reina had more of the real world experience he was looking for in his education to prepare him for the police academy then what he found at the four-year state university where he would complete his Bachelor's of Science Degree in Criminal Justice. He described the working credentials of some of his community college faculty with the academic credentials of his university faculty.

> (A La Reina) a commander from, he might have been a captain at that time, but there's a commander from L.A. Sheriff's, one was a captain, one was a retired chief, one was a retired LAPD detective, one was a judge, so that was definitely (applicable). When I got to (the state university), half the teachers were experienced like a retired sheriff, retired PD, and then half the teachers were just academics. So like my final class where I did my research proposal, it felt weird, like I get that academics is a huge part of education, obviously, but it was like a thirty-year old woman and I'm sitting there and luckily it was in the field of criminal justice so I got to do all the stuff on use of force, which was obviously, at least (for me), related, but it was weird, I had more experience, like I was a cadet at (a police department) and Explorer, I had more (practical) experience in use of force than she did.

During his time at La Reina, John also took a Report Writing course he knew would not transfer because he wanted certain skill sets he learned were needed in the field from being a cadet and an explorer and was able to make connections between his community college coursework and field experience.

> Being an explorer and a cadet I definitely learned things that I'd hear in the classroom the next day or I'd hear something in the classroom and it would go back and help me at work or it'll be informative at work.

John had selected La Reina in part because of its reputation for helping students transfer and felt that if students were "savvy" they could navigate the system and have access to resources. At first he utilized counseling services to help him learn requirements and then navigated the system on his own.

> If you were just coming and signing up for classes you thought you needed and stuff you're obviously not going to be savvy, so I went straight to the counselor's office. I looked at the sheet that she picked my first four classes off of and I was like "OK I can do the rest of this myself" once I read it and saw all the requirements, so from that point forward I was like "okay I'm going to take this and this."

Beyond the counselors, he also shared that the college had career days that were helpful and that the Administrative Justice Department would advertise "all over the place" in the Administrative Justice building law enforcement positions. Despite the community college experience being "very conducive to his goals of pursuing a career in law enforcement, he decided not to get a degree or certificate in the field while at La Reina, opting for general studies transfer instead.

> There are things I considered, so, I was like, "Hey I'll get my AA and general studies and then transfer." Or they were like, "Or you can just transfer." Or you can get your AA in Administration of Justice and transfer. So, I looked into it. The AJ certificate, the Associates Degree for AJ, from what I understood, was pretty extensive. You had to cover pretty much every AJ course, so, I was like "okay, I don't want to do that because that's going to take me another (year)." So, that being said, at about the two-year mark

> when I'm finishing, I'm planning out for when I'm going to get out of here I was like, "Okay, what about an AA?" Because I had done a bunch of classes and I may qualify for an AA and I went in to figure out more information about it because I was already planning on transferring but if I can get the AA and then transfer also, it would have to be a BA, a BS I guess, it really didn't matter I would get an AS in Administration My goal was transfer so I was like okay, well, this seems like if you didn't want to go all the way through a bachelor's degree but you wanted a good education in the field, boom, good to go, AS in Administration of Justice and that may cover a lot. So not that I thought any less of the AS, it's just that I want a bachelor's. That's where you get the money in the police department, not that finances were my only motivation; I also just wanted to be able to say "I went to college. I got my degree. I did what I was supposed to do."

After reviewing units with a counselor, it turned out John could have applied for an Associates in General Studies but felt the only reason for submitting the paperwork to receive the degree was that it may look "good on a resume" and since the Bachelors is what had currency in the field he was pursing, that was his focus.

John and "Student Success"

John defined his experience at La Reina as "successful" and shared that his goals had been met. He also said he would potentially return to community college courses to upgrade his skills and that he had met law enforcement professionals in his classes who were already working in the field but chose to take select courses. When asked to reflect on "success" he shared that it depended on individual goals and was unique to each student. He also said that goals may change as a result of the college experience.

> They (students) are not all the same. So it all depends on their goals. And when you're in classes with people, you obviously ask, "Hey, what do you want to do?" and a lot of people were, "I want to be a cop. Me too, cool." Some people were like I just want to take some courses. There was one girl in my class who was already a police officer and she was taking like a class with me, I never knew what her goals were in taking the class, but I was like, "Oh that's cool," she's already in her career and just coming back just for maybe a class or two. I didn't ask any further. I would define my journey as successful, and I would say I would personally define student success as if they meet the goals that they set when they initiated their experience in the CTE programs. I mean if they met the goals, I totally understand if their goals changed once they started, "Oh, this isn't for me, I'm going to go do something else" but that's kind of the point of going to college, you learn what you want to do and what you don't.

John concluded by saying that "most people are going to college to get a job…where you get experience" and that particularly in his field he valued the "actual work experience" of the faculty he was able to learn from at La Reina on his journey to become a police officer.

Introducing Maggie: Background, Education and Employment Goals

Maggie was the first person in her family to go to college. She chose to attend Wallingford out of high school because of proximity and because she liked the "variety" of classes offered. When first attending Wallingford she was a full-time and at times a part-time student at other times, working, while living at home with her mother. A motivation for Maggie to continue in higher education was that she didn't like the job she had and she wanted to advance. Wallingford helped her move forward in her college career but she needed to "retake a

lot of classes…math classes primarily" because she didn't feel well prepared from her middle and high school experience and looked back at high school math as a "joke."

When we met for the interview Maggie was working as a "seasonal" employee at a truck rental company and living with her boyfriend and his family. She also shared that she "actually decided to go back to school just to take classes" (at Wallingford). Her first experience at Wallingford ended in 2010, when she had earned enough units to transfer to a private university, but did not complete the Graphic Design certificate or degree she had indicated was a goal. Her four-year degree was in Multimedia but after completing that course of study she chose to return to Wallingford "out of career interests to maybe personal interests" to pursue science courses.

> I think I maybe want to deviate from what I have been doing and go back to school for another, whatever 10 years it is going to take me to finish. I think I want to pursue primarily neurology or neurobiology or something along that line, but I'm going to kind of test it out this semester and see if it's something I can do.

Science-related courses of study had been an interest when she originally began at Wallingford but she chose the field of Graphic Design as it was an area she had an interest in and because she did not feel encouraged to pursue science related coursework.

> I chose graphic design because I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do and I knew that art was already something I was familiar with and I figured I'd ease myself in to taking classes and figuring out what I wanted to do just by starting with that. I don't think I necessarily found the support that I wanted in terms of science related stuff there, or that it just didn't fit to my schedule. And so I just didn't, it was a little too difficult for me to focus on the science aspect—which I'm actually doing now. Which is kind of strange? That's what I'm going back to take the classes in.

Maggie shared that the she felt a level of comfort returning to Wallingford and that it was her campus of choice for reengaging with her career interests in science saying "I really like them, so far, I haven't had a bad experience with (Wallingford)." Her second time through as a student at Wallingford will now be focused on a subject she has always wanted to pursue.

> I think I've always wanted to do it. I always wanted to take those science courses. It's just like, something in the back of my mind that just won't go away. So, at least I'm just doing that now. And I'd rather just try it and fail than not, there's always (the) wondering, than spend too much time not doing it.

Maggie's College and Community Environment Influences

As shared above, Maggie enrolled at a community college to advance out of a job she didn't like and develop her skills. She became a Graphic Design student out of familiarity and interest with the subject and influence from friends and family. Her CTE track choice was in a sense by "default" and not motivated by job opportunities as she recalled being told at the time there were "no jobs" for potential careers she "threw out" to explore with family and friends.

> Friends and family discouraged—it was more like discouragement from the things I wanted to do and then it kind of pushed me into the things I kind of really didn't think was a good idea. I don't think Graphic Arts was (a good idea) and that's probably why I'm doing science again now because I didn't do it before. Because they just kind of told me not to do it. They said, "Don't do that because you're not going to be good at doing that," or something like (that). I got a few responses like that from people who matter and their opinion is supposed to help me. So you assume it's helpful, even though it really wasn't.

Despite Graphic Design being a "default" focus of study, she did remember gaining transferable skills from course projects. She recalled one specific project where presentations were made in a professional manner and he professor acted as a client, providing constructive feedback and providing her an opportunity for "a lot of growth." She felt the career and work emphasis of the Graphic Design courses she took at Wallingford would allow her to continue building on those skills when she transferred to a four year university, but found the focus to be different and less applicable.

> It was definitely helpful in pushing me to pursue that (Graphic Design) as a job or whatever into (the four year university) but, unfortunately the methods that I experienced at (Wallingford) weren't the same in (the private university), and so it was very (much) like a downgrade out of community college.
>
> I feel like because the professors at (Wallingford) were geared towards teaching actual people who want to work and I feel like (the private university) it was, the teachers were not, they didn't really care. They knew that the students, half the students there really weren't interested because the students were straight out of high school. They literally treated us all like children. And so it was very (much) like a waste of time to say the least.

She shared specific examples of skills learned at Wallingford. In addition to foundational computer skills, PhotoShop and Adobe, she felt typography was a useful tool to have background in and that she now can identify typographical errors in terms of design. Other skills gained had to do with working with clients, accepting criticism, and being a better listener in the workplace.

> Obviously you have to be able to accept the criticism and I kind of like that because I think in a professional environment you need to be able to accept that your client's not

going to like what you have. So that's something I'm prepared for in terms of interacting with people, understanding--reading what the client wants and understanding what they have to say and then changing a design. So I think that was pretty important. And it's been something I've used ever since. I spend more time listening to other people and what they need from me as an employee (and) as a worker, so learning and listening and then reworking what I'd done.

Maggie worked while at Wallingford. She credited her work experience with positively influencing her in terms of gaining time management skills. She also viewed the workplace as helping her gain transferable soft skills that she had not yet acquired.

It actually helped because (when) I started out the job I was working at was an office job even though they had a shipping department. It was pretty much office work, you're answering phones, you're helping customers, but they just, they taught a lot of skills that I didn't learn anywhere else. Like, not, I wouldn't say punctuality, but just, I don't know how to explain it, just mannerisms. That really, really prepared me. It actually helped me stay on a schedule that made me maybe feel comfortable taking classes at college. It's a schedule that's kind of all over the place. It's not a regular schedule—it just helps me balance going to school. Which I couldn't do before working as weird as that sounds.

When Maggie discussed influences from family and friends, she again cited how she was influenced in taking on a CTE focus of study, that although she was interested in, it was not the focus she wanted to pursue.

I think primarily the reason I focused on graphic design as well was probably because of these people, a lot of people kind of discouraged me from taking science and math. And so I, was like, "Well, I guess I'll just take graphic arts because I DO graphic arts."

In terms of the influence of the campus on her studies at Wallingford, Maggie shared that she felt safe, appreciated the cleanliness of the buildings and the accessibility of parking. She did meet with counselors "once or twice," but when discussing mapping out courses of study and next steps said she mainly did that by herself. Maggie's choice of studying Graphic Design was not influenced by the potential jobs available at the time. When Maggie was exploring career and job options between 2007 and 2010 she was told "there's not jobs…for that" and said that was "pretty much the answer" she received for all inquiries.

Maggie had taken multiple Graphic Design courses and had declared that as her focus of study, but decided not to complete the certificate in the field and instead to transfer. Reflecting on why she opted out of completing the certificate, she felt the need (after three years at Wallingford) to "hurry up" and "get out of college" and that she "didn't care" about the CTE certificate. Staying at Wallingford to complete the certificate would have taken too long when she realized what her options were.

> I hadn't even heard about this whole certificate thing until later before it was too late, where I'm like, "I have to spend another two years taking classes part-time?" when I just wanted to just take…I wanted to quit my job and go to school full-time and get it done so I could get a better job.

Maggie also indicated she was influenced by adult classmates who were in her classes at Wallingford. She said that many were there to upgrade workplace skills and that the interaction she witnessed between those students and the faculty helped change the way she viewed herself.

> Most of them wanted to improve on their skills and their technical skills because they just had to have that training. That kind of helped because they would talk to the professor like an adult and so the professor would talk to all of us like an adult and it really helped.

> I wasn't used to people being like that. If you're surrounded by a lot of children, you're going to end up absorbing their attitudes towards everything. At least in high school that's how it feels.

Maggie and "Student Success"

Maggie did not complete a Career and Technical Education certificate. She did leave a community college and complete a four-year degree. She also returned to the same community college to pursue a potential science-related career. When asked to define "student success" she noted that her CTE experience led her to something else but had mixed feelings about how she would quantify her experience and the path she took.

> I would say I'm partially successful because I finished, sort of. I didn't finish the actual CTE community thing, but it led me to something else. I didn't just stop. But I think it would be unsuccessful because I didn't actually follow a designated program that led to some kind of certificate and I think that maybe I could have been more proactive with teachers or counselors in getting that advice. I just think it would've been more helpful if I was, (if) I had a direction in terms of that when I went in, but I just didn't. I just wasn't aware of these things so I didn't use those resources.

For Maggie, not knowing about certain resources that may have been helpful negatively influenced her college experience yet she has returned to continue a field of study she always wanted to pursue. She concluded by defining herself as a "partial success, in a weird way."

Introducing Sean: Background, Education and Employment Goals

At the time of the interview, Sean was working as a Sales Assistant and living in a southwest state outside of California for a little over a year. Married with two children, Sean chose to attend Wallingford to study business and accounting for proximity, family, and financial reasons, although he would have preferred to "have gone directly to the four-year university" he eventually transferred to. Sean shared in the interview that going to a community college allowed him to explore fields of study to see "if it was something" he liked and that by choosing this more economical higher education option that he "just played it on the safe side." He was a full-time student while at Wallignford and felt in part it was an "extension of high school" for him. For his intended purposes, the community college met his goals. Sean credited family values with helping him move through Wallingford, but did not necessarily feel fellow students looked at the experience the way he did.

> (Wallingford) was just an extension of high school. High school obviously prepared me for it. I was brought up in a family that valued hard work, so I ended up having the highest or around the grades in every class I took, because a lot of people did not put in the effort. And also people took stuff more seriously in high school than (they) did at (Wallingford), it's all personal drive and in any aspect of this, like you put in what you want to get out. So it was something I was interested in, I wanted to know if it was something (of interest) so I put a lot of effort into it. I think I got more out of it than a lot of other people did.

Sean's College and Community Environment Influences

Sean worked while attending community college. In the same year he began Wallingford he was working at a company that allowed him flexibility with course work and encouraged him to advance his applicable skill sets gained at the community college in the workplace. Sean was able to continue to contribute to this company when he returned from the out of state university during the summer.

> What happened was in 2008 I got a job at a company just doing some marketing layouts and (that) kind of job. Then I started taking some accounting courses, business courses at (Wallingford), and then my employer saw that I was interested in accounting, so she introduced me to some books, gave me software, QuickBooks, and I read about understanding of basic debits, credits and accounts and so on. She saw that I was able to understand those basic concepts and so, from the knowledge I gained from those courses (at Wallingford), it did allow me to extend my ability as well in that current employment. What happened was, after two years when I transferred to (the private university), I would come back every summer and work for that company again to help them out with their books.

Sean did not spend "extra time" at the campus while he was attending community college, and when asked about the campus resources again stated it felt like an "extension of high-school." He did feel that, for those who sought out support, there were resources to help move students forward and that he did visit counselors several times to stay on track.

> I think they were there if you wanted to utilize them. I went and talked to my counselors a lot because I wanted to make sure I was talking the right courses and do the transfer. That was my intention in the beginning, so I had several visits there and they were

helpful. They were very useful. I never went to the career (center), so I don't know how good that was, but for counselors for units and in classes they were helpful.

Sean earned his transfer units and then enrolled in an out-of-state private university where he was part of joint Bachelor's and Master's degree in Accounting. For family and personal reasons he left the program prior to completion, missing "a couple of courses" and meaning he had no degree when he left. As cited above he did feel there were transferable skills gained in his community college that apply to the workplace and in the interview he shared stories of strong faculty who helped him advance, but reflecting back he shared he could have been better prepared for the four year university.

> (Community college) didn't really prepare me for the four-year university, that's how I feel, because as I said it's just the mentality that went on at the community college, and (when) I got to the four-year university (it was a) reality check, like, "Wow, so this is really what college life is supposed to be like." At the community college it required minimal effort, but at the four-year you really have to put in an effort and the time to get good grades.

Sean and "Student Success"

Sean had been identified as a Business student from the CTE Outcomes study, and from the information he shared in the interview it was clear he had been interested in Accounting as a field. But when asked about completion and CTE related certificates from his community college experience, he shared his goal was to transfer and that he "didn't even remember talking about a business certificate" while at Wallingford. When discussing "student success" definitions, Sean identified skill sets over certificates or degrees attained as the markers that should be looked at,

sharing that "a piece of paper" does not necessarily prove competence and provided an example of his thinking.

> If I was employed as a book-keeper or an accountant at a company in which they wanted me to get a better education with regards to accounting, for example, I would consider being successful as gaining the knowledge that I need, getting the certificate doesn't mean too much to me. It is unfortunate that a lot of companies see it as defining value, but for me personally it's just the education that you get out of that. The piece of paper of doesn't really say much.

Sean hopes to complete the degree path he had to leave at a university and said he would only return to a community college if he was interested in "trade-specific things" or skill sets to "increase knowledge in whatever field" he may be working in. Sean categorized his experience at the community college as successful for what he learned while he was there and as it allowed him to transfer and continue his path in higher education. Sean took most of his coursework toward a joint Bachelor's and Master's degree but by missing some courses he left university without a degree. Sean's personal situation with completion in higher education contributed to his view of "student success."

> Part of the reason why I don't like paper certificates saying "Good job, you got your degree," is because I was a couple of courses away from getting my Master's degree and it was a joint program, so I left there without my Bachelors and without a Masters. I think it's just that my definition of success is very different than others. People just want the paper. As for me, I want the education. So it really depends on a person's aspect of success or what their goals are.

Introducing Nicole: Background, Education and Employment Goals

At the time of the interview, 27 year old Nicole was taking coursework at both a state university and a community college in northern California pursing a degree and a teaching credential with the goal of becoming a high school teacher. During the interview she shared she had attended four different community colleges and that she had earned multiple Associates degrees and certifications. Early in the interview Nicole disclosed that she was a learning disabled student and that this led to her attending a "private community college" in Vermont where she would complete an Associate degree and that she credits with helping her advance as a higher education student.

> I am a learning disabled student, so I went to a college in Vermont to help me, because in high school they don't do a good job. The skills that you need to know as a student for one thing, and then especially (for) learning disabled students. So for a while I struggled with school, and then once I graduated from that school in Vermont I was a much, much better student. So that deeply changed everything. I think that's probably as far as my education goes. Probably the biggest thing that influences how I work as a student and even outside of being a student, just as a person, because we think differently and we are highly distractible.

Nicole viewed her family as very supportive of her college and career pursuits, sharing that she felt encouraged and that her father helped "to keep everything organized." Nicole's parents divorced when she was young. She was raised by her father and grandmother saying that her "mom just wasn't around."

After her experience in Vermont the completion of her Associates degree, Nicole specifically chose to attend Wallingford in southern California because of the Animal Science

program that was offered hoping to find a career where she could work with animals. Nicole would spend three years at Wallingford and complete degrees and certifications in her chosen field. Yet after some three years of working and looking for work in her area of study Nicole found the expectations of that career field to be challenging and decided to return to college for a career change.

> I took three years off trying to get any animal job, and I changed career paths. It's a great career to have if you don't want to have a family, if you don't mind not having time off, you don't want to take vacations, so I decided to change careers just because it wasn't something that wanted to pursue long-term. So I went to this community college on and off afterwards for about three years, and then decided to go back and get my Bachelors, which I am doing full-time now. I am still kind of in a community college because I take classes every now and then, because it's cheaper than the university.

Nicole did feel that educational goals were met at Wallingford in her specific program and that she was prepared for employment goals she had in the area but her experience in the field would lead her back to college to pursue a teaching career that she felt may have more financial benefits and stability.

Nicole's College and Community Environment Influences

Nicole found the CTE program she chose to pursue at Wallingford to be very thorough and specific. It would take three years to complete the program but she felt well prepared for career options in the field when finished.

> They were very, very specific, and they definitely prep you adequately to be involved in the career if it's what you choose to do, and not just something specific like animal

> training, but they really tell you everything that you need to know, anything from handling (animals), and then management, the training part, working in zoos, anything that you could do, and they really prepare you adequately for that.

Nicole cited hours working hands-on with animals as valuable and also how the program helped grow in terms of working with the public and presenting to the public.

> Part of your job is to talk to the public, so that was a huge part of it. I guess that is still valid as well because we definitely learned how to approach a very broad audience range, so that was definitely a huge part of the program and that's definitely something that sticks out.

The CTE program Nicole was a part of had sites off campus and included work based learning with animals and at different facilities in southern California. Twice during the interview she mentioned the value of working with the public as a skill gained and also shared she plans to continue applying skills gained from the program for dog training.

> Personally, it teaches you how to be patient, and when you have an opinion that varies highly from somebody else, like we used to get some very strongly-opinioned people that would come and say that we're not doing what we were supposed to be doing and we were evil people, you learn how to deal with those sort of things when you don't agree with them, and how to calm a situation down when it might get a little out of hand. That is something that you can use out of work, personally, professionally, what not.

Nicole realized this CTE field of study that took place primarily off campus was not a "typical" community college experience. She found some frustrations with the school in terms of transferring the units she had earned in Vermont but overall found the resources to be "pretty good" and identified the resources for learning disabled students as "very, very helpful."

Nicole and "Student Success"

Nicole completed her CTE course of study and spent three years exploring jobs in that field before deciding on a new career path. In her higher education journey she has been at four community colleges. When asked about the meaning of "student success" she was quick to respond that it is personal and unique to each individual and that there are economical realities that impact choices and career pathways.

> I think it really depends on the person. I think it depends on how motivated they are to do something with that afterwards, or if they're just going to take whatever they can get afterwards. Especially nowadays it's more veering in the side that you take whatever job you can get, because of the economy. So I think it really depends on students and the person in what they want to do. You sometimes have students who think that's what they want to do, they complete it, and then they know that's not what they want to do. So I think it really depends and is variable, and I think it's a hard thing to judge. But, overall, it's pretty successful for those people that do what they want. Actually my dad did that, he went back to school, and he is doing something in that field. So I think it really depends.

Nicole classified her time at Wallingford as successful in terms of skills gained and becoming prepared for the field she had thought she wanted to pursue. Although she is choosing a career as a high school teacher over working with animals, she envisions herself applying the skills she gained from the program for both dog training and perhaps even taking in exotic animals for rehabilitation. Nicole's broad experience in community colleges allowed reflection

on transferable skills gained in both specific CTE coursework and general requirements. She shared she viewed CTE coursework as helping with "success" outside of class because of how it may prepare students for the working word.

> I think community colleges do a very good job as far as that goes. As far as success outside of class, I think it really depends on the courses. If you take general Math, English, Science and what not maybe some of those will help you out, mainly because you have a broader knowledge base now, but as far as teaching you skill sets in the working world, those classes don't do as much of that I think. It's more that students are learning prioritizing skills and organization skills and what not, (skills) needed for jobs later on, and sometimes students don't really get that. That's more up to them than it is to the college.

Introducing Claire: Background, Education and Employment Goals

Claire had originally entered studies to become a nurse "back in the 80's" at a four-year university on the east coast. She left that program prior to completion after delivering twins (she had thought she was only carrying one child) that came 11 weeks early. In her 50s, married and with four children in their teens or older, she was contacted by Wallingford and informed that she had a place in the nursing program. She had applied "a couple of years" prior and had been on a wait list. Claire was hoping this program would be the first step in many that would lead to a career that went beyond being a nurse. Claire did not complete the nursing program. In our interview she disclosed she had stage four cancer and had just completed her last chemotherapy session. She also shared how she exited the program, how skills gained in the program helped her

care for ailing in-laws before they passed, and how although her original goals were "never to be" she knows there were "other things to do" and "other doors" in her future.

> I am just sort of recovering. I know it was before 2010 that I stopped, around that time maybe that I stopped going (to the program). It's been quite a few years. Basically I flunked out of nursing school that last semester, I did the clinical part, the clinical instructor failed me and I could not get back in, so I just dropped it. I had a few things in mind with the nursing, it's not like wanted to be a bedside nurse for a very long time, I just wanted to do it for a short period of time, go on to a Masters, and then a PhD. I had things in mind like research, and more of alternative health type of situations. I also had some business ideas while I was there, and I experienced different things. I found the experience very valuable. What I did learn was immensely valuable.

Earlier in her working career Claire had worked as a social worker in a skilled nursing facility. In her position she "learned a lot about medications and how they affect the elderly" and also learned more about the nursing field as she was "always picking the brain of the director of nursing" at the site. This work experience helped with an understanding of patients prior to starting her nursing program and also provided health industry experience. She had envisioned herself going beyond the nurse position to work in other areas of healthcare.

> I actually wanted to get myself into a position to have doctors work for me rather than the other way. But I never saw the light of day for that. But maybe it's all for the best, because, relatively soon, after I stopped going to nursing school my mother-in-law came down with cancer. So we brought her to our house and I took care of her until she passed on. And it was eye-opening and hard. But if I had just finished nursing school and just started a job, I would have had to quit a new job.

Claire's College and Community Environment Influences

After leaving the nursing program prior to completion, Claire cared for both of her in-laws before learning of her diagnosis of cancer. Though she never reached her goal of becoming a nurse, she cited the skills learned in the program as "invaluable" to her role as a caretaker, in her knowing how to communicate with physicians and the ability to research her condition and understand potential treatments as well as specific skill sets of a nurse.

> I think parts of my experience were invaluable, absolutely invaluable. I learned so much in the nursing program. I learned how to change IVs, make sure there is no air in the line, I know how to handle a diabetic, especially when they are brittle diabetics, I learned the effects of different kinds of insulin, the long, short and medium, acting ones, fast acting, and of a lot of the oral medications too. I learned a lot about telemetry for heart patients, how different medications work on heart patients. That is a very complicated field I must say, that's a complicated field, and I had more to learn, I know, but I finished that segment.

Although it had been a long-term goal to enter and complete the nursing program, Claire found the program demanding and shared that she "had little time for friends" and that she developed both high blood sugar and high blood pressure that she attributed to the pressure of the program. The commitment needed to advance in the program was also impacted her immediate family, which included her daughter who was twelve at the time.

> My youngest daughter made it a little hard. And my husband, even though he was trying to support me, "Yeah, do it, do it, do it," but he had his demands, his family demands. My daughter when she would come home from school, a lot of times I wouldn't be there, or I'd come home finally and she would be upset about it. And once she even said to me,

> "When are you going to stop going to school and be my mommy again?" She was used to me always being there. And I did just stop working those two years at the Skilled Nursing facility, and that was rough on her, she hated when it when I was there. It was hard on me.

In addition to challenges managing the program and her home life, Claire also encountered difficulty with certain faculty in the program and had issues with her student pairings for clinical hours. She shared that she "would have hated pushing drugs on people" and viewed that as a role of nurses in traditional healthcare settings. She also felt at times she made observations of patients and reported them and that supervising faculty ignored her comments. When she reflected on the experience in the program she did cite many "top notch" instructors but also noted that some nursing faculty "left much to be desired" and described one in particular as "harsh" "rude" and "manipulative" and that those qualities she identified in this faculty member led "a lot of potential, wonderful nurses (to) just drop out". Claire was paired with a fourth-year student for clinical work and had communication challenges with this pairing that led to her communicating her grievances with the class instructor. She was told that there would be a meeting between the students to resolve the issue. The meeting did not take place, and Claire failed the course. She tried to reapply but was told "we don't have a place for you."

When asked about leaving the program, Claire shared she felt she was "flunked" by certain faculty in the program and her attempts to return were denied. She felt the resources that counselors provided for her as a nursing student were "poor" and that she had to learn to navigate the community college system and program on her own. Claire identified benefits and challenges for community college students based on her experience at Wallingford and also reflected on her time in a four-year university.

> I think that one thing (Wallingford) can do for a young student is something very valuable, it can help ease them into the college system. However, as long as they understand that there are some courses-- the unfortunate things about Wallingford is – and maybe it's all community colleges, I'm not sure – some courses they don't need to take and they end up taking courses they don't need. They're wasting their time. They shouldn't be doing that. The counselors are not helpful with this. So the students themselves need to watch their own backs. It teaches you in a way to watch your own back, be your own advocate, research, question, inquire, ask people who have the experience, to learn how to handle your life. Maybe there is success in just learning how to handle life.

Claire and "Student Success"

Claire shared that perhaps there is success in learning how to navigate a community college system and program and that for her what was learned in the parts of the nursing program she did complete was directly related to her career interests and actually applied in her personal life caring for in-laws and dealing with her cancer diagnosis. Yet, because she was unable to complete the program after failing a required course and was not allowed to re-enter she felt like a "failure." Claire faults herself for not enrolling with a different instructor for the course she failed and feels that was the difference in her not completing. "I think I would have graduated had I not had that other instructor at the end. If I stayed with previous one that I had for two semesters, she was great, I am sure I would have graduated."

Claire's community college experience and her condition from chemotherapy treatments have made her cautious about re-entering higher education, but she did disclose that she envisions returning at some point.

> Because of the chemotherapy, I notice like my thinking is not the same. I'm having a hard time recalling things, names, and dates. But I fight through it, I say I've got to remember this, okay at this time, this was the name, and so I fight through it. Once I'm done with my alternative therapy, hopefully my mind will clear up a little bit, and my memory will clear up a little bit, then I could see myself having…and also physically I'm not really able to get to school back and forth. It was a big deal for me being here (at the interview). I did nothing else; I did nothing else this morning because I knew I needed the energy to get here. After I flush out all this chemo, I do see myself doing possibly doing some courses, I'm not sure I'll do it in Wallingford, but possibly complete a four-year degree, which I have a lot of things under my belt, I hope they're still (useful) I don't know.

Introducing Alexander: Background, Education and Employment Goals

Alexander was the second member of his family to attend a college or university but the first to finish, completing his Bachelor's degree in the fall of 2012. Both of Alexander's parents were born outside of the United States, which made Alexander's entrance into college challenging in Alexander's view.

> My parents were from a different country so I really don't have them push me, they didn't really know about the whole college system. They wanted me to get an education; they didn't know how to go about it. I was behind other people.

Motivating factors for Alexander choosing Wallingford included price, proximity, accessibility, and the opportunity to explore business courses that could help with his contribution to his family's business. The family business (a restaurant) is where Alexander worked before, during, and now after his college experience but he indicated his plan was to find new employment now that an Accounting degree was completed. To save expenses, Alexander lived at home while attending college. When reflecting on his community college experience, Alexander shared that there were benefits to utilizing a community college for his business courses and transferring. As a 25 year-old who had always lived at home and helped support his family business, Alexander also lamented not having a more independent college experience.

> I don't think four-year college was right for me straight out of high school, I don't think I was ready for it. But I wish I had that cool four-year college experience where you go off on your own and get that whole experience.

Alexander's College and Community Environment Influences

Alexander's family commitments and connection to the family business influenced not only his choice of where to attend college but also the subject matter he pursued. He felt "prepared" for college from his high school and middle school experiences and also said that "a lot of friends" from his high school also attended Wallingford. As stated above, his family did not have experience with higher education but he did feel supported by them and felt "pushed" to continue and complete to be the first one in his family with a degree. College allowed some exploration for Alexander in terms of area of study but he gravitated to Business and Accounting as it related directly to the family enterprise and he saw real-world applications.

> I had some good teachers with some real-world experience, and I'd say those were the most interesting classes I took business wise. At the time I chose business mainly because I'd always been around my family's business and I was interested in all aspects of business. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do exactly, and later on I decided to do accounting.

Alexander credited his work experience with helping him "manage time" as he was a full-time working student at Wallingford. He also approached the college experience as an opportunity to learn more about business and acquire skills that one "can't exactly learn on the job." Alexander mentioned one instructor in particular who had "a lot of real-world experience" whose teaching style included sharing multiple stories and examples that influenced Alexander in his approach to work and his role in the family business. Alexander also cited faculty as helpful in discussing where to transfer after his community college experience in addition to the campus writing center, financial aid office, and counselors.

> When I started in Wallingford at the time maybe I had one school in my mind. Like I told you, I didn't really have anybody to show me, I had to figure it out on my own, so I didn't know what the next step would be. I knew there was another step after Wallingford that I'd be taking, but I didn't know what it was specifically when I first started. As I went along I figured it out on my way. Some teachers I spoke to recommend some schools that I looked into.

Alexander and "Student Success"

As the first person in his family to complete a degree, Alexander classified his college experience as a "success." When asked to reflect on the notion of student success and his

experience he indicated that the CTE focus he began with helped move him forward in addition to family encouragement and support and personal motivation.

> You get out of it basically what you put in, if you know what you want to do. The people that don't get through… there are a lot of people at community college that are there for many years because they don't know what they want to do. I had an idea of what I wanted to do, so I got through it quickly. A lot of people change at least once.

Alexander learned to navigate the community college system as he went through it and his interest in business and its connection to his family life and work influenced the direction he chose. Now that he has a four-year degree he views the community college experience as a first step and the ability to take that experience and the units gained in it as success.

"For me success at Wallingford was basically getting the units or completing the units I needed to transfer to university. That was success."

Narrative Summary

In this chapter I have presented stories of ten former Career and Technical Education community college students from two southern California community colleges that participated in the CTE Employment Outcomes Pilot Study. Each individual's experience was divided into three sections: (a) personal background, education and employment goals; (b) college and community environment influences; and (c) reflections on "student success." These areas emerged from the study's research questions, the framework provided by the Conceptual Model for Student Success in community college occupational programs and the interview guide, (Appendix C). The former CTE student's stories are presented individually to honor their distinct voices and experiences. The presentation and interpretation of findings in the student narratives are not objective. My

work and experience within a community college system that focuses on Career and Technical Education influence the retelling and contextualizing of the student stories. Student stories were retold utilizing their own voices and every effort was made to respect each individual's experience. From these narratives, common themes emerged in the context of the CTE Student Success Conceptual Model.

Interpreting Their Stories / Analysis and Findings in Context of CTE Student Success Conceptual Model

The ten narratives in this study were interpreted through the constructs and variables offered by the CTE Student Success Conceptual Model, identifying three recurring themes that surfaced from the stories shared. The analysis of the narratives and choice of themes that arose from this study are influenced not only by the four overarching research questions formulated for the study but also by my work in the field of CTE with community colleges and the review of literature in Chapter Two. The findings are presented with the awareness that as interview participants shared their stories with me, as an investigator I was also constructing a new narrative from these accounts to address my research questions (Riessman, 2002).

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the motivations and perceptions of community college career and technical education students and their reasons for leaving programs prior to CTE certificate or course completion utilizing narrative inquiry and applying constructs form the CTE Student Success Conceptual Model. The Conceptual Model for CTE Student Success is built on four sets of constructs: student characteristics, student success outcomes, college environment, and local community environment (Hirschy et al., 2011). According to the model, all constructs influence each other and consider that the reality

of community college students is that they "are members of multiple communities" and possess characteristics that are "malleable" and influenced by both the college environment and attainment of educational goals (student success). For a CTE student, career integration includes how students may be socialized into and supported on chosen career tracks through real world and relevant workplace training and meeting industry practitioners. As shared in Chapter Two, in this model, success may take the form of attaining employment in the field, completing industry credentials, persisting from one semester to the next (Hirschy et al., 2011), as well as the traditional markers of success previously stated. The model builds on traditional retention models while addressing the specific issues that influence CTE students. The themes that emerged from the narratives may be classified under the model's variables of career integration and employment and educational intentions, and the construct of "student success" as defined by CTE students. These qualitative findings seek to help inform programs and policies to better serve CTE students in a way other retention models, focused on completion may overlook.

Emergent Themes - Career Integration, Employment and Educational Intentions and CTE "Completion," definitions of Student Success

Career Integration

The two community colleges selected for the study are both social and academic systems (Tinto, 1993) and occupational programs (CTE programs) emphasize applied skills leading to career occupations (Levesque et al., 2008). Career integration in the CTE Student Success Conceptual model is conceptualized as including the amount of career-related skills and activities offered, "norms and values" of career fields, and "interactions with professionals in the field." In the narratives shared, the subjects spoke of the value of faculty who still practice and work in their fields, transferable skills gained for careers, class activities or assignments

modeling the workplace, and in distinct ways all 10 of the subjects reflected on career integration when discussing their time as a community college CTE student and the areas they chose to study.

Maria and Claire were both nursing students from different backgrounds at different community colleges pursuing careers in healthcare. Maria was unsuccessful in completing the nursing program she first enrolled in and Claire also had to leave the program she was in prior to completion yet both identified transferable skills gained (and later applied) from their time in those programs. Maria learned of her level of dyslexia and how to adjust her approach to learning as well as the importance of resilience from a nursing advisor who encouraged her to continue at another institution where she would continue to refine nursing 'skills and techniques.' Claire cited the skills gained from her time as a nursing student as "invaluable" and directly applicable to caring for her in-laws and navigating her cancer diagnosis journey.

Ruth, Sean, and Alexander all were designated as "business" students while in community college. While all three would eventually transfer their units to four-year universities and not necessarily have completed the needed courses or paperwork to be labeled CTE certificate or degree completers, all addressed career integration in their reflections of their community college experiences. Ruth gained tangible computer skills, business communication skills, and credited the faculty's practical experience with teaching "what would fly and what wouldn't" in the workplace. Now being able to look back on both her university and community college experience, she views her CTE community college coursework as giving her the skills she uses everyday in the workplace, more so than upper division English classes from her four-year degree. Sean's employer noted his applied workplace skills from his community college courses, which allowed him to "extend" his abilities in the workplace and apply skills to his

current employment. Although Sean viewed the community college environment as an "extension of high school," he also shared it would be a place he would return to if interested in a trade specific skill or to increase knowledge in a specific field and cited specific faculty as being beneficial to his career journey. Alexander was also interested in applied skills, coming from a family business and appreciated the "real-world" approach he found from CTE faculty, including their help in discussing where he would transfer.

Bill and Olivia re-entered higher education as a means to transition careers and chose CTE programs for specific skill sets, not necessarily certificates or degrees. Both Bill and Olivia already had undergraduate degrees and had years of experience in their field (Bill as a business owner and Olivia as a teacher). Bill was able to make a "100%" correlation from coursework to career application and gain not only new skills for a career in technology but also confidence in active problem solving with customers. Olivia wanted to pursue skill sets in Landscape Architecture and gained those skills through a "hodgepodge" of CTE classes she saw useful to starting a business in that field. Olivia cited a Design Build class and faculty practitioners as providing her tangible skill sets for a career change.

Nicole and Maggie chose CTE majors in community college and subsequently completed degrees and certificates. Both have returned to higher education to pursue new career interests and both cited applicable skill sets gained in their programs. Maggie, the first one in her family to go to college, felt the faculties at her community college were "geared toward" people who wanted to work and apply skills and learned workplace decorum and professionalism from class projects and interaction with faculty and students who worked in the field. She cited listening to clients and customer service as transferable skills gained during her community college experience and chose to return to the community college she first attended to pursue a new career

interest. Nicole cited public speaking, presentation skills, patience, as well as specific skills related to working with animals that she still applies and hopes to continue to apply despite her career switch into the field of education.

John referenced a conversation with his father at the age of fourteen that helped him clarify law enforcement as a career. In his field of study he appreciated the working credentials of faculty and the practical experience he gained from courses and individuals who worked in the field. He cited noting a disconnect at times when he entered a four-year university to complete his degree and was in courses where instructors had "academic" knowledge but may have lacked the practical experience that he gained both from being a cadet and also from community college faculty.

Employment and Educational Intentions and CTE

In the CTE Student Success Conceptual Model student educational and employment intentions are characteristics that are considered malleable and may be influenced by the college environment and modified by training experiences (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Educational and employment goals may change and evolve during time in college programs. The constructs of student characteristics, college environment, and student success all may influence the CTE student and impact choices about "completion" of CTE certificates and or degrees.

The 10 participants in the study were from two different colleges. The colleges they attended participated in the CTE Employment Outcomes Pilot Study in 2012. A goal of the study was to explore employment outcomes of former CTE students and potential participants were classified as "completers" or "leavers". For the purpose of the survey, "completers" were students who earned a CTE certificate (that was made up of six or more credits) or a CTE associate degree. "Leavers" or non-completers were defined as students who had completed a

minimum of 12 units or more in specific program area CTE coursework but did not complete a CTE certificate or degree. The five study participants from La Reina had been contacted via email by the Institutional Research Board committee staff and identified as "leavers" from the pilot study and the five Wallingford participants had also been shown to be "leavers" according to the CTE Employment Outcomes Pilot Study classifications by a community college Dean of Institutional Research.

In the interviews, nine of the ten former CTE students indicated their employment and educational goals were met even though they may have not completed the CTE certificate or degree required to be considered a "completer" for the purpose of the CTE Employment Outcomes Pilot Study. This finding addresses the challenges of utilizing completion rates as the main measure of success in community college CTE programs and also the challenge of categorizing students who have intentions or goals that may evolve during their college experience. Students may start in one area and stop out and or detour on their journey yet still persist in another field or institution to completion or personal educational goals. This finding supports literature that demonstrates identifying the reasons community college students may not complete courses, certificates, and degrees related to traditional measures of success after they leave the college is challenging (Marti, 2008) and that community college student intentions and attitudes are areas that deserve greater attention and study to inform institutional practices and better serve students (Hom, 2009). Institutional measures of success can be challenging to track in these cases as was demonstrated by the participants in this study.

In the case of nursing students Maria and Claire, both were unsuccessful in their first attempt to complete a community college nursing program. Maria was able to secure a second chance at another community college, complete her degree, secure work in the field, and is

looking toward more education to advance her career. Claire did not meet her goals and was unsuccessful in trying to re-enter the program she was unable to complete. Despite the transferable skills she gained in the program and identifying her time spent at the college as "invaluable," Claire did not meet her educational and employment goals and is now facing health challenges that have changed her focus and priorities.

Bill returned to college to gain skills to transition his career. His goals were met and he is now working in the new field he chose to pursue. Bill was very close to completing a certificate (missing one class for a Computer Science Certificate) but felt little benefit to the certificate as clients do not request it and is more interested in tangible skills and experience. Bill also noted he would have to miss work to meet the scheduling requirements of the course and felt his time was better spent "in the field".

For the remaining seven participants, taking a concentration of 12 units in CTE related field may have served as an entry point to a longer educational journey toward higher level degree completion, more coursework, and more focused career exploration and advancement. The statewide results from the 2012 CTE Employment Outcomes Survey for "Leavers" from the 14 pilot community colleges participating in the study indicated that 60% of respondents chose earning a certificate or degree (with or without transfer) as the primary reason for attending the community college. This narrative inquiry of 10 students allowed a more in-depth look into both educational and employment intentions and perceptions around the value if CTE certificate or degree completion. In addition to Maria, Claire, and Bill, the stories of the other seven participants shed more light on CTE "completion" versus ongoing educational and career advancement.

At La Reina, John, Ruth, and Olivia began with CTE focused courses and all moved on to more education and training. For John, this meant moving forward to a four-year school to earn a Bachelor's Degree in his field (Criminal Justice) after realizing that to complete what was needed for an Associate's Degree in Administrative Justice would be "pretty extensive" and extend his stay at the college and also, in terms of career relevance and advancement, he felt the B.A. would allow for greater salary and advancement. Ruth also did not complete her initial stated goal of a Business degree at the community college level but did transfer and complete a B.A.. Ruth chose to focus her B.A. in English Language and Linguistics. She shared that La Reina helped her "know more about" herself and that she wouldn't want a Business degree. One semester of business class away from completing her Business A.A. degree she chose to support an out-of-state friend and to transfer with the general studies units she had already acquired. Since attending La Reina and taking courses that helped her complete a contractor's license, Olivia continues to take course work at another California community college to enhance her skills sets and prepare for her own business.

Apart from Claire, all four of the interviewees from Wallingford were able to move onto to four-year universities to continue with educational goals. As shared in the last chapter, Maggie did not learn about the details of completing a CTE certificate (in Graphic Design) until it was "too late" and chose after three years to transfer her units to a four-year university because she felt the need to "hurry up" and get out of college. She now is returning to the community college where she began to explore a long time interest in science related careers. Sean also wanted to transfer and saw little value in certificate or degree related to his business studies at Wallingford. His community college experience helped him advance into a joint Bachelor's and Master's program that he was unable to complete and emphasized during his interview that for

him it is the "education you get out of" the college experience and not necessarily the "piece of paper" that is of value. Like Maggie, Alexander was the first person in his family to access and complete a higher education degree and chose a community CTE area of study as the starting point. He chose to take his units and transfer and shared that being able to do that constituted "success" for him as he was able to complete a B.A. and apply his skills to his family business. Finally, in the case of Nicole, we see a student who already had an Associate's Degree accessing a CTE program for specific skill sets and career opportunities. Nicole later decided that her CTE program area would not be her career choice after time working in that field. She is now taking the skill sets she learned from that experience into her new goal of working in education and pursuing a teaching credential.

Student Success

In community college CTE programs, the metric or "gold standard for success" is viewed as completion of a CTE (degree or) credential (Bahr, 2011). In the CTE Student Success Conceptual Model, student success "refers to the degree with individuals meet their educational goals" and reflect a "broad array of potential outcomes" (Hirschy et al., 2011). The model also accommodates for the goals of students to change with time and experience. With the exception of one former student, all the participants in this study reflected on their community college experience as a "success" despite being identified for the study as a "leaver" and not completing CTE certificates or degrees. Definitions of success were individual to the participants and varied.

For Maria success meant preserving, learning about herself as a learner, and being able to work in her field of study (nursing). Bill too cited being able to work in the field he studied, the confidence gained from being able to figure out and complete new tasks, and the ability to use a

community college in the middle of his life for a career switch. Olivia, also a career switcher, identified success as being able to take advantage of opportunities and resources provided in college programs to be prepared for credentials or work that may be outside of the community college system. For Ruth, success was not just completing a degree but also being able to put the skills she had gained to use in the workplace. John also cited application of skills gained through education as a component of student success, but also pointed out that success depends on individual goals that vary from person to person. Maggie felt her experience was "partially successful" in that it included completing a degree (though not in her CTE field) and because it led to something else (ongoing education and exploration of science fields). Sean's view of student success was impacted by being unable to complete a joint Master's and Bachelor's program after transferring from a community college. For Sean success has more to do with education, knowledge, and application in the field then it does with "completion." Like John, Nicole felt definitions of success should be individual and cited her father as someone who went back to school to then re-enter the workforce in his new field of study as a success. Although she is no longer pursuing a career in the CTE field she studied, she felt that CTE coursework contributed to student success by preparing students for the working world. Claire posited that student success may include being able to navigate a community college system or program to meet individual goals while for Alexander it was completing what was necessary to transfer and the ability to be focused on a goal or outcome.

Conclusion

In this chapter 10 stories were presented of former Career and Technical Education community college students from two southern California community colleges that participated in the CTE Employment Outcomes Pilot Study. Each individual's experience was divided into

three sections, (a) personal background, education and employment goals, (b) college and community environment influences, (c) reflections on "student success" and interpreted through constructs provided by The Conceptual Model for Student Success in community college occupational programs (Hirschy et al., 2011). In Chapter Five I revisit the problem this study sought to addresses, revisit the methodology applied, summarize the findings as they relate to the original research questions, discuss implications for the field of CTE, and make recommendations for further study.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Statement of Problem

Measures of success at a community college consist of the traditional achievements of certificate completion, degree completion, and transfer to a four-year university. These are accepted definitions of student success in community colleges despite the multiple missions assigned to these institutions of higher education, including workforce training pathways and Career and Technical Education. Traditional metrics of success do not account for students and workers who seek to gain new transferable skills for career advancement but may not complete certificates or degrees. This study explored the attrition of community college students from the core markers cited above, specifically, students who leave Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs prior to certificate or degree completion. "Positive attrition" is considered as it relates to community college student behavior and traditional markers and definitions of student success and occurs when students have successfully completed their classes or made progress toward achieving personal goals but do not return to community college campuses the following semester (Fralick, 1993). What can be learned from a student who describes a successful community college experience but fails to fall into the three categories above? Current policy discussions focusing solely on increasing rates of completion in community colleges may miss qualitative markers of success as defined by community college students themselves. Reconsidering measurements of "success" and understanding that student voices and experiences should factor into discussions on how to best serve students were motivating factors of this study.

Current literature on retention and community college outcomes from a qualitative research

perspective on the "whys and hows" of community college student behavior and progress is limited (Michalowski, 2010). Current literature indicates that, compared with students on academic or transfer tracks, CTE students have a higher attrition rate (Bailey et al., 2004) and that much of the cited literature employs attrition theories not created with this population in mind (Hirschy et al., 2011). This study sought to explore and better understand characteristics, goals, and motivations of CTE identified students in the areas of career-related activities and skill building for the workplace, important elements in developing effective approaches to improve both retention and other successful outcomes for CTE students (Hirschy et al., 2011).

Review of Methodology

Utilizing narrative inquiry and the voices of ten former community college students, this qualitative research study explored the motivations and perceptions these CTE identified students and their reasons for leaving programs prior to certificate completion or CTE degree completion. The ten students were identified from having previously participated in the RP Group's CTE Employment Outcomes Pilot Study and the following research questions were examined:

1. What do CTE students who do not persist to certificate completion say were their reasons for attending a specific community college CTE program?
2. How do CTE students who do not persist to certificate completion view their community college experience in relation to their career goals?
3. What do non-persisting CTE students identify as the important factors that influenced their decision to withdraw?
4. To what extent were the students' initial educational goals met, despite the decision to withdraw prior to certificate or degree completion?

This qualitative study used narrative inquiry to address the four research questions. The design used the Conceptual Model of Student Success for CTE students in community colleges (Hirschy et al., 2011), a theoretical model of student persistence positing CTE students bring unique characteristics to their community college experience and building on previous models of persistence in higher education by adding the constructs of career integration and educational intentions. The four sets of constructs from the model: student characteristics, student success outcomes, college environment and local community environment were used to frame themes that emerged from the narratives. The interview guide (Appendix C) was developed to address the variables included in this model. The qualitative research design used individual interviews to allow community college students' own voices to resonate on how they used CTE programs and how the courses and programs affected their work careers and skill development. Allowing former CTE students (leavers) to share their narratives opens up the possibility of garnering greater understanding of students' experiences and needs and is an approach validated by literature on qualitative designs. Examining student stories and understanding their experiences related to community college CTE programs warrants a deep qualitative study and exploratory approach to move beyond numbers of "completers" and available statistics that may determine institutional policy.

Discussion of Results/Research Questions

An intention of this research was to add a qualitative component to the CTE Employment Outcomes Project and increase understanding of attrition and persistence behavior among community college CTE students. A model of inquiry constructed for CTE students (Hirschy et al., 2011) and composed of constructs that included student characteristics, college environment, local community environment, and student success, were set to frame the qualitative research.

The study was guided by the four research questions cited above. To respond to these questions, participants were asked a series of questions from the interview protocol to allow the sharing of their stories. As shared in Chapter Four, each participant had unique community college CTE reflections but in many cases related experiences provide common ground to respond to the following questions:

For research question one, (What do CTE students who do not persist to certificate completion say were their reasons for attending a specific course/program/community college?) proximity and affordability were the most cited reasons for attending specific course/program/community colleges by the ten participants. Nicole had a specific CTE program in mind that was offered at few community colleges and made her choice specifically by program. Reputation was also a factor cited by Ruth and Bill. Both Bill and Maggie chose to return to the community colleges they began their higher education journeys at for more training and coursework. Bill returning to La Reina after many years working as a business owner to gain technical skills and Maggie returning to Wallingford to pursue studies in science.

Research questions two and four (How do CTE students who do not persist to certificate completion view their community college experience in relation to their career goals? and To what extent were students' initial desired educational goals met, despite the decision to withdraw prior to certificate or degree completion? respectively) were addressed in the Emergent Themes section of Chapter Four. With the exception of Claire, nine of the 10 participants shared that educational goals were met and transferable workplace skills acquired. John is working in law enforcement, a goal and career path that came about at the age of fourteen. Maria is employed as a nurse, a career goal influenced by her family experience and one that required two separate campuses and programs to achieve. Bill and Olivia made career changes, utilizing specific CTE

fields and courses to gain new skill sets. Ruth, Maggie, Sean, and Alexander would all transfer units to four-year programs, and, with the exception of Sean, complete higher education degrees and identify career skills gained from community college CTE experiences. Nicole did find work in her CTE field but also determined a new career path to pursue after gaining a better understanding of her work life.

Research question three (What do non-persisting CTE students identify as the important factors that influenced their decision to withdraw?) intersects with the limitations of this study and new discoveries regarding CTE non-completers. CTE transferable experience and transferable units to a higher degree trumped the perceived value of a CTE certificate or specific degree among the participants. Olivia shared that she did complete the needed Architecture units to complete but had also taken a concentration of Horticulture coursework to help prepare for her new career goals. She felt her coursework prepared her for passing an exam that was not part of the community college but directly related to her career. Bill was aware of a course needed to complete a certificate, but it would conflict with his work and he did not see the value or currency of the certificate as it related to his work. Ruth, John, Maggie, did not want to spend more time at a community college when their next steps and goals were at four-year schools. Maria and Claire both were unable to complete nursing programs in their first try and cited challenging faculty as one reason for their lack of completion. Maria would be able to meet her goal at different college. Sean and Alexander wanted to take their transfer and business units and move on a quickly as they could. Nicole would complete multiple certificates related to her field of study while at community college and is now pursuing a bachelor's and teaching credential (while still taking certain units at another nearby community college).

In the broad context of higher education retention and attrition literature and considering the current climate in California community colleges that focuses on completion, the qualitative data gathered in this study offers correlations and opportunities see beyond quantitative student success metrics. Revisiting the narratives in light of the seven attrition and retention models cited in Chapter Two provides further opportunity for analysis and connecting the findings to previous research. The overall findings relate to the Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975, 1993) theory that states students are continually weighing the benefits and costs of staying in college. The reflective narratives demonstrated students considering the value or certificate or degree completion in the context of their overall career and academic goals and showed external influences play a role in persistence. Students shared the value of the CTE certificate of degree did not outweigh considerations of workplace or academic advancement in other areas. The Bean and Metzner (1985) attrition model applies to the participants in that chose to "stop out" without a CTE certificate or degree prior to transferring to a four-year university or entering the workforce, and is also evident in the findings of this study. Particularly in the cases of Bill, Olivia, Nicole, and Maggie, entering and exiting around courses that offered transferable skills for the workplace not necessarily associated with a specific CTE certificates or degrees allowed them to "stop out" for personal and or professional reasons. Other participants, also shared they would return to community colleges for specific skill training, not for CTE certificates or degrees. In the case of the participants of this study, "stopping out" should not be identified with "dropping out."

Of the 10 students participating in this study, nine classified their CTE community college experience as "successful." Bean and Eaton (2000) offered a theoretical model based on Tinto's integration model and psychological theories. The narratives shared allowed for a window into the notions of self-efficacy and where these individuals placed locus of control in meeting their

goals. By self-labeling their experiences as "successful" and sharing transferable skills gained from community college coursework, the psychological influences that influenced advancement to goals of these former students are likely to positively affect future enrollment decisions. Maria's story demonstrated resilience and coping behaviors that allowed her to succeed in the face of multiple challenges. She now sees herself continually moving forward on her academic journey. Claire's story showed she partially attributed her lack of completed goals to external factors at the college (challenging faculty, no opportunity to repeat a failed course) but also demonstrated an attitude of appreciation for the experience in labeling "invaluable" and applying skills gained to serve others. The eight other former students, in individual ways, all communicated that their CTE community college experience either reinforced positive self perceptions of themselves as learners or helped develop and shape these skills, an outcome that may be overlooked without the opportunity to interview former students categorized as "non-completers" for classification purposes.

Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003) proposed a model looking at the student interplay with cognitive factors, social factors, and institutional factors and offer a five sided framework to increase retention based on institutional factors (student services, academic services, curriculum and instruction, admissions, and financial aid). The models of Nora, Barlow, and Crisp (2005) and Braxton et.al.'s (2005) also included and emphasized the interplay of the student and institutional factors (campus environment, commitment to students). In the 10 narratives of this study, select students did voice some frustration with institutional services. Ruth talked of challenges accessing transcripts and challenges with "people behind the window" in student service areas. The overall findings from the narratives showed interplay between the students and institutions that led to personal goals being met. This was evident in the added support Olivia

experienced from scholarships and campus support groups as well as with Alexander, who was counseled and encouraged by faculty on specific next steps in four-year universities.

The Reason (2009) model of student retention provided a wide range of variables to explain student persistence to create a more nuanced understanding of the many relationships and influences impacting student persistence and was the seventh model looked at in explaining need to look at specific factors of CTE students by Hirschy et al. in 2011. The seven models outlined in Chapter Two and revisited in this chapter served in the development of the Conceptual Model for CTE Student Success that added career integration and educational intentions to other variables in consideration of CTE students. The model's constructs were also used to frame the narratives of this study. In presenting the model, students themselves were identified as the "best source" regarding the assessment of their goals and student "success" (Hirschy et al., 2011). This study meant to focus on "leavers" of CTE programs at community colleges and allow students to voice their experiences in community college CTE program and determine themselves if they would qualify them as successful validated the notion that factors other than completion should be taken into account when assessing "student success" and that student experience, reflection, and commentary should infuse quantitative metrics of success.

Measuring success with qualitative measures other than completion and retention rates at large institutions is challenging. It was challenging to identify and locate participants for this study even though they had already participated in a version of an exit survey when they participated in the CTE Employment Outcomes Survey and contact data existed. Yet, as evidenced in the narratives, the voices tell a different story than the CTE completion numbers. In examining CTE students' narratives and definitions of success there are clearly impactful educational practices taking place that do not show up in completion data, practices that help put

individuals on pathways to jobs and careers and incorporate transferable skills to help in meeting personal and professional objectives. As shared in Chapter Two, a framework that provides a lens for looking at and building on organizational strengths, i.e. new vocationalism and CTE opportunities to serve students and advance their career options is found in the Community College Abundance Model (CCAM) (Shults, 2008). Drawn from the fields of positive psychology, positive organizational scholarship, and positive organizational behavior to appreciate human capital, build on strengths, and add value to stakeholders. In this model, as previously described, abundance (the state of a healthy college) is not simply related to financial health but to organizational states and mind-sets of the college community. In this study, the outcomes of the participants, in terms of skills gained, steps taken to advance, career options created through education, demonstrate the strengths of the two participating colleges and their faculty and staff. Yet in a data-driven environment emphasizing completion and retention these strengths may be overlooked and the opportunity to build on "success" missed. Perhaps CTE programs and their campuses are "healthier" than the story told my completion data, as was demonstrated by the narratives in this study. Maintaining a "healthy" college of abundance requires consistent effort (Shults, 2008) and infusing success data with student narratives of success on a regular basis at community college campuses may serve to move communities to build on strengths and what is working well to serve students and their surrounding communities.

Limitations of the Study / Research Context

The CTE Employments Outcomes Pilot study conducted in 2012 at 14 California Community College included the two campuses that were the context of this study. The pilot study explored the notion that CTE students have positive employment outcomes despite not

completing a CTE certificate or CTE degree. The survey was given to "completers" (students who earned a CTE certificate of six or more units or a CTE degree) and "leavers" (students who over three semesters completed a concentration of CTE courses by taking 12 units or more in a specific CTE area) who did not earn a CTE certificate or CTE degree. Participants who completed 12 or more CTE program focused units at a single institution may have transferred but since they did not complete a CTE certificate or CTE degree were categorized as "leavers" for the pilot study.

A purpose of this study was to add narrative inquiry to inform the quantitative data gained from the CTE Employments Outcomes Pilot study. The intention was also to focus on "leavers" who had participated in and responded to the original pilot study. In the case of La Reina participants, "leavers" were sent my recruitment email from the school's Institutional Research Office and interested participants contacted me directly by email. From this group I was able to interview five students who represented five different CTE fields, age groups, and outcomes (Table 4.2) Early response rate data from June of 2012 from the RP Group researchers indicated 50 leavers had responded to the Pilot study at La Reina. Although the number of respondents may have risen prior to the conclusion of the pilot study and year one findings, I was pleased to have been able to interview five of these former students for the study. In the case of Wallingford College, raw data from the study was provided I and consulted with a Dean of Institutional Research to identify "leavers" or CTE non-completers from the original RP Group Study. As shared in Chapter Four, there were thirty-nine potential interviewees according to the criteria assessed that looked to verify they had actually responded to the RP Group study and that a CTE certificate or degree was not completed. Outreach in the form of emails and phone calls to this

target group yielded five interviews of students who represented various CTE fields, age groups, and outcomes.

From the colleges participating in the Pilot study, the response rate for "leavers" was 26% according to the RP Group's findings. The findings for all colleges showed that 69% of "leavers" were interested in further studies in their fields and that 91% were either "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their community college education and training. According to the pilot results, positive employment outcomes resulted from taking 12 or more concentrated CTE units without completing a certificate or degree and that these CTE "leavers" posted a 25% increase in terms of hourly wages (rpgroup.org).

It is acknowledged that 10 student narratives from two colleges participating in the Pilot study is a relatively small sample size yet important to note the consistency of the findings with the overall CTE Employment Outcomes Survey cited above. Gaining access and approval at the college sites, contacting and coordinating interviews with students a few years removed from their community college experience, proved more challenging than anticipated. Through the ten participants self-selected into the study after being identified from the original RP Group Pilot study, this study meant to add voices and narratives to the quantitative findings yielded by the work of the RP Group. Qualitative research utilizes purposefully selected, small samples examined in depth (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

Expected Findings and New Discoveries

As a CTE community college faculty member, I have seen many individual students access community college workforce development trainings and take specific CTE courses for skills upgrades who may fall out of traditional definitions of student success and as CTE

"completers" but who would credit the community college system for providing pathways to career advancement. The findings from the CTE Employments Outcomes Pilot study also supported the hypothesis that CTE completion numbers do not tell the whole story of "student success." The 2013 CTE Outcomes survey changed the label of "leaver" to "skill builder" to more accurately reflect student intentions and findings. In 2014, the CTE Outcomes Survey was included as research that joined the research sources of Peter Riley Bahr, The California Community College Chancellor's office, and the nonprofit research agency WestEd in a brief subtitled *Why Completing a College Degree Is Not the Only Way to Succeed*. The findings from this brief demonstrated that both short- and long-term participation in community college coursework has "a significant impact on students" regardless of certificate completion (Bahr, 2011). Personal experience in the CTE field and related research led me to expect findings of "student success" and satisfaction with community colleges that do not show up in completion rates.

New discoveries from the 10 narratives shared during this study included a deeper understanding of the complexities of community college students, how malleable goals may be, and a renewed appreciation for faculty who work or have vast work experience in the field they are sharing with their students. Students may use community college CTE programs as an entry point into higher education, gaining transferable workplace skills, adapting new career goals and understandings, increasing their ability to not only advance in the workplace but also to gain new views on ongoing training and education. Student employment and educational goals may change, are impacted by both classroom and career experience, and are individual to the student. The students in this study did not identify themselves as "CTE" students (in each interview I defined CTE for clarity), but rather learners looking to advance on academic and career pathways.

Years removed from their CTE community college experience, these students recalled course activities and faculty stories that had real work world applications, and some, with benefit of comparison to coursework at four-year universities, cited this as the most relevant and used in their work lives. These discoveries echoed the words I had heard attributed to a former California community college district chancellor, that all higher education (be it CTE, Liberal Studies, General Education) is essentially workforce development, providing applied skills for the workplace and varying in duration.

Recommendations for Further Study

The study revealed that students have multiple identities while pursuing higher education and that what may be viewed as a CTE concentrator may also be a student intent on transfer, uninterested or even unaware of a certificate or degree attached to the transfer goal. An entry point into higher education through CTE coursework may result in the success of a transfer student and ultimate "completer" of a Bachelor's degree while also being a negative outcome of CTE programs. Research into how CTE students identify themselves and identifying which aspects of higher education prove most beneficial in the workplace would expand on the preliminary findings of this study. The narratives shared also revealed little perceived benefit of attaining a CTE certificate or degree, but a perceived benefit of skills gained during training and coursework. Research into employer views of community college CTE certificates would benefit the community college workforce partnership and further align training with workforce requirements.

Conclusion

The findings and analyses from this qualitative narrative inquiry study support research that suggests there are multiple versions of "student success" for community college CTE students that may lie outside completion rates. CTE Employment Outcomes Project Pilot study served as the source and context to add a more qualitative understanding of CTE "leavers", "non-completers", and or "skill builders". The overall findings from that study indicate community college CTE students make wage gains, advance in the work place, and are satisfied with their education and training despite falling into the "non-completer" category, and this was again confirmed for the 2012-2013 iteration of the survey that expanded to 35 campuses. At the time of this writing there are over 50 California community colleges intending to take part in this survey for the 2013-2014 year. As this research contributes to the discussion of definitions of "student success" student voices, narratives, and lived experiences add to this ongoing dialog.

As this research study concludes and as a result of the student stories shared with me during the process, I am grateful for the understanding gained from the former CTE students who participated in this work. Through the process I was reminded that the voices we need to listen to while we work to constantly improve the opportunities and educational experiences provided to students are the voices of students themselves. I was also reminded of the complexity of community colleges and the importance of the ongoing dialog of what should be counted and measured when we look at "success" within this system that provides so many entry and exit points for its users. This study affirms what CTE faculty have long held to be the case with students accessing institutions for skills and experiences rather than certificates or degrees, that the current definition of success is too narrow. In the field of CTE success corresponds to transferable workplace skills and career advancement. Partnerships with industry and

employment outcomes should valued by community college leaders and should be considered as well as completion in an expanded metric of success. The human story, face, voice, behind the metrics measured will always be vital to the ongoing process of meeting the multiple missions and democratizing potential of community colleges. This is an ongoing inquiry for educators and community college leaders who seek to serve individuals and help them succeed on both personal and professional pathways.

> *"For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other."*
>
> — Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

APPENDIX A: E-MAIL RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

TO: Insert Name, 2012 CTE Outcomes Participant
Subject: CTE Outcomes Follow-Up Interviews for Research Study

In 2012 you participated in a survey of former community college CTE students as part of the CTE Outcomes Project that has helped inform community college faculty and administrators.

I am a doctoral student at UCLA and also work in Career and Technical Education as the director of Cooperative Education at a community college in Southern California. I am very interested in interviewing you to learn more about how you view your community college experience for my dissertation research.

My study will provide you an opportunity to reflect on and share your experiences as a community college CTE student in an interview that will last between 45 and 90 minutes. Although your participation would be completely voluntary, your time will be compensated with a $20.00 gift card provided at the conclusion of the interview. By participating you will also be contributing to knowledge about how to better understand and serve community college students.

I hope you will participate in this study. Please call or email me directly if you are interested in taking part in the student and to let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Douglas Chelton Marriott
douglasmarriott@hotmail.com
Cell: 310-710-7634

APPENDIX B: RESEARCH PARTICIPANT PROFILE SHEET

Directions: please complete the following information:

1. Name _____
2. Email address:
3. Gender - Male _____ Female_____
4. Age:_____
5. CTE Course of Study while in Community College:
6. Names of Community Colleges attended
7. Degrees or Certificates Completed or in progress
8. Current field of employment and current job title

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Tell me a little about yourself. Where do you work? What is your family situation?

2. How long ago did you attend community college? Were you a full-time or part-time student?

3. How do you view your community college experience in the Career and Technical Educations courses you took? What memory stands out in your mind as your think about your time as a CTE student? Why is that memory important to you?

4. Tell me about your original reason for taking Career and Technical Education classes at a community college. Why did you choose _____ College?

5. What were you hoping to gain or accomplish by taking classes at the college?

6. To what extent were your goals met in the CTE program you were enrolled in?
    a. What do you think helped you meet your goals in the CTE program?

7. Now I am going to ask you about your personal background and how it affected your college experience.
    a. How do you think your middle and high school education affected your college experience?
    b. How do you think your work experience, before and during college, affected your college experiences?
    c. How do you think your family and friends affected your college experience?

8. Tell me about how you think the college environment impacted your experience in the CTE program you were enrolled in.

9. How do you view the college resources and environment in terms of helping students succeed?

10. In what ways to you think the subjects and skills being taught in the courses you were enrolled in were or were not related to your career interests?

11. When you were deciding what program area to take classes in, how much was your decision affected by job opportunities in your community?

12. What would you describe as the main factors that led you to leave the program prior to completion? Was there a specific moment or incident during your experience as a CTE student when you decided not to complete the certificate?

13. How would you personally define "student success" for a CTE community college student? Would you categorize your experiences as "successful"? Why or why not?

14. What were some of your most memorable lessons from your CTE program experience at the college? Did this experience influence your perceptions of yourself as a worker and learner? (If yes, why?)

15. Tell me about how you view the connection between the program and your work. Was the learning relevant?

16. How do think your work and career were affected by your CTE program experience? Do you envision yourself taking other courses in the future?

17. What other experiences or stories related to your community college CTE experience or your view of "student success" would you like to share?

18. How, if at all, did your experiences in the CTE program change your view of yourself as a learner and worker?

19. Is there anything else about your experience as a CTE student that I have not asked about? Is there anything else about your experience since you left the community college that you would like to share?

APPENDIX D: DRAFT CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

University of California, Los Angeles
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Community College Student Success Among Non-Completers:
A Narrative Exploration of The Phenomenon of Positive Attrition
Through The Voices of California Community College CTE Students

Douglas Chelton Marriott, MA (Doctoral Student) and Linda Rose, Ph.D. (Faculty Sponsor), from the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), are conducting a research study.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you previously participated in the CTE Outcomes Project. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to determine how former Community Colleges students who were enrolled in CTE coursework but did not complete certificates or degrees assess their community college experience.

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Participants will be asked to take part in one 45 – 90 minute interview with the investigator.
- Interviews will take place at the campus attended or at a location of the participants choosing.
- Interview participants will be given an opportunity to edit, add to, or erase responses provided during interviews by reviewing transcripts of their interview.

How long will I be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of approximately 45 minutes to 90 minutes.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

- There are no anticipated risks or discomforts.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate?

You will not directly benefit from your participation in the research.

The results of the research may help community colleges better serve CTE students and enhance programming

What other choices do I have if I choose not to participate?
If you choose not to participate you may still obtain information about the results of the study.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you (such as an email address) will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of the following privacy and confidentiality practices:

- Data will be stored in secure physical and/or digital locations and password-protected to mitigate the risk of theft.
- Personal identifiable information will be removed from and/or disguised in all collected data.
- Access to data will be limited to the investigator.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

- **The research team:**
  If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact:

  Douglas Marriott at douglasmarriott@hotmail.com or 310-710-7634

- **UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):**
  If you have questions about your rights while taking part in this study, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers about the study, please call the OHRPP at (310) 825-7122 or write to:

  UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program
  11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 211, Box 951694
  Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

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