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“We Leave School Because of Jobs:” The Role of Work in the Paths to Success of Students in an Alternative Education Program

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“We Leave School Because of Jobs:”
The Role of Work in the Paths to Success of Students in an Alternative Education Program

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

Monique Corral

2019
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“We Leave School Because of Jobs:”
The Role of Work in the Paths to Success of Students in an Alternative Education Program

by

Monique Corral
Doctor of Philosophy in Education
University of California, Los Angeles, 2019
Professor Carola Suárez-Orozco, Chair

This multiphase qualitative study provides a glimpse into everyday realities not always considered to contribute to student outcomes—students’ lives outside of school. The study involves young adults, predominantly Latinx from working-class backgrounds who are pursuing their secondary education in an alternative program. Based on the centrality of the need to work that emerged, the study examines the unique and multifaceted role of work for students. Based on multiple sources of information (i.e., participant observation, interviews, surveys), most students in the study who worked were compelled to do so because of difficult economic realities. Further, in contrast to common perceptions that focus solely on the negative outcomes for students facing multiple commitments, the findings indicate that there are both costs and benefits to working and juggling such commitments. I discuss the study’s implications for
practice and future research, including the value of high return nontraditional and alternative education paths that consider students’ everyday realities, particularly commitments centered on work and family. Further, I discuss the value of career development initiatives and supports in schools to guide students while considering their financial circumstances.
The dissertation of Monique Corral is approved.

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2019
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my grandmother, Nana, who is resting in peace, and to my high school teacher, Ms. Q and teachers and programs everywhere that inspire creativity and passion in their students.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Despite important advances in understanding school dropout in the United States, high school dropout and graduation rates remain problems for certain students—disparities are pronounced for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. It has been recently estimated that the national percentage of public high school students who graduate on time with regular diplomas within 4 years of starting the 9th grade (i.e., the “adjusted cohort graduation rate”) is 73% for Black and 76% for Latinx students, which is below the rates for White (87%) and Asian (89%) students and the national rate of 82% in 2013-14 (McFarland, Cui, & Stark, 2018). This adjusted cohort graduation rate is even lower for economically disadvantaged students (75%), limited-English-proficient students (63%), and students with disabilities (63%) (McFarland et al., 2018).

As scholars have begun to conceptualize the dropout problem as a system-level failure (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015), to further our understanding of what can be done to address inequities in student outcomes and educational opportunities, in the dissertation, I examine the student experience from the student point of view—particularly because the perspectives of students themselves have been mostly overlooked (Howard, 2002). With an overarching goal of understanding how to improve the learning experiences and career outcomes of students from low-income communities of color, I focus on implications that underscore the value of career development initiatives in schools for their role in providing valuable and engaging learning experiences and outcomes for students.

The study provides a glimpse into everyday realities not always considered to contribute to student outcomes and affect educational trajectories—students’ lives outside of school. The
study involves 20 young adults, predominantly Latinx from working-class backgrounds who are working toward a high school credential in an alternative program.

In the process of the study emerged the compelling need to work for students from low-income communities. Building upon students’ own accounts of the significant role of work in their lives, the study provides a new way of understanding the unique and multifaceted role of work in students’ paths to success. Most students in the study who worked were compelled to do so because of difficult economic realities. Further, I demonstrate the range of the role of work in students’ lives. In contrast to common perceptions that focus on the negative outcomes for students who juggle multiple commitments, the findings indicate that there are both costs and benefits to students who work and face multiple commitments, and the costs and benefits do not always balance out.

Informed by the central role that students’ lived realities outside of school play in educational trajectories, I argue that while it may seem that school and work are at odds, the dynamic of school and work is multifaceted. The findings suggest that there are pros and cons to student employment—its role in students’ lives is complex, yet central to positively contributing to their livelihoods in both the present and future.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

This research is guided by two overarching frameworks. First, the study is grounded in a conceptual framework of risk and resilience. While the term “resilience” appears in the literature across multiple disciplines, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, developmental psychologists, and other mental health professionals provided early information on the phenomenon of resilience from their work with “at risk” children who were able to “beat the odds” (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993).
Traditional models and definitions of resilience underscore the indicators of resilience (Stack-Cutler, Parrila, & Torppa, 2015), including resilience as a psychological trait, process, coping strategy, and outcome (Yang, 2014). However, Smith et al. (2008) emphasize that resilience measures generally target the personal characteristics that promote positive adaptation rather than the phenomenon of resilience itself, which is the actual *ability to bounce back or recover from stress*, and is closest to the original and most basic meaning of resilience (i.e., as related to recovery, resistance, adaptation, and thriving). Additionally, while considerable research on resilience has focused on the intrinsic characteristics that embody resilience (Floyd, 1996; Kia-Keating, Dowdy, Morgan, & Noam, 2011; Smith et al., 2008; Stack-Cutler et al., 2015; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), theoretical and empirical investigations have also emphasized that resilience is a relative and contextual construct, varying over time on the basis of reciprocal interactions of variables both inside and outside individuals (e.g., Masten, 2001; Werner, 1989). Hence, while many psychological perspectives focus on the individual (Nasir & Hand, 2006), resilience may encompass different dimensions, including extrinsic factors such as social context (Stack-Cutler et al., 2015). As described by Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000), resilience is a “*dynamic process* [emphasis added] encompassing positive adaptation within the *context* [emphasis added] of significant adversity” (p. 543). However, limited research has examined the underlying mechanisms of how context and related extrinsic factors impact adult learners, particularly those who reignite their secondary education in alternative programs, including how resilience is promoted and constrained (Kia-Keating et al., 2011). Indeed, much remains to be done to unpack how resilience develops over time and can be sustained in the context of education (Floyd, 1996).
In the study, I apply a risk and resilience framework to the experiences of adult learners in alternative programs and adult education settings. While the challenges students encounter in these types of settings are documented (e.g., episodic participation due to the demands and commitments associated with adult life; Comings, 2007; Comings & Cuban, 2007; St. Clair & Belzer, 2010), students’ strengths and other protective factors are less documented, including persistence and resilience (e.g., as students reignite and pursue their education, make progress toward their academic and career goals)—productive constructs that move beyond an exclusive focus on negative narratives and student deficits (Morrison, Brown, D’Incau, O’Farrell, & Furlong, 2006) and relate psychological phenomena to features of schools, families, and communities that foster success in school (Wang et al., 1993).

While intrinsic factors and mechanisms (e.g., cognitive, psychological) play an important role, external factors such as systemic factors and life circumstances that hinder and promote success in school are also important parts of the equation—particularly as scholars have begun to conceptualize the dropout problem as a system-level failure (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Indeed, Morrison et al. (2006) emphasize that student school performance is best fostered in an environment that supports students across multiple contexts. Additionally, Comings, Cuban, Bos, and Porter (2003) provide a multifaceted view of persistence that acknowledges differences among students in adult education programs based on the complexity of their outside lives, why and how they use educational programs to reach their goals, barriers they face, and resources they draw on as they seek to improve their skills. Taken together, in the dissertation, I emphasize the interconnectedness of both the challenges and benefits of students’ life circumstances and commitments (e.g., work), which shape their persistence and resilience in school. This emphasis differs from approaches that emphasize the negative (Floyd, 1996) and fail to consider the role of
risk in healthy outcomes (Kia-Keating et al., 2011). As emphasized by Floyd (1996), “to focus primarily on the problems of any group of people in isolation from data that highlight possible solutions to their problems is to promote distorted and negative stereotypes that perpetuate defeat and pessimism” (p. 181).

Second, acknowledging the important roles of both individual and contextual factors that impact learning and student outcomes over time, the dissertation is also guided by developmental psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory of human development (1977). Central to Bronfenbrenner’s theory is understanding human development in context across multiple areas of life—a key tenant is the nature of the interrelationship of individuals and their environments throughout the life span (1977). Bronfenbrenner’s theory highlights diverse contexts of development, including individual and proximal contexts such as families and schools, and more distal and macro contexts in which we are embedded, including school policies and political ideologies (1977). The study is informed by Bronfenbrenner’s theory in two central ways: (1) student outcomes and students themselves are influenced by a web of interconnected factors and complex patterns found both in schools and outside of them (e.g., life circumstances and everyday realities); and (2) school personnel and programs should understand the basic (e.g., financial) and career needs of students in order to promote student engagement, learning, and outcomes, which informed the analysis of the study’s findings (e.g., challenges and benefits of working, students’ diverse aspirations).

Taken together, the study is guided by both Bronfenbrenner’s tenets for understanding development in context over time and the important role of external factors in learning and student outcomes (e.g., life and financial circumstances), as well as a risk and resilience framework (e.g., challenges and benefits of working). Both frameworks are needed for a more
holistic understanding of the factors that contribute to student success—both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Guided by these frameworks, the study investigates the unique role that work plays in students’ lives, and implications that can be drawn from this understanding to promote students’ “career development”—the multidimensional development of a person’s career that takes place over most of their lifetime and emphasizes the importance of “work” in human functioning and wellbeing (Blustein, 2006; NCDA, 2011).

**Dissertation Overview**

The young adults who participated in the study were working toward high school credentials in an alternative program. As an alternative pathway, the program mostly serves students who were not succeeding in traditional school environments. The site of the study is in an urban region of Southern California and the program serves predominantly Latinx students from working-class backgrounds.

As I examine in the literature review chapter, the study is informed by the high school dropout, career development, and student employment literatures (e.g., Adams, 2002; Blustein, 2008; Castellano, Stringfield, & Stone, 2003; Ruhm, 1997; Rumberger, 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). I propose that these literatures provide unique ways of viewing high school dropout and provide insight into how to combat dropout and improve student outcomes and learning experiences. However, while the career development literature considers the important role that work plays in our lives, I find that there is a need to consider the unique experiences of socially marginalized populations in career development processes and to also consider how employment may positively contribute to outcomes within the school context and students’ lives outside of school (e.g., in addition to financial returns, how meaningful work experiences and on-the-job training can improve student outcomes and provide developmental and psychological
benefits). Further, while the high school dropout literature considers the magnitude and complexity of the dropout phenomenon (e.g., Fine, 1991; Lukes, 2014, 2015; Rumberger, 2011; Tuck, 2011, 2012), the complex role of students’ lives outside of school has been under-considered. For example, life circumstances and lived realities that pull students away from school (e.g., the need to work), may also pull students back to school and serve positive and contributive roles in students’ lives.

In the methods chapter, I document and examine the approaches and steps I took to develop and conduct the qualitative study across three phases of data collection in order to triangulate data using multiple sources of information over time (i.e., participant observation, interviews, surveys). At the center of the study are the following guiding research questions: What role does work play for students who are pursuing their secondary education in alternative programs, and what implications can we draw from this understanding to promote students’ career development?

The aim of the study was to understand the phenomenological experience of students in an alternative education program. To examine this in depth, I explore several research questions which frame the analysis of the study. Specifically, I considered:

(1) Why do students leave traditional high schools?

(2) What are the challenges and benefits of working for students?

(3) What are students’ aspirations and questions about the future?

First, I found that difficult economic realities can compel students from low-income communities to work and work can pull students away from traditional educational pathways and also continue to present challenges in alternative secondary education programs. Further, work can intersect with other factors in students’ lives (e.g., personal adversities, family commitments,
school mobility). Second, while there can be costs to students (e.g., interference with schoolwork completion, stress associated with having multiple commitments), I found that work can also play positive and motivational roles—across their educational journeys, students experienced multiple benefits from work experiences and training (e.g., economic and career returns, including immediate income to support their own and family’s livelihoods, skill development, opportunities for career advancement; academic and psychological benefits, including increased sense of purpose, responsibility, motivation). And third, students’ aspirations and questions about the future underscore the value and interconnectedness of multiple aspects of their lives—career, education, and family—and personalized and meaningful pathways to persistence and completion.

In addition to the findings, in the discussion chapter, I examine the study’s broad contributions to the literature, implications for practice, and study limitations and implications for future research. The findings provide a glimpse into factors not always considered to contribute to academic outcomes and trajectories—adverse and positive life circumstances and everyday realities outside of school. The findings suggest that students’ financial circumstances can pull them away from traditional secondary education environments and also pull them back to school to alternative programs in order to compete their high school credential. I argue that we can support students who work by integrating learning, training, and work in academic programs and paths—both traditional and alternative.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Students’ lives outside of school and everyday realities are not always considered to be factors that contribute to student outcomes and affect educational trajectories. However, in the study, a focus on students and their lived experiences unearthed a common reality—the multifaceted role of work in students’ everyday lives, which presents both costs and benefits to students.

The young adults who participated in the study were enrolled in an alternative education program. The alternative program provides different paths to a high school credential and mostly serves students who were not succeeding in traditional school environments—most of whom are from working-class communities of color. Within this context and to provide foundation for understanding the role of work in students’ lives, the major bodies of scholarship I examine in this chapter are high school dropout, career development, and student employment. In this chapter, I argue that the career development and student employment literatures provide unique ways of viewing high school dropout and the factors behind it and can inform measures to help address the dropout problem and improve student outcomes and learning experiences.

High School Dropout

The literature on school dropout in the U.S. runs far and wide. Across disciplines, theoretical and empirical scholarship has led to important advances in understanding the magnitude and complexity of school dropout, including the multifaceted nature of why students drop out. However, high school dropout and graduation rates remain problems for certain subgroups of students. Disparities are pronounced for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. It has been recently estimated that the national percentage of public high school students who graduate on time with a regular diploma within 4 years of starting the 9th
grade (i.e., the “adjusted cohort graduation rate”) is 73% for Black and 76% for Latinx students, which is below the rate for White (87%) and Asian (89%) students and the national rate of 82% in 2013-14 (McFarland et al., 2018). This adjusted cohort graduation rate is even lower for economically disadvantaged students (75%), limited-English-proficient students (63%), and students with disabilities (63%) (McFarland et al., 2018).

Yet, these figures do not comprehensively capture the magnitude of educational disparities between different groups of students. While the U.S. Department of Education has attempted to standardize methods for calculating graduation rates to make them more accurate and comparable, important limitations remain (Sublett & Rumberger, 2018). First, the figures are estimates; second, criteria and reporting practices vary across state and local education systems, including how students are identified for inclusion in certain subgroups; and third, certain subgroups and regions are excluded altogether, including the Bureau of Indian Education and Puerto Rico (McFarland et al., 2018). Further, much work remains to be done to unpack and explain the disparities in dropout and graduation rates and on a more action-oriented front, to address pressing educational inequities.

In a recent Washington Post article, “Why Surging High School Graduation Rates Might be a Mirage,” Jay Mathews (2017) writes:

We should restrain our enthusiasm about our rising graduation rates. Those numbers aren’t worth the headlines they are getting. We need to find ways to improve teaching and learning for all students, before they decide high school is not worth the time and trouble and escape any way they can.

To Mathews’ point, there is value in understanding what lies beneath the numbers—in investing in improving teaching and learning for all students. In the dissertation, I argue that we must also consider students’ lives outside of school, as students’ everyday realities play a central role in
their experiences and outcomes in school and beyond it (e.g., economic mobility, career advancement).

**Multifaceted Nature of Dropout**

An important feature of school dropout is its multifaceted nature. In the dropout literature, “dropping out” has been described as more of a process than a single event with multiple factors both within students and outside of them contributing to the process over a long period of time (Rumberger, 2011). However, a growing body of scholarship has emphasized the role played by structural and school-level factors that are a result of system-level failures (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). In one study, school leaders describe the dropout problem as “partly rooted in school failure and disengagement and partly in community poverty and student life circumstances” (Barrat, Berliner, & Fong, 2012, p. 227), which considers the array of factors related to schools, poverty, and life circumstances that influence dropout.

Research has also revealed patterns in high school graduation rates, including racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic gaps (Murnane, 2013). Graduation rates have been found to vary widely by race and ethnicity, with American Indian, Black, and Latinx students continuously lagging behind their White and Asian peers (McFarland et al., 2018). Significant disparities and variation also exists across schools and states, particularly when comparing schools with high numbers of low-income families with high-income families, with students from lower-income families having substantially lower graduation rates than those from higher-income families (Civil Rights Project, 2005; McFarland et al., 2018; Murnane, 2013; Rumberger, 2011). Further, the dropout problem has been found to be concentrated in a small subset of high schools primarily located in cities that overwhelmingly enroll Black and Latinx students from low-income families, which is particularly troubling given the role of education in economic mobility.
In low-income urban schools that mostly serve students of color, dropping out of high school has been described as a “shared tradition” (Fine, 1991, p. 21).

**Systemic Barriers and Dropout**

Historically, the pervasive stigma attached to the “dropout” label and the focus on intrinsic factors within students themselves that suggest that dropping out is a matter of choice have masked inequities in students’ experiences in school and outside of it, including policies and practices of exclusion that hinder access to opportunities for educational advancement and success (Fine, 1991; Lukes, 2014, 2015; Tuck, 2011, 2012). In comparison to the term “dropout,” which has become synonymous with a disinterest in school (Lukes, 2014, 2015), and with academic inferiority and a sense of hopelessness and helplessness (Fine, 1991), the school “pushout” phenomenon considers structural factors inside schools that “both inadvertently and by design” push students out before graduation (Tuck, 2011, p. 817). Importantly, with push factors, schools are the agent (e.g., school policies and practices of exclusion; Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). Tuck (2011, 2012) maintains that school pushout is produced by federal and state policies and standards that prevent multiple and meaningful routes to graduation, particularly related to assessment and meritocracy. The Civil Rights Project (2005) also indicates that high stakes tests for students and test-driven accountability for schools creates unintended incentives for schools to push out low achieving students.

Indeed, myriad practices and barriers that contribute to school exit have been revealed and applied to explain disparities in student outcomes between different groups of students (e.g., students of color, low-income students, immigrant-origin students). Rather than stigmatize students as “dropouts,” Lukes (2014, 2015) differentiates among three distinct groups: “pushouts” [i.e., students pushed and “counseled” out of school by school personnel to pursue an
alternative credential such as a GED (General Educational Development) or to abandon school due to age, behavioral issues, lack of credits, and pregnancy], “shutouts” (i.e., immigrant young adults whose intention of entering a traditional high school was unsuccessful), and “holdouts” (i.e., labor migrants who reentered an educational pathway via adult education after years of working in low-wage jobs).

Importantly, qualitative research has led to important advances in understanding practices and policies that shape the experiences of students who have been socially and historically marginalized. Michelle Fine’s (1991) classic case study of a New York City comprehensive public high school serving predominantly Black and Latinx students from low-income backgrounds powerfully documents pervasive inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes—“Uncovering layers of systemic, widespread school failure, the question was no longer why a student would drop out. It was more compelling to consider why so many would stay in a school committed to majority failure” (p. 7). Aligning with scholarship that frames the dropout problem as a system-level failure (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015), Fine’s (1991) critical educational ethnography offers a nuanced vantage of school pushout. Fine (1991) documents how structural factors and systemic barriers, including macro- and micro-level practices and policies, promote school failure and pushout, and impact students’ lives and families. One student’s experience highlights the multifaceted nature of school pushout and provides insight into how to combat the problem:

We need to tell little kids to reach for the impossible. But then they get to school and learn only about what they can’t do. What’s not possible. They get rules, structures, and things have to be the same. I didn’t want to be doing exactly like other kids. I had energy, passions, physical life to lead and that was set back. I couldn’t wait and postpone my dreams. (Fine, 1991, p. 10)
This powerful narrative reveals factors within the school context that push students out of school, including the focus on rule enforcement and standardized and rote learning experiences that are disengaging, constraining, and demoralizing.

Further, in Romo and Falbo’s (1996) classic longitudinal study of Latinx youth whom their school district had designated as “at risk” of dropping out, case studies of students’ experiences reveal complex and interwoven structural factors and barriers that showcase how schools function to reproduce educational and social inequities (e.g., through tracking, grade retention, bureaucracy). Using the GED as a basis of analysis, Tuck (2011, 2012) also exposes policies and practices that lead to school pushout. Made up of 4 individual subject tests (i.e., math, language arts, social studies, science), which do not have to be taken at once, the GED is an alternative to the traditional high school diploma that is recognized by state and local jurisdiction authorities as a high school credential (GED, 2019). Students can prepare for the GED by taking free preparation classes (e.g., through publicly funded and state accredited GED programs at adult schools and community colleges). Noting that students use the GED as an “emergency escape hatch from hostile secondary schools” to recover and regain their education, Tuck (2012) exposes factors and sources inside schools that pressure students to leave school—school policies, rules, and practices that work to push students out before graduation (e.g., disrespectful treatment from school personnel, arbitrary school rules, high stakes testing; p. 15). Student academic and behavioral “problems,” including poor attendance and fighting have also been found to trigger practices in schools that force students to leave (Ream, 2005; Tuck, 2012). Taken together, research has provided a nuanced understanding of what the pushout phenomenon looks like in schools and what can be done about it, particularly within the lens of social justice and social change (e.g., multiple routes to graduation). However, while structural
factors and barriers within schools have been shown to explain disparities in dropout and graduation rates between subgroups of students, students’ everyday realities outside of school must also be considered.

**Life Circumstances and Dropout**

In addition to the prevalent structural roots of school pushout, which are embedded within schools and society at large (Fine, 1991), we must also consider how students’ lived experiences outside of school shape their educational experiences and outcomes over time. In Fine’s (1991) ethnography, one student recalls:

“I’ve been here and the only things that come through here is drugs, if it’s not the drugs it’s the money, it’s the babies having the babies for the old guys, and the young guys. It’s nothing really to be happy for. But when you get out and see how other people live, you like to stay a while and relax ‘cause you know it’s still home. You go out and you see different things, you make different careers, but after I finished Job Corps I came home. I was getting homesick for my mother. (p. 174)

This narrative situates students’ experiences in both larger structural roots of inequities and in proximal realities and circumstances that are not always considered to be factors that affect educational trajectories. For this student, her everyday reality is shaped by her physical environment and routine exposure to drugs and crime within her community. Further, her exposure to career possibilities outside of her community seems to have shaped her career aspirations (i.e., “you make different careers”). Yet, similar to the multifaceted nature of school pushout, her career-decision making seems to be driven by a complex system of out-of-school factors that take her away from her home and community and pull her back to them (i.e., the Job Corps opportunity and her dynamic with her mother, respectively). As described by Freeman and Simonsen (2015), “Community and family factors such as poverty have real and significant
effects on students’ ability to succeed in and complete school” (p. 240). This same sentiment is reinforced in Tuck’s study (2012)—one participant shares:

High school is fine for kids who are fine in their lives, but if there is anything hard going on in someone’s life, school becomes very difficult. When things are hard in your life and you’re not excelling academically, it’s easy to be like, “This is stupid, I don’t need to be here.” And for adults in the school to feel the same way. (p. 63)

This compelling narrative underscores the role of out-of-school factors, including difficult life circumstances on school outcomes (e.g., grades, attendance, completion). The narrative also highlights the complex nature and interaction of push and pull factors that derail some students’ educational journeys. Indeed, student mobility (i.e., non-promotional school changes) has been found to be initiated by different sources (e.g., students, families, schools) and factors (e.g., family disruptions and job changes, unpleasant school experiences, behavioral problems, poor grades, insufficient credits; Ream, 2005; Rumberger, 2015; Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy, 1999). Importantly, out-of-school pull factors that pull students away from school have been found to be predominantly reported by students themselves (e.g., difficult financial and life circumstances), which emphasizes the central role that the student perspective and students’ life circumstances play in understanding dropout, as well as the need to provide supports and alternative pathways that meet diverse and distinct student needs and circumstances (Doll et al., 2013; Tuck, 2012).

**Dropout Recovery and Alternative Pathways**

While scholarship has led to important advances in understanding dropout (e.g., risk factors associated with dropout, negative outcomes of dropout, severity of the dropout problem; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015), dropout is not always permanent (Barrat et al., 2012; Kelly, 1993; Romo and Falbo, 1996). However, in comparison to the dropout literature, dropout recovery is understudied (Aron, 2006; Barrat et al., 2012; Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). Yet, important work in
the area of “dropout recovery” has emphasized certain characteristics of students who reignite their secondary education—they attend school infrequently and leave and return to school several times (Kelly, 1993; Romo and Falbo, 1996). Indeed, Kelly (1993) describes students who exhibit dynamic patterns of school attendance as “fade-outs.” However, while non-attendance patterns are observable, not every aspect of the fade-out process has been found to be easily measurable and observable (e.g., disengagement over time; Kelly, 1993). Indeed, in Romo and Falbo’s (1996) longitudinal study, most students were exceedingly close to dropping out at several points along their pathway to graduation. As a result, Romo and Falbo (1996) also describe dropping out and staying in school as a dynamic process in which some students stop attending for a period, then return, then stop attending, and so on.

While the quality of alternative pathways varies (e.g., some alternative pathways, such as continuation schools are seen as a “second, yet devalued, chance;” Kelly, 1993, p. 31), other alternative pathways have been found to successfully reconnect students to education options (e.g., providing students opportunities to achieve in more individualized settings using non-traditional learning methods; Aron, 2006; Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). Indeed, while the term “alternative education” covers educational activities that fall outside the traditional K-12 school system (e.g., home schooling, special programs for “gifted” students) and there are different types of program models offered by a range of sources (e.g., school districts, charter schools, community colleges), alternative programs are often viewed as opportunities designed to serve “at risk” students who have not experienced success in traditional high school environments [i.e., programs outside the traditional high school curriculum and classroom setting (e.g., diploma plus programs, college gateway programs, twilight academies) that serve youth who remain in school but are “underachieving” and “at risk” of dropping out, as well as out-of-school youth who
reenter school—both of whom have not experienced success in traditional high schools; Aron, 2006; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006; Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006]. However, some alternative programs continue to follow elements of the traditional high school general education curriculum and requirements—for example, in some programs, students complete their secondary education by finishing high school credits needed for a diploma with traditional general education curriculum and assignments, and also pass an equivalency credential, such as the GED (Foley & Pang, 2006). While alternative programs have been found to be most effective when they give students individualized attention and supports that meet their diverse needs (e.g., low teacher-student ratios, flexible scheduling, curriculum focused on the application of knowledge), directing students to the program best designed to serve their unique needs is often viewed as essential (e.g., for working adults, part-time and evening classes, and online models; Aron, 2006; Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006).

In addition to alternative programs for “at risk” youth who remain in school and out-of-school youth who reenter school, “adult education” schools and programs also provide opportunities to students to complete their secondary education but are distinct in that they mostly serve adults and typically also provide training opportunities and programs that prepare students for career pathways (OCTAE, 2017). Providing free to low-cost classes for adults [e.g., high school diploma, GED, English as a second language (ESL), career and technical education (CTE)] and part-time options and evening classes (i.e., flexibility, accessibility), adult education programs can be particularly valuable for working adults (California Department of Education, 2019). Further, adult education options can be valuable for those who have been pushed and shut out of school, including immigrant communities (Lukes, 2014, 2015; Skeels, 2012). Within the context of the structural factors examined earlier, alternative routes in the adult education setting
such as GED preparation classes can serve both as a “gateway to higher education and full employment, and as a get-away from inadequate high schools” (Tuck, 2011, p. 818).

However, alternative programs are not free from challenges, including unrealistic targets for student and program success that do not align with the unique needs of students, particularly for students that need significant amounts of time to reach learning goals and can benefit from interim milestones recognized by education institutions and employers (e.g., certifications that are marketable and carry value on the labor market; Dougherty, 2018) — research areas that would benefit from further analysis (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). Further, the role that the everyday lives and economic realities of adult learners play in their paths to both academic and career success would benefit from additional analysis. From this standpoint, students pursue their education alongside life circumstances that compete with school. Comings (2007) maintains that few students enter adult education programs with learning needs and goals that can be achieved with little instruction, and “most come with goals that require hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of instruction to achieve,” often overcoming significant barriers to participate in programs, including work and family commitments that affect persistence in complex ways (p. 23).

Informed by both the career development and student employment literatures, in the study, I examine the role that work plays in students’ lives and the nuances involved, including how commonly perceived work “demands” can also benefit students and positively contribute to their lives, which I discuss next in the career development and student employment sections of this chapter. I argue that the career development and student employment literatures provide promising avenues to consider when developing measures to address the dropout problem and to improve student outcomes and learning experiences (e.g., why schools should consider the
distinct career development and employment needs of students from historically marginalized backgrounds).

**Career Development**

To help combat the dropout problem and pressing educational inequities, in addition to alternative programs that provide multiple routes to success, we should consider the career development of students. Historically, youth who were at risk of not finishing high school were tracked and sorted into vocational education programs that prepared them for specific work roles in the local economy (Castellano et al., 2003). However, changing social, political, and economic realities have made the integration of students’ career development into the “fabric [of] secondary education” valuable for all students (Castellano et al., 2003, p. 265). Emphasizing the central role that applied learning and career preparation should play in schools, Castellano and colleagues (2003) describe the “need that all students have for a solid academic education as well as for preparation for adult life, including work” (p. 261).

The concept of “career development” has been described as the multidimensional development of a person’s career that takes place over most of their lifetime, and it considers “work” a core aspect of human functioning and wellbeing (Blustein, 2006; NCDA, 2011). Grounded in research and theory by psychologists, traditional perspectives on working are often informed by vocational psychology and industrial and organizational psychology, and explain how people develop, pursue, and accomplish their career goals (Blustein, 2006; Perry, DeWine, Duffy, & Vance, 2007).

Career-based learning and programming in schools can prepare youth for the transition from school to the world of work whether they are bound for college or the workplace (Castellano et al., 2003; Solberg, Howard, Blustein, & Close, 2002). In addition to preparing
students for the world of work by introducing them to workplace competencies in hands-on contexts (Advance CTE, 2019), career-based learning can integrate overarching practices that are not exclusive to specific career pathways, including self-awareness, career exploration, and career planning by teaching skills to investigate career possibilities and develop career alternatives—knowledge and skills that all students can benefit from (NASDCTEc, 2012; O’Brien et al., 2000).

Another approach to improving career readiness is “career and technical education” (CTE). In the 1990s, federal legislation authorizing funding for CTE began to mandate accountability requirements, including improved outcomes through academic and vocational curriculum integration (Castellano et al., 2003). Hence, while historically, vocational education prepared youth for specific work roles in the local economy, CTE’s renewed broader mission involves preparing students for the larger world of work beyond specific occupations (e.g., project-based learning and skill development that is not exclusive to specific career pathways, including the ability to work in teams; Advance CTE, 2019; Castellano et al., 2003; NASDCTEc, 2012). However, while research on the role of CTE in school reform suggests that CTE participation can produce positive financial outcomes, in comparison to work that demonstrates that CTE participation can provide long-term financial benefits, less work has explored CTE’s academic impacts (Dougherty, 2018).

Yet, to date, the evolving research base has suggested that CTE participation can provide positive academic and student outcomes. In one study, Dougherty (2018) found that participation in a high-quality CTE program increases the probability of on-time graduation from high school by 7 to 10% for high-income students, and has larger effects for low-income students, a group that is overrepresented in CTE and whom were historically tracked into vocational education. In
addition to the benefits to high school persistence and graduation, Kelly and Price (2009) suggest that well-designed and high-quality vocational programs (e.g., with regard to choice, career focus, experiential learning, multidimensional performance criteria, teacher-student mentoring relationships) can provide positive psychological benefits to students (e.g., efficacy, feelings of self-worth). Further, employing a social capital theoretical framework, Lanford and Maruco (2018) highlight distinctive features of career academies—small learning communities with a career theme located on high school campuses (Pullias Center for Higher Education, 2018)—that provide valuable job-related experiences and improve student engagement (e.g., through academic and personal support for students outside of the classroom).

However, traditional career development theories, which have mostly focused on the “lives of those with choice” in comparison to “those for whom work serves more as a means of survival,” have been criticized for excluding and therefore, lacking applicability to historically marginalized populations (e.g., based on poverty, race and ethnicity, immigration status, gender, age; Blustein, 2001, 2006; Blustein, Kenna, Gill, & DeVoy, 2008, p. 294; Medvide & Blustein, 2010). In particular, the career development of students of color from low-income backgrounds has been mostly overlooked and understudied (Howard et al., 2010). Yet, an evolving research base has provided important insight into avenues for integrative, theory-based career development interventions in schools that focus on the development of the whole person across multiple domains and consider how “context and development are dynamically and mutually interactive” (Solberg et al., 2002, p. 710). In one study, Jackson, Kacanski, Rust, and Beck (2006) examine the beliefs about educational and career barriers and supports of youth from low-income, inner-city schools. In the study’s intervention, youth participated in career learning workshops designed to challenge school and work barrier beliefs by expanding students’ learning
about sources of support for attaining their educational and career goals—which underscores the value of career development programming in schools that provides purposeful and meaningful learning environments and supports (Jackson et al., 2006).

Further, in Medvide and Blustein’s (2010) study, high school students primarily from poor and working-class backgrounds reveal personal agency by seeking opportunities and resources to facilitate their academic goals and career plans. Medvide and Blustein’s (2010) study highlights the important role of career development programming in facilitating “goal directedness”—seeking opportunities and resources to facilitate plans. As one student reveals:

I feel like in this society, a lot of people don’t feel like they are surprised at how far I get because of who I am. And they don’t expect me to achieve so much, and I’m underestimated a lot of the time. (p. 9)

This narrative captures the prejudice aimed at the educational and career development of historically marginalized youth. As she works toward her academic and career goals, the student has experienced prejudice tainted with low expectations and underestimations of her accomplishments. Her narrative underscores the value of using knowledge about systemic barriers and oppressive experiences and inequities to inform career development initiatives in schools. In Bullington and Arbona’s (2001) study, Latinx high school students from working-class backgrounds also recognize racial and ethnic prejudice against their own and others’ educational and career attainment. One student shares that she will be “‘treated bad’ when she goes to the real world” (p. 147), and another student indicates, “People look down on you. Some people look down on me, and I know I’m going to show them wrong. It’s that motivation that keeps me going” (p. 149). The prejudice this student has experienced also emphasizes the central role that addressing systemic barriers and oppressive experiences should play in career development initiatives that are purposeful and appropriate for historically marginalized youth.
Diemer and Blustein (2006) assert that “critical consciousness”—the capacity to recognize and overcome sociopolitical barriers—can be uniquely instrumental in navigating career development processes for urban youth. We should consider embedding critical consciousness in career development initiatives in schools, including how students’ lived experiences are shaped by policies and practices that explain disparities in student and career outcomes between different groups of students (e.g., students of color from low-income communities).

Understanding the unique role and impact of career development initiatives for students from communities that have been socially marginalized and excluded remains an important area for future interdisciplinary research. In particular, the role of systemic processes that produce poverty and racism must be considered in educational and career inequities. In a comprehensive literature review, Freeman and Simonsen (2015) found a lack of emphasize on developing high school dropout and school completion interventions that address poverty and the effects of race, which is troublesome based on the longstanding disparities in dropout and graduation rates—which are pronounced for students of color, economically disadvantaged students, limited-English-proficient students, and students with disabilities (McFarland et al., 2018).

**Student Employment**

Student employment in the U.S. is prevalent and the role of employment has shifted over time to be a dual focus in students’ lives (Doll et al., 2013; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). According to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, in 2018, 23% of high school students were employed or looking for work (i.e., participating in the labor force), compared with 37% of 16- to 24-year-olds enrolled in high school or in college (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Further, the employment rate was lower for Asian high school students (11%) than for their Black (14%), Latinx (14%), and White (22%) counterparts (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). However, while
numbers provide important insight into the prevalence of student employment, research is needed to further our understanding of the role of work in students’ lives, particularly for students who need to work because of difficult financial circumstances. While common perception may hold that students from low-income backgrounds may be more compelled to work than their counterparts—relatively little scholarly attention has been given to the nuances involved. Further, although outside commitments, including work and family responsibilities have been found to pose challenges related to retention and persistence, interdisciplinary research is needed on the positive and developmental contributions of work to further our understanding of the role and integration of work in students’ paths to success, including career success.

Indeed, in the career development literature, work is a core aspect of human functioning and wellbeing (Blustein, 2006; NCDA, 2011). In the context of learning and development, employment is also considered to play positive and developmental roles for youth, providing preparation for an adult career and skills adaptive to adult life (Castellano et al., 2003; Ruhm, 1997; Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). Supplementing the finding that earnings increase as workers gain greater experience at work (Becker, 1993), “earning while learning” studies focused on economic outcomes have mostly found positive outcomes connected to high school employment (e.g., future earnings, fringe benefits, occupational status; Ruhm, 1997; Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006) and to college employment, particularly when employment is related to field and program of study (e.g., lower unemployment risk, shorter job-search duration, higher wage effects, greater job responsibility; Geel & Backes-Gellner, 2012). However, while employment related to field and program of study (i.e., not just any type of paid employment) has been found to produce positive economic outcomes for adult learners (e.g., earning potentials
and employment opportunities; Geel & Backes-Gellner, 2012), Zimmer-Gembeck and Mortimer (2006) suggest that for youth who work, few jobs are connected to their studies or to their career aspirations, which speaks to the need for better integration of career readiness and development initiatives in schools and curricula. Coupled with the pronounced disparities in high school dropout and graduation rates for students of color from low-income communities, the earnings advantage of high school graduates over non-completers raises concern that certain students are not being adequately prepared for work in the modern economy (e.g., the wage rates of Black youth in innercities who do not complete high school have fallen by more than 30% since the early 1970s; Becker, 1993). Equally concerning is that youth who have been socially and historically marginalized are not benefiting from the important developmental and social and psychological benefits of employment (e.g., agency, economic empowerment, human capital, social capital; Becker, 1993; Gillen, 2019; Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006).

Notably, even though employment is an important objective of schooling, and learning and training also occur on-the-job, in practice, employment does not always complement formal education—the career readiness and development of youth is often compromised by the focus on achievement and getting into college (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). Indeed, in the U.S., the connection of employment to the curriculum in secondary schooling remains the exception and not the norm (e.g., curriculum that defines and explores preparation needed to pursue future objectives, class discussions about work experiences, greater school involvement in the job selection process; Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). Further, structural and commonplace one-size-fits-all approaches (e.g., traditional and standardized curriculum and learning environments, inflexible and inaccessible scheduling) and educational pathways that lack breadth and alternative options (e.g., in comparison to CTE programs; Dougherty, 2018) do not always
align with the unique needs and interests of students, particularly those who work. These nuances also persist into postsecondary education. In one study that focuses on the employer perspective, most executives and hiring managers surveyed indicated colleges and universities need to make improvements to ensure that college graduates possess skills and knowledge needed for workplace success at the entry level and particularly for advancement and promotion (e.g., oral communication, real-world application of skills and knowledge; Hart Research Associates, 2018). Further, most employers indicated that participation in applied and project-based learning experiences—particularly internships and apprenticeships—give recent college graduates an edge in the hiring process, underscoring the value of applied experience and workplace skills (Hart Research Associates, 2018).

In addition to skill and preparation gaps, while research suggests that high school employment does not equate with dropout—a process with varied and complex determinants that takes place over a long period of time (Rumberger, 2011)—in the high school employment literature, a large proportion of the research examines intensity of work (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). Some studies reveal negative effects of high-intensity work (i.e., more than 20 hours per week) on school outcomes, including its interference with attendance and time spent on homework (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). However, although it is important to protect students from exploitation, the focus on hours of work neglects other important parts of the equation, including individual student needs and circumstances, and the positive and developmental role of meaningful employment for youth (e.g., development of social competencies and social capital; Lanford & Maruco, 2018; Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). Indeed, Zimmer-Gembeck and Mortimer (2006) suggest that stronger links between work and school for youth may diminish negative influences of work on achievement and persistence,
while also promoting the positive potentials of employment. Further, in adult education and higher education, the emphasis on the negative role of commitments outside of school for adult learners (e.g., work as a “risk factor” that “competes” with school and as a pull factor that pulls students away from school; Doll et al., 2013) overshadows how employment can serve positive roles in students’ lives within school and outside of it (e.g., sense of self-worth and purpose, experiential learning, career advancement, economic mobility, quality of life; Adams, 2002; Kelly & Price, 2009).

Conclusion

In summary, the career development and student employment literatures provide promising ways to further understand and to address the high school dropout problem and educational inequities, particularly the important role schools have in supporting the unique needs of students who work and manage multiple commitments, and in supporting the career development of students to promote their career success. However, although the career development literature considers the important role that work plays in our lives, I find there is a need to consider the unique experiences of students from socially marginalized communities who work. Further, in addition to gaps in initiatives aimed at promoting students’ career development, I find there is a need to examine how employment can positively contribute to student outcomes and students’ lives outside of school (e.g., in addition to economic returns, how students’ everyday lives and development benefit from meaningful work experiences and on-the-job training). Further, while the high school dropout literature considers the magnitude and complexity of the dropout phenomenon, I find that there is a need to examine the role played by nuances in students’ lives outside of school, including pull factors connected to life circumstances and lived realities that pull students both away from school and back to it (e.g.,
poverty, economic empowerment). Indeed, pull factors can serve positive and contributive roles in students’ lives (e.g., employment that pulls students away from negative schooling experiences and also provides income to support students’ own and family’s livelihood).

The study’s aim is to provide a new way of understanding the unique role of work in students’ paths to both academic and career success. In contrast to frameworks that emphasize the negative impact of commitments outside of school on student outcomes, it is important to disentangle the unique role of individual commitments and analyze and document both their costs and benefits to students. The findings suggest that the role of work in students’ everyday lives is multifaceted—there are both costs and benefits to students who work and manage multiple commitments. However, moving beyond a deficit approach, while not ignoring costs associated with managing multiple commitments, in the dissertation, I suggest that student employment comes with distinct conditions and resiliencies that should be considered by schools.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

To understand how students’ everyday realities shape their paths to academic and career success, the study describes the student experience from the student point of view. The study involves 20 young adults, predominantly Latinx from working-class backgrounds, working toward high school credentials in an alternative education program. The site of the study is one of multiple sites of a larger program administered by the adult education division of an urban public school district in Southern California. The adult education division serves a majority Latinx student population. The unit of analysis was the young adult students enrolled at the site (Merriam, 2009). I collected data for the study over a 14-month period from Summer, 2017 through Spring, 2018. I also conducted pilot work at a separate site of the program over a 6-month period in Spring, 2017. The pilot site is in the same region as the primary site of the study and serves a similar student demographic—predominantly Latinx students from working-class backgrounds. I collected data across three phases to triangulate data using multiple sources of information over time: (1) participant observation, (2) interviews, and (3) surveys. In order to understand the experiences of students, I conducted semi-structured interviews and collected surveys. Although the focus of the study is on the student perspective, to learn more about the background and context of the program at the center of the study, during ethnographic fieldwork, I also engaged in informal conversations with program staff, including teachers, teacher assistants, and support staff. However, for the purpose of the study, data gathered only from students is presented.

Positionality

I have spent most of my childhood and adult life in urban communities like those of the research sites—working-class communities of color; and as a woman of color, I have roots that
in many aspects make me an insider. Yet, as a researcher and having taught in adult education for a different school district and program, I am also an outsider. Within this context, I aimed to learn about the experiences and realities of students using various sources of information and methods, including ethnographic fieldwork, and about how the program of the study operated, which was new to me. I took different measures to ensure the rigor and quality of the study, which included taking field notes following site visits that included both descriptive information and reflexive thoughts and questions; conducted pilot work; and triangulated data across three phases of data collection: (1) participant observation, (2) interviews, and (3) surveys. I also conducted data analysis over multiple phases—from collaborative case study discussions within a research team format, which took place during exploratory phases of analysis and centered on student interviews, to quality checks of the study’s codebook. Taken together, the iterative and rigorous nature of the measures I took helped me negotiate the insider-outsider dynamics I experienced.

**Participants**

Of the 20 students interviewed for the study ($N = 20$), 65% self-identified as female and 35% self-identified as male. Eighty percent self-identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 10% African-American/Black, 5% Armenian, and 5% Filipinx. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23—35% were 18, 25% were 19, 25% were 20, 10% were 22, and 5% were 23. Two students were parents. Fifty-five percent of students were born in the U.S. and 50% were first-generation immigrants. Most participants’ parents’ highest level of education completed ranged from “no schooling completed or less than 1 year” to “high school.” Demographics of the study’s overall sample are presented in Table 3.1.
Table 3.1
Demographics of Study’s Overall Sample (N = 20).

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<td>13%</td>
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<td>6%</td>
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<td>Elementary School</td>
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</table>

*a All percentages are given as a percentage of responses for that item.

For participant recruitment, I attempted to contact all students 18 and older who were enrolled at the site. Once contact was made with students, I described the study and obtained
interest for their participation. This outreach was done from Summer, 2017 to Fall, 2017, and it occurred in person and by phone. At the time of this outreach and recruitment phase, there were approximately 65 students enrolled at the site and approximately 60 of these students were adults—I attempted contact with all the adults enrolled at the site. I recruited some participants by phone—I made phone calls to 42 students—and recruited other participants in person while I was at the site during ethnographic fieldwork (n = 14). From outreach attempts by phone and in person, the first 20 students to agree to participate in the study were scheduled for a one-to-one interview. Of the students I made direct contact with, 2 participants stated that they were not interested in participating in the study because of demanding schedules. A sample size of 20 was chosen to help buffer against “no-shows” who did not show up for scheduled interview and did not reschedule (n = 12), and to ensure that adequate and quality data were collected to support the study. In total, 20 students participated in a one-to-one interview, which amounts to a third of the student population during the outreach and recruitment phase of the study and the sample is representative of the larger population of students enrolled at the site (e.g., majority Latinx students from working-class backgrounds).

Setting

All participants were enrolled in one site of the study’s alternative program—a program administrated by the adult education division of an urban public school district in Southern California. When data was collected over the 2017-18 school year, the site of the study served a range of approximately 65 to 100 students, as the program allows enrollment throughout the school year (i.e., it has an “open enrollment” policy, which gives students the opportunity to enroll at any time, permitting space). Nearly all participants live either in the specific community of the site or in surrounding communities. Located in an urban region of Southern California,
according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, the community surrounding the site is made up of 57% Latinx, 27% White, 9% Asian, and 4% Black or African American; 19% of individuals live below the poverty level; 77% are high school graduates or higher; and 60% of housing units in the area are renter-occupied with 44% of the rental units paying $1,000 to $1,499 a month in rent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

In a nontraditional format, the alternative program of the study serves youth and young adults ages 16 to 24 who come from another high school or program (e.g., traditional high school) and are behind in high school credits. Research in this area is understudied—more attention has been placed on students pursuing traditional programs, including traditional high schools in comparison to students enrolled in alternative secondary education programs. In contrast to traditional, comprehensive high schools, the independent study nature of the alternative program provides several options to students for obtaining a high school credential—a traditional high school diploma, a high school equivalency credential, and both a diploma and equivalency credential for those students who are extremely behind on credits, as students earn credits from passing the equivalency credential and use them toward the credits required for a diploma. Although students have access to teachers, teacher assistants, and other support staff, students complete most of their coursework independently. However, in order to maintain progress with earning course credits for their diploma, students are expected to meet with their assigned teacher and to turn in course assignments once a week and can borrow textbooks to complete assignments outside of school. This flexibility is beneficial to participants who work and manage commitments outside of school.

I selected the program for various reasons, including its large size, urban location, and focal student population, which aligns with the objectives of the study (i.e., to learn more about
the experiences of students who have been socially and historically marginalized; e.g., the program serves mostly students of color from low-income communities and has multiple sites across a large metropolitan area). Further, I gained entry into the program and sites of the study through snowball sampling. I went through multiple gatekeepers to gain access to the program and research sites. I met with the principals of the pilot and primary sites to discuss the study’s aims and was granted approval by both principals. I also met with and gained approval from the program coordinator of the pilot and primary sites of the study. Once I gained required approvals, I obtained institutional review board (IRB) approvals from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the public school district in Southern California that administers the study’s alternative program. While the process of gaining access was lengthy [e.g., from meetings with principals and program coordinators of the sites, to two IRB processes (i.e., with UCLA and the public school district)], cultivating relationships is a process that takes time and was essential to gaining access from the stakeholders and gatekeepers of the study’s school sites.

The focal site of the study has two main classrooms and a third space which is like a central hub of the site—this is where the program coordinator’s office is and where program orientations with students and staff meetings take place. This central space also serves as a separate workspace for students. All classrooms and spaces of the program are in bungalows, which are situated in the parking lot of a public school campus. During ethnographic fieldwork, I spent time in the site’s spaces to understand how the program and classrooms operated and how students experienced the site and its distinct spaces. As a result of my time at the site, I was able to pilot the study’s measures and refine the study’s research questions. When I was at the site, I also assisted students as they worked on course assignments, helped to translate information for
Spanish-speaking parents who stopped by the site with questions, and helped with and attended program and outreach activities (e.g., I reached out to students about program events and attended staff and student meetings, including college fieldtrips, outreach meetings at local high schools, and graduation ceremonies).

**Participant Observation**

During my initial visits at the research site, the program coordinator introduced me to students and program staff, including teachers, teacher assistants, and support staff (e.g., the clinical social worker assigned to the site). My role organically transformed over time from more of a passive observer, to a participant observer, particularly as I began to develop trust and rapport with staff and students. As a participant observer, I offered my help to students as they worked on assignments, reached out to students to let them know about upcoming events and workshops (e.g., college field trips, graduation meetings), and participated in staff and program meetings (e.g., from regional district meetings on the administration of the alternative program and its multiple sites, to local staff and student meetings at the specific sites of the study, including graduation meetings). I visited the site approximately 1 to 2 times per week and spent an average of 2 hours at the site each visit. During my visits, I usually visited classrooms to say hello to teachers and students and offered to help students as they worked on course assignments. This fieldwork experience was extremely valuable in helping me develop trust and rapport with both staff and students. At the end of each site visit, I took field notes on what I learned and reflective and meaning-making processes relevant to the study and my own role as a researcher (e.g., questions that came up, ethical issues).

**Interviews**

36
The focus on students’ perspectives emerged from the need to examine viewpoints from a source that is rarely heard—students themselves (Howard, 2002), particularly students pursuing alternative paths in urban public schools and students labeled “dropouts” and presumed not to experience success in school. Yet, students leave school for multifaceted reasons, including personal and family health issues, adversities in the family home, foster care placements, and broader school failures.

To help gain a nuanced understanding of students’ educational experiences over time, I applied an adapted interview approach, which was informed by both phenomenology and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 2009). A mapping strategy was also embedded within the study’s interview protocol (Annamma, 2016). I asked participants \((N = 20)\) to create a visual “education journey map” of their education journey from pre-kindergarten to the program they were currently enrolled in; and posed closed- and open-ended questions to tap into their perspectives about experiences along the way (e.g., “What elementary school did you go to?”; “What was this school like for you?”; see Appendix A for examples of education journey maps completed by participants). I repeated the same set of questions for elementary, middle, and high school.

Adapted methods such as this can be particularly useful with students who have been historically disenfranchised (e.g., based on poverty, race and ethnicity, immigration status; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008), particularly to underscore barriers and milestones along paths to academic and career success. Discussions informed by education journey maps can also shed light on nuances in students’ educational experiences over time. Methodologically, education journey maps can be used as anchors during data collection (e.g., interviews)—they create points of reference to help participants remember and reflect on
information, serving as quality checks as participants provide information from past experiences that they can clarify and correct when their maps are in front of them during interviews. Taken together, methods such as timelines and visual maps have methodological value as quality checks during data collection and for triangulating data during analysis.

Overall, the one-to-one semi-structured interview centers on the way students understand and explain their experiences in the context of their lives (Seidman, 2013; see Appendix B: Interview Protocol). The interview protocol consists of four main sections based on students’ experiences: (a) educational experiences over time using the education journey mapping strategy (e.g., the schools they attended, what specific schools were like for them); (b) experiences in the study’s alternative program (e.g., what the program is like for them, what interactions with others are like); (c) everyday realities outside of school (e.g., responsibilities at home, work); and (d) education and career plans (e.g., future aspirations, questions about plans). The four sections of the interview and specific questions were developed to capture and understand nuances in students’ experiences over time (e.g., past, current, future) and were informed by thorough literature reviews of topics pertinent to the study, pilot and fieldwork experiences at the research sites, and my experience as an adult school teacher and work with adult learners pursuing nontraditional education pathways. Several topics from the literature pertinent to the study’s aims were examined, including the urban schooling experiences of students of color, adult education, and career development.

One semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the 20 students who participated in interviews (i.e., the focal sample of the study). Interviews lasted from 34 to 95 minutes and took place in a private room at the research site. Once participants’ consent was obtained, interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis.
Surveys

Following students’ one-to-one interview, participants were asked to complete a survey (see Appendix C: Survey). I asked students to complete the survey on their own time—at home or while at the site—and to return it to me either in person when I was at the site or to leave it in my box in a secure envelop at the site. Out of the 20 participants who were interviewed, 16 students returned their completed survey (response rate = 80%). I conducted additional outreach for the survey with participants who did not initially return it, including a phone call and email, and some students requested the survey be mailed to them, which I did with a self-addressed and stamped return envelope (e.g., students who moved out of the area, did not regularly attend the program). As with the interview protocol, survey questions were informed by thorough literature reviews of topics pertinent to the study, pilot and fieldwork experiences at the research sites, and my experience as an adult school teacher. The survey included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions and topics on similar themes with those of the one-to-one interview—students’: (a) high school experiences (e.g., “Students leave high school for many reasons, what led to you leaving high school?”); (b) experiences in the study’s alternative program (e.g., “On average, how many assignments do you tend to complete and submit to your teacher per week?”); (c) everyday realities outside of school (e.g., “If you currently work, how many hours a week do you work?”); (d) education and career plans (e.g., “Do you intend to complete additional education after you get your high school diploma and/or equivalency credential?”); and (e) demographic information.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of examining, categorizing, and triangulating both qualitative and quantitative evidence attained over time from three sources of information—participant
observation, interviews, and surveys. Informed by Merriam (2009), the nature of analysis was both iterative and rigorous, and occurred in multiple phases: exploratory analysis (phase 1), content analysis and iterative coding (phase 2), and final coding and quality checks (phase 3).

Analysis formally began with two rounds of exploratory analysis (phase 1). The first round of exploratory analysis took place as interviews were being concurrently transcribed. Quotes from participants that seemed to reflect pivotal lived experiences were flagged and kept in a separate spreadsheet and both descriptive and interpretative notes were taken on the quotes. The second round of exploratory analysis took place once interviews were fully transcribed. This round of exploratory analysis was informed by the classic case studies approach (Yin, 2017), and centered on discussions of case studies of individual participants, including students’ educational journeys over time and pivotal school and lived experiences during elementary, middle, and high school. The purpose of these conversations was to provide background and context for understanding students’ experiences. Discussions of case studies took place within a research team and collaborative format and occurred between myself and three undergraduate students who I trained on qualitative research analysis and guided through the process. Case study documents were also developed and both descriptive and interpretive notes were taken that were then reviewed by the research team to inform collaborative discussions on individual cases during weekly team meetings. This twofold exploratory analysis process underscores the iterative nature of the analysis that took place for the study and that paved the way for future rounds of analysis and the development of the study’s finalized codebook.

Following this exploratory analysis phase, which focused more on the perspectives and experiences of individual students, I built upon a common reality for participants—the need to work to financially support themselves and family, which was unearthed from examining
individual quotes in interviews—to develop preliminary coding categories and draft a codebook that I used in multiple rounds of iterative coding (phase 2). Building upon responses to work-related questions in interviews (e.g., “What responsibilities do you have outside of school?”; “Do you work?”; “What do you do?”; “What is your job title?”), I identified key quotes centered on the role that work played in participants’ lives and developed detail-oriented questions to investigate the role of work more systematically (e.g., Why do students work?; What are the challenges and benefits of working?; What are students’ aspirations?). Categories were then developed for each question based on recurring patterns in the data and evaluating the data in terms of how it related to the purpose of the study and research questions (e.g., the role work and juggling multiple commitments played in why students left their traditional high school for the study’s alternative program, the challenges students continued to face in the study’s alternative program, students’ strengths and determination to complete their secondary education and pursue their career goals, the value students placed on their education). Categories were also informed by the two overarching theoretical frameworks of the study [i.e., risk and resilience (e.g., challenges and benefits of working), and Bronfenbrenner’s tenets for understanding development in context (e.g., students’ diverse aspirations, including those centered on their education, career, family, and quality of life and wellbeing)]. Categories were added to the codebook as they emerged (e.g., why students work, challenges and benefits of working, students’ aspirations).

Building upon themes and recurring patterns of meaning identified in participants’ own words in interviews, I also engaged in content analysis based on the frequency and variety of messages (Merriam, 2009). The nature of this process was iterative, which allowed me to reexamine and adjust the codebook as patterns were uncovered and categories were found to fit or fail to fit the patterns. Once saturation was met across patterns, the codebook was finalized,
and all interviews were then thoroughly reread from beginning to end and coded using the finalized codebook (phase 3). In order to check on the assignment of codes, this final stage of coding allowed me to perform a quality check on coding conducted during earlier rounds of analysis as the codebook was evolving.

I used Dedoose software for coding and during analysis.

**Conclusion**

The main motivation for the study was to describe the student experience from the student point of view. In the process emerged the centrality of work, particularly as it related to students’ persistence and determination to achieve their career goals (e.g., their multifaceted aspirations). As a result, data analysis focused on the role of work in students’ lives and paths to success, and implications that could be drawn from this understanding to promote students’ career development. In the next chapter, the findings chapter, many direct quotes are included, which center on common themes found during different phases of analysis:

1. Why do students leave traditional high schools?
2. What are the challenges and benefits of working for students?
3. What are students’ aspirations and questions about the future?
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

“You ain’t got school, you ain’t got nothing else.” [Camilo, 18 years old]

“I didn’t want to continue [my] education. Yeah, I just got tired of the work. . . . I didn’t see the value in education. Until I returned. Until it was a little too late. Too late and still working on it. I’m still working on it, but it will take me longer now.” [Gael, 20 years old]

Camilo and Gael value their education. However, salient factors outside of school have affected their progress and advancement in school [all names are pseudonyms (i.e., students, schools, etc.)]. Gael’s multiple commitments deplete his time and energy—from family and work demands, to schoolwork, and he “just got tired of the work.” While factors inside and outside of the school context have been found to affect student outcomes, a significant pull factor emerged as a salient theme from the findings—the compelling need to work for students from low-income communities.

In this chapter, I present three major findings. First, while push and pull factors inside and outside of school affect student outcomes, I found that difficult economic realities can compel students to work and work can pull students away from traditional high schools and continue to present challenges in alternative programs that offer high school credentials (i.e., even in part-time, independent study, and “flexible” alternative programs that offer high school credentials, including both the traditional diploma and equivalency credentials). Further, I found that work can intersect with other factors in students’ lives (e.g., personal adversities, family commitments, instability and school mobility). Second, in addition to its costs, I found that work can play positive and motivational roles—across their educational journeys, students benefited from work experiences and on-the-job training in important ways (e.g., psychological benefits, skill development). And third, students’ aspirations and questions about the future underscore the value and interconnectedness of multiple aspects of their lives—career, education, and family—
and emphasize the need to better integrate career readiness and development initiatives across diverse levels of education (e.g., traditional and alternative programs in secondary education, adult education).

Participants, young adults from working-class communities of color, were pursuing high school credentials in an alternative program administered by the adult education division of an urban public school district in Southern California. All participants (N = 20) are young adults, ranging in age from 18 to 23. When data was collected over the 2017-18 school year, the specific site of the study served a range of approximately 65 to 100 students—enrollment fluctuates because of the program’s rolling enrollment policy, which allows enrollment throughout the school year, permitting space at individual program centers. At the time of data collection, participants had been enrolled in the study’s alternative program from less than 1 month to 5 years. Like the demographics of the student population served by the site of the study, participants are predominantly Latinx (80%) from working-class communities. Half of the sample are first-generation immigrants (50%). Most participants’ parents’ highest level of education completed ranges from “no schooling completed or less than 1 year” to “high school.” Demographics of the study’s overall sample are presented in Table 3.1, and characteristics of the student interview sample are presented in Table 4.1 [e.g., current employment status, grade when left traditional/comprehensive high school, total number of school changes (K-12), length of enrollment in study’s alternative program].
Over half of the participants were employed at the time of the study (i.e., paid employment; 60%; n = 12). However, applying the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ definition of the labor force participation rate (i.e., employed or looking for work), most students in the study were currently employed, actively looking for work, or interested in finding a job (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). The study’s employed subset worked an average of 39.5 hours per week (M = 39.5, range: 24-70)—most had one job (67%; n = 8) and a third had two jobs (33%; n = 4). Most participants held service jobs, ranging from sales and retail, such as sales associate at a department store to sales lead at a cellphone store, to management roles, such as manager at a grocery store. An employment overview (e.g., job title, average work hours per week, length of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Current Employment Status</th>
<th>Current Grade</th>
<th>School Length of Enrollment</th>
<th>School Status</th>
<th>School Changes (K-12)</th>
<th>Length of In Study’s Alternative Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alejandra</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2 years</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>12th</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>9th</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9 months</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>3 months</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 year</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Latina</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>10th</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2 months</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Employed</td>
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<td>2 years</td>
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</tr>
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<td>10</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>12th</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 months</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>3 months</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4 months</td>
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<td>Martin</td>
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<td>Latino</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1 month</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Rodrigo</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>1 month</td>
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<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>11th</td>
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<td>5 years</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1 year</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trissa</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7 months</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a All student names are pseudonyms.
employment with current employer) and the career plans of the study’s employed subset are presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2
Employment Overview and Career Plans of Study’s Employed Subset (n = 12).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Average Work Hours/Week</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Length of Employment with Current Employer</th>
<th>Career Plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alejandra</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Sales Associate</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>Veterinarian/Designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andres</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Valet</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Vocational Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriela</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Caretaker</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Veterinarian/Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gael</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>Automotive Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julieta</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>Caretaker</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>Chef/Veterinarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorena</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Store Manager</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td>Medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Store Manager</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Business Owner</td>
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<td>Luna</td>
<td>Varies</td>
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<td>Martin</td>
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<td>Sales Lead</td>
<td>16 months</td>
<td>Business Owner</td>
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<td>Sofia</td>
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<td>Cashier</td>
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<td>30</td>
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<td>Trissa</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Security</td>
<td>Seasonal</td>
<td>Nursing/Cosmetology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall Averages: 39.5 hours/week, 20 months

All student names are pseudonyms.

Student Vignettes: Narratives of Persistence and Resilience

To provide background and context for the central findings and themes of the study, which I describe in the subsequent sections of this chapter (e.g., “Need to Work to Financially Support Self and Family,” “Challenges and Benefits of Working,” “Aspirations”), this section provides descriptions of students and their experiences. I describe representative cases to illustrate the focal theme of the study—the complex role of work for students who need to work due to difficult financial circumstances, including both the negative interference of work with school (e.g., attendance, focus on school) and the positive and contributive roles of work in students’ lives (e.g., economic returns, and sense of purpose, responsibility, and motivation). I
found that students benefit from working in both the short and long run (e.g., economic mobility, skill and career development and opportunities, psychological benefits).

Equally important, students’ narratives and experiences capture a common thread of the study—the persistence and resilience of students from the perspectives of students themselves. Despite barriers and challenges in their everyday lives (e.g., difficult economic realities, instability and school mobility, multiple commitments and responsibilities), students continued to persist in ways not always recognized by others, including schools (e.g., drive and determination to succeed, learning and skill development from work opportunities). Grounded in students’ everyday realities and life circumstances, students’ narratives provide another way to view persistence and resilience from the student point of view.

**Sofia, “I have to keep going”**

Sofia is a 22-year-old Latina. She was born in Mexico and immigrated to the U.S. when she was 3 years old with her mother, brother, and sister. Currently, Sofia lives with her mother. Like the majority of students in the study’s alternative program, Sofia lives in an urban area of Southern California that is largely Latinx and where an estimated 21% live below the poverty line and close to half of the population was born in another country (i.e., mainly in Latin America; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Sofia lives approximately 2 miles from the alternative program and relies on public transportation to get to and from places (e.g., work, school). While she has attended the study’s alternative program for 5 years, her attendance has been sporadic and she has not consistently submitted coursework—consistent coursework completion and submission are critical components of maintaining progress toward completing a high school diploma in the program. Like other students in the study, for Sofia, life circumstances, including a major car accident, family issues, challenging financial circumstances, school and residential
mobility, and reliance on public transportation, have negatively impacted her schooling and attendance along the way. Sofia left her traditional high school at the beginning of 11th grade and her educational journey is laden with mobility and poor attendance—Sofia has attended 2 elementary schools, 1 middle school, and 3 high schools (see Appendix A for Sofia’s education journey map).

However, like other students in the study, despite challenging circumstances and experiences, Sofia’s narrative is also one of persistence and resilience. Sofia aspires to be a nurse and she is close to completing her high school diploma. To obtain her diploma, she needs to complete one final course and pass 5 subject tests to earn her equivalency credential, which will give her the remaining credits she needs to obtain her diploma. Additionally, for Sofia, working allows her to support herself financially and to sustain her livelihood. Currently, Sofia works full time as a cashier at a “donut shop.” However, like other students in the study, despite having a job, Sofia still struggles financially, as she lives in an area of Southern California that has a high cost of living. Further, her job and the taxing nature of juggling multiple commitments and challenging circumstances, have at times, pulled Sofia away from school—illustrating how work can also be a pull factor that pulls students away from school.

The role of work in Sofia’s life underscores the complex role of work for students—the cons, the pros, and the consequences of challenging everyday realities (e.g., difficult financial circumstances, instability and school mobility). Yet, when she can, Sofia continues to show up to school and to turn in coursework in order to obtain her diploma. In her interview, when asked about whether she has ever thought about leaving school again, Sofia’s response permeates with examples of persistence and resilience, characteristics not always associated with students.
attending alternative and adult education programs—characteristics that challenge negative perceptions and deficit narratives of students as “dropouts” and “unmotivated:”

I have at some point. When I’ve gone through so much. Of course, I do think about it but then I always feel like I have to keep going for the same reason. So, I just kind of let positivity come out of what I’m going through. I have to keep going for the same reason. I work at a donut shop so, of course, I don’t want to work there all my life. And that’s what I always tell myself. . . I just can’t work there all my life.

Sofia has “gone through so much” in her life, and she values her education and strives for better outcomes (e.g., “I see myself as a nurse with my own place . . . I just want to see myself at that point first”). Although her educational journey has been interrupted time and again with school mobility (e.g., she has attended 6 different schools and programs across her K-12 education), Sofia has continuously reenrolled in school and has tried out multiple program and delivery models based on traditional and standardized curriculum (i.e., within traditional and alternative programs) to obtain her high school diploma. Importantly, however, although her income has allowed her to support herself, Sofia’s narrative also underscores the need for career readiness measures in schools that promote economic mobility and career advancement (i.e., “I work at a donut shop . . . I just can’t work there all my life”), which I address in the discussion chapter (i.e., career development initiatives in schools).

Lucas, “I don’t wanna give it up”

Lucas is a 20-year-old Latino. He was born in El Salvador and immigrated to the U.S. when he was 12 years old (see Appendix A for Lucas’ education journey map). Lucas was separated from his mother when he was 3 years old when she came to the U.S. without him and then reunited with her 9 years later. In his interview, Lucas talks about the emotional toll of this separation and its negative impact on his schooling:

I was getting in the mentality . . . I don’t fit in school . . . I don’t have my parents to help me with my homework and when I get out of school, I would see my friends get picked
up by their mom or dad . . . so that’s when I started going more toward the job kinda thing.

For Lucas, work has and continues to play a pivotal role in his life. In addition to quantifiable gains (e.g., economic gains and financial independence), work has played less visible, yet deep positive and motivational roles in Lucas’ life that have promoted a sense of purpose and drive that school and his formal education have not always provided. However, Lucas also understands the value of learning and development and is determined to stay on course and finish his diploma:

I’ve been going through a lot, and I don’t wanna give it up . . . Last year I had the chance to do it, to finish it, but it threw me off, like some stuff that happened in the last year, it threw me off, I got disappointed in myself.

For Lucas, difficult circumstances and experiences and their emotional ripple effects, have interfered with his schooling (e.g., his girlfriend’s miscarriage). However, while both Lucas and Sofia have been “through a lot,” they are determined to persist and pursue their education. Lucas aspires to be a business owner and operate a chain of supermarkets. While Lucas has attended the study’s alternative program for 3 years, he is close to completing his high school diploma. To obtain his diploma, Lucas needs to complete 2 courses and pass 5 subject tests to earn his equivalency credential, giving him the remaining credits to obtain his diploma. Additionally, for Lucas, working allows him to support himself financially and live independently in an apartment of his own. Currently, Lucas works full time as a manager at a supermarket where he has worked at for 4 years. However, Lucas and other students in the study can also benefit from supports and measures in schools and beyond them that promote their wellbeing and mental health as they face difficult life circumstances and setbacks.

Both Lucas and Sofia have been impacted in important and positive ways by work. While their jobs have sometimes negatively impacted their schooling, they have also positively
impacted their everyday lives. Work has filled gaps that provided means to ends, including an ability to thrive among difficult economic realities and life circumstances (e.g., Lucas left his traditional high school in 11th grade because of his “job”—he felt more motivated and encouraged by his work experiences than by his schooling experiences). However, there is also room for improvement—Lucas, Sofia, and the career goals of other students in the study speak to the need to provide supports and assistance in schools that promote the economic mobility and career advancement of students from low-income communities who want and need to work and face taxing commitments in order to sustain their livelihoods in areas with high costs of living.

**Samantha, “I want to be successful”**

Samantha is a 19-year-old Latina. Her circumstances exemplify the desire and need to work based on difficult and unstable financial circumstances. While Samantha was not working at the time of the study, she was “desperately” looking for a job:

**Interviewer:** Do you have any responsibilities outside of school?

**Samantha:** I’m currently trying to look for a job cause when my uncle moves out, I’m going to have to pay rent and bills so that is my responsibility.

**Interviewer:** Do you currently work?

**Samantha:** Not yet, but I’m hoping and looking for a job. I’m desperate, so desperate.

**Interviewer:** What kind of work are you interested in obtaining?

**Samantha:** Honestly anything. As long as they teach me, I’ll probably get it quick.

**Interviewer:** Have you worked in the past?

**Samantha:** No.

Samantha’s life and educational journey have been laced with ups and downs—challenging life circumstances (e.g., her parents’ separation, substance abuse in her family, difficult economic circumstances, unstable living conditions) and residential and school mobility (e.g., she has
attended 5 different schools across her K-12 education; see Appendix A for Samantha’s education journey map). Yet, school has remained a priority for Samantha and she deeply values her education. In her interview, when asked about what made her decide to return to school and get her diploma, Samantha shares:

I want to be successful. I don’t want to be living a shitty life. I believe I can make myself stable and I want to be a nurse or cosmetologist or a dentist. I think that would be one of my main goals and I will do it.

Like other students in the study, Samantha has multiple aspirations that intersect her education, career, family, and quality of life and wellbeing. However, her positive aspirations are also mixed with uncertainty and pressure about the future. Samantha and other students in the study feel behind—behind in their schooling and progress toward their career goals. Students find themselves in an alternative program trying to complete their high school diploma, after their education has been interrupted time and again by various push and pull factors (e.g., challenging life and financial circumstances, instability and mobility, multiple commitments grounded in the school-work-life balance, unengaging learning experiences at school) and the pressure to obtain their diploma and pursue further education and their career is mounting.

As I discuss in the “Aspirations” section of this chapter and in the discussion chapter, students can benefit from initiatives that address rising pressure and uncertainty about their career plans and future, as well as barriers that place additional constraints on students’ taxing schedules and commitments (e.g., rigid general education requirements based on rote assignments that are not applicable to students’ career interests). I suggest that administrators and policymakers reconsider and reevaluate curriculum requirements and pedagogies (e.g., reevaluate traditional high school curriculum requirements and the quality and quantity of assignments required for course credits for the diploma in alternative programs, update the
curriculum and assignments to promote applied and experiential learning, ensure that earning credits for work experience and prior learning are viable and accessible options for students who need and want to work).

**Why Students Leave Traditional High Schools and Struggle in Alternative Programs**

In contrast to traditional, comprehensive high schools, the alternative program at the center of the study follows an independent study model and provides several options to students for reigniting and completing their secondary education—a traditional high school diploma, a high school equivalency credential, and both a diploma and equivalency credential for those students who are extremely behind on credits (i.e., students earn credits from passing the equivalency credential and use them toward their diploma). Further, the alternative program’s attendance requirements are less rigid than those traditionally found in comprehensive high schools—although students have access to teachers, teacher assistants, and other support staff, students complete most of their coursework independently and have the option to work on assignments in the classroom or to borrow textbooks to complete coursework outside of school. Further, students are expected to meet with their teacher and to turn in course assignments once a week as outlined in course contracts. This flexibility of the alternative program is beneficial to students who work and manage multiple commitments. However, this scenario also has its shortcomings. Sofia, a 22-year-old Latina who works approximately 28 hours a week as a cashier at a “donut shop” and faces “family issues” and instability, demonstrates this:

That’s when I came here [the study’s alternative program] and . . . I was working at another job. . . . I wouldn’t stay . . . consistent with the program. But I would still show up and bring work when I did come. . . . I had a lot of classes missing.

In the study, students who managed taxing commitments and life circumstances struggled with being able to consistently turn in coursework to earn required credits in the study’s alternative
program—an integral component of maintaining progress toward completing their diploma in the program.

**Need to Work to Financially Support Self and Family**

The decision to leave their former traditional high school went beyond a matter of choice and a lack of desire to succeed—for most participants, a significant draw was work and the compelling need to financially support themselves and families. Martin, a 23-year-old Latino who began working at 16 and worked approximately 35 hours a week as a sales lead in a cellphone store while attending the study’s alternative program, explains:

I was 16 . . . when I started working. I started making money—something my mom couldn’t give me. . . . She was taking care of us—my sister, my brother, and me by herself. At that time, my mom was single . . . [and she] was struggling trying to get us in a good place and for us to be good, but it was getting really hard. Then I needed to go to work to help with rent. . . . So I was helping my mom out with rent and I started saving money as well and I saved for a car. . . . At that moment, it felt like I was more proud of myself. . . . I felt motivated, but I got motivated in a different way—not school, but to work. . . . I was like, forget this, I’m just going to work . . . this is helping me—not school.

At 16, Martin was compelled to work and he began to carry a large financial weight in his family, helping his mother with rent, as she struggled as a single parent to support her children (i.e., “I needed to go to work to help with rent”). Further, work served a motivational role for Martin and his income contributed to his quality of life in an immediate and tangible way—not school (i.e., “work . . . this is helping me—not school”).

However, beyond the benefits of working (e.g., economic returns, motivation), most participants also reported challenges about how their jobs negatively interfered with school—in both traditional schools and alternative secondary education programs (e.g., attendance, focus on school). When describing how she was compelled to work because of difficult financial circumstances and how work pulled her away from her traditional high school, Gabriela, a 19-
year-old Latina who works an average of 70 hours a week while attending the study’s alternative program, maintains, “It was just hard growing [up]. So yeah maybe if I didn’t have to work it would’ve been way easier and I would’ve stayed in school.” Similarly, in discussing the central role that work played in pulling her away from her former traditional high school, Sylvia, a 22-year-old Latina who works approximately 30 hours a week as a teacher’s assistant while attending the alternative program, explains:

I was 16 . . . and my parents don’t make much and my brother was already working and it still wasn’t enough. So I was like, . . . I should start working and I thought maybe if I sign myself into continuation school I’ll have time for work as well. But then work got in the way, I got more hours, and just left again . . . and I just kept working and working.

Faced with difficult economic realities, Sylvia was compelled to start working when she was a minor—she explains the role of her parents and siblings in this dynamic:

I knew I had to help [my parents]. I know the parents are supposed to help . . . the children, but I feel like I just needed to. Same with my brother. . . . he helps out a lot. So I was like, I can’t just be . . . here doing [nothing]—I have to help as well and my sister was really tiny, so she couldn’t do much.

Prior to enrolling in the study’s alternative program, Sylvia, Gabriela, and Martin were compelled to work because of financial difficulties in their family and home lives and work was a significant draw in pulling them away from their traditional high schools—work negatively impacted their school attendance, completion of schoolwork, and “focus on school.”

Taken together, nearly all participants who worked faced financial pressure to do so because of difficult economic realities within their family and home lives. Like Sylvia, Gabriela, and Martin, Lucas, a 20-year-old Latino, who works approximately 45 hours a week at a grocery store while attending the alternative program, reports that he left his former traditional high school in order to become financially self-sufficient:

We leave school because of jobs. . . . As soon as you start to see money . . . that’s when students, you know, start to be, like, . . . I get money right now that I’m young right here.
With studies, you know, I’m just losing my time, cracking my head... They could go out... they could buy whatever they want, if you want to buy a car... mostly students will go for the money.

Lucas’, Sylvia’s, Gabriela’s, and Martin’s experiences provide insight into pull factors outside of the school context that compel students to leave traditional high schools. Further, their experiences raise important questions surrounding how alternative programs that offer high school credentials may also not align with the needs of working students. As young adults from working-class communities of color, participants’ lived realities highlight difficult economic realities and taxing demands placed on their time and energy, as well as conflicts with rigid school requirements and unengaging learning environments (e.g., attendance, rote assignments).

Indeed, as Lucas questions the value and quality of his former traditional high school, he suggests it was a waste of time (e.g., “I’m just losing my time, cracking my head,” which also has a stressful undertone).

**Family commitments.** Further, while the role of work was salient, it also intersected with other factors and circumstances in students’ lives. Family commitments resulting from difficult financial realities and other conditions in the family home played a critical role in compelling students to work. In addition to the central role that work played in pulling her away from her former traditional high school, Gabriela has two jobs and works an average of 70 hours a week to help support her siblings and mother, who is disabled. As she explains:

I basically have to make food for [every]one at the house and really provide for the family because my older brother right now isn’t working so I am the one [earning] the income and my mom... doesn’t get a lot because she is disabled for life... We have to budget a lot, we have a lot of things to pay like I wish I would’ve never gotten a car, just one off the streets. I wouldn’t have to make payments and my insurance wouldn’t be too high because if you are under 25 then you have to pay more for full coverage.

Gabriela’s difficult financial and life circumstances compel her to work, and her lived reality captures the intense nature of demands placed on some students. Even as a young adult,
Gabriela’s wages heavily supply the livelihoods of her siblings and disabled mother. In addition to two jobs and the financial and emotional weight she carries as a caretaker for her mother, Gabriela is responsible for major household tasks (e.g., cooking), which places additional constraints on her time and interferes with school (i.e., the study’s alternative program).

Further, I found that family commitments evolve incrementally. For some, investment in the family goes beyond the short term and appears enduring. As young adults, and even when they were minors, some participants play a central role in supporting the wellbeing of numerous family members—parents and siblings, and for those who are parents, their own children. Beyond contributing to rent and other family expenses (e.g., groceries, insurance), some participants take care of younger siblings and other family members and manage household tasks (e.g., cooking for the family).

However, while the need to financially support themselves and their families is salient, participants also shared positive contributions of working on their quality of life and work experiences that promote their career development with skill development and opportunities for advancement. Taken together, the study’s findings provide a new way of understanding the needs of students who work and the central role of work in their paths to academic and career success.

Descriptives for the reasons that students work for the study’s employed subset are presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3
Reasons Students Work for Study’s Employed Subset (n = 12).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need to Financially Support Self and Family</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Circumstances and Adversities</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Development and Quality of Life</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Life Circumstances and Adversities

In addition to difficult economic realities, other salient life circumstances compelled most participants to start working as a minor and to continue to work as an adult. Julieta, an 18-year-old Latina, began working as a teenager and explains:

When I hit 8th grade things just started getting complicated at home like with money and my parents, so it was really hard for me to stay focused. And I would go to work with my mom after school, she would be waiting for me after school, I would go to work. And so I got really distracted with school because I just kept thinking about work and money instead of school, friends, you know—things that a teenager . . . think[s] about. And then 9th grade, my dad left to Mexico. . . . So it just got more complicated on me because I was the oldest daughter. . . . I was trying to pay attention all the time, but I couldn’t because I was just think[ing] of, ‘Oh I have to get home, I gotta do this or I gotta call my sister to make sure she gets home’ and I don’t know I just kinda put school to the side and put my siblings first.

Julieta underscores the multifaceted nature of the need to work for students—difficult financial circumstances, personal adversities, and family commitments. Julieta began to work as a teenager to help support her family’s livelihood because of the instability in her home—her family’s struggles to make ends meet and when her father left to Mexico, as the eldest daughter, the intense financial and caretaking responsibilities she was compelled to take on for her siblings. Julieta reflects on how her family’s circumstances and financial struggles ignited a focus on work and how this negatively impacted her schooling, particularly her engagement and focus in school.

For Julieta and others in the study who began working as minors, work continued to play critical roles in their lives into adulthood. Like Julieta, Lorena, a 19-year-old Latina, worked to support herself and to reconnect with her husband. Lorena’s father played an important role in this, as she describes:
My dad is supporting me with the economic part because I don’t pay rent, food, so that really helps me a lot that I don’t have to pay that. I’m trying to do everything at the same time, I work then I’m seeing a lawyer because I want to bring my husband over here, so I have to earn money and I’m coming to school. [I’m] very stressed out, but he helps me out a lot with that. Not having too much stress, not thinking I have to pay my food, pay this and that, he helps me with that part.

Lorena’s father’s support is pivotal in helping to alleviate stress associated with expensive rent and food costs, especially considering that Lorena and the other participants in the study live in areas of Southern California with high costs of living. With her father’s financial support, Lorena is also able to afford an attorney to help her husband immigrate to the U.S. Without her father’s financial help and support, Lorena would be more stressed and overwhelmed (i.e., “[I’m] very stressed out, but [my father] helps me out a lot with that. Not having too much stress, not thinking I have to pay my food, pay this and that, he helps me with that part.”). Indeed, difficult everyday realities and adversities can weigh heavily on participants, while at the same time, the income they earn from work can be used for necessities and to contribute positively to the quality of their lives, as in Lorena’s case, as she uses her income to support herself and to pay attorney’s fees so that she can reunite with her husband.

**School hypermobility.** Another central feature of participants’ circumstances is hypermobility (Ream, 2005; Rumberger, 2015; Rumberger, et al., 1999). Although mobility manifests itself in students’ lives in various ways, school mobility is substantial. Participants attended an average of 6.65 different schools across kindergarten to grade 12 ($M = 6.65$, range: 4-10). Participants had the most school changes in high school with an average of 3.65 different high schools attended ($M = 3.65$, range: 2-7), which included moves to different types of secondary schools—from traditional, comprehensive public schools, to alternative contexts, such as online and independent study programs. Descriptives for school changes across kindergarten to grade 12 for the study’s overall sample are presented in Table 4.4.
Table 4.4
*School Changes from Education Journey Maps for Study’s Overall Sample (N = 20).*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>M</th>
<th>Range</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Schools</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Schools</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Schools</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>2-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total K-12 Schools</td>
<td>6.65</td>
<td>4-10</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Some participants reported that school changes stemmed from complex family dynamics and adversities. Alejandra, a 20-year-old Latina, describes school mobility as “always moving up and down to schools” and explains:

I was doing really bad at Franklin. It’s like there was no hope for me there. . . . I think it was one of my friends that told me about Ortega because she was moving from Franklin to Ortega [all school names are pseudonyms].

Alejandra’s lived experiences underscore the multifaceted nature of the dynamics that trigger school mobility. While Alejandra declares “there was no hope for [her]” at her first middle school and labels herself a “troublemaker,” as she regularly ditched school with peers—pointing to complex dynamics and adversities that more accurately impacted her school mobility, Alejandra discusses growing up with a sibling who battled drug addiction, being removed from her family home and placed in foster care several times throughout her childhood, and being raised by a single parent. Reflecting back on her childhood experiences and life circumstances, she underscores, “So much going on in [the] family. . . . Wow, you know, we’re so young, yet we go through so much.” Similarly, Martin discusses the role his parents’ separation played in his life:

My parents’ divorce . . . so we were trying to figure out where we were going to go. So we were going from town to town. . . . I was only thinking about work and my parents fighting all the time . . . 2 months with my mom and 2 months with my dad. So I was going back and forth.
Martin’s parents’ separation triggered residential mobility and negatively impacted his educational journey—he was pulled away from school and compelled to work at 16 to help his mother financially, as she struggled to support him and his siblings.

Hence, although the need to work emerged as a significant draw in pulling students away from school, other factors inside and outside of the school context played a role too. For most students in the study, life circumstances and everyday realities (e.g., difficult economic realities, personal adversities, school mobility) played an impactful role in their educational journeys. When describing what she believes could have helped her stay in school and graduate high school on time, in addition to discussing the central role that work played in leaving her traditional high school, Gabriela maintains, “It was just hard growing [up] . . . maybe if I didn’t move a lot or if I actually had a routine, I would’ve been fine.” However, while work and life circumstances presented unique challenges, despite the costs, quality and meaningful work experiences and opportunities provided returns.

**Career Development and Quality of Life**

Beyond being compelled to work to support their own and family’s livelihoods, many participants’ work experiences also served to promote their career development. While for some participants, work interfered with school, it also provided essential income that contributed to the quality of their lives and paved the way for skill development and opportunities for career advancement, as Martin describes—“I am a big part of the company and I have been doing this since I was 16. . . . I want to open up a family business, . . . a cellphone store.” Martin’s lived experiences underscore the developmental and incremental benefits of work experience—Martin gained and developed numerous skills from work experiences, and he was able to hone plans for building his own business with his family (i.e., a cellphone store). Had Martin stayed in his
traditional high school, his school and work schedule would have continued to conflict and to negatively impact the work experiences and skills he gained over time.

Many participants also recognized that their career development and quality of life intersected, as illustrated by Alejandra—“I do plan on hopefully becoming somebody successful. . . I don’t want to just, I don’t like sitting around and not doing anything. I like to keep myself busy so I definitely just hope to become successful.” Alejandra underscores the role and importance of work in life—to provide solace from dullness and boredom and to provide purpose and contribute to happiness and satisfaction, as Alejandra further explains when speaking about her plans to pursue a career she will “admire doing.”

Taken together, these findings have important implications for academic and career paths—findings underscore the need to consider and support students who need to work and to promote students’ career development, including high return short-term paths where students are able to enter career pathways in order to gain quality and meaningful work experiences and higher earnings. Difficult economic realities and the demands placed on students to work, especially those from low-income communities who live in areas with high costs of living, underscore the need for flexible and high-quality and diverse academic opportunities and environments that better align with students’ career interests and needs in and outside of the classroom (e.g., financial and basic needs). When discussing the reasons she enrolled in the study’s alternative program, Alejandra exemplifies this point—“I needed to go somewhere . . . where I can add them to my schedule, where they can work with my schedule. Be more flexible with your time.” Alejandra’s need for flexibility and academic pathways that “work with [her] schedule” because of her job demands and other life circumstances (e.g., personal adversities,
family commitments, reliance on public transportation) underscore our responsibility to consider and support students’ realities outside of school.

**The Challenges and Benefits of Working**

Working while a student is not an easy undertaking—costs are involved. For some students, particularly those who need to work because of difficult economic realities, managing school and work is like a constant balancing act. Indeed, for most participants, working has its disadvantages, particularly its interference with the time they dedicate to school assignments and the progress they make toward their high school diploma in the study’s alternative program. In addition to work demands, adverse experiences and multiple commitments interfere with school. However, while work can present challenges for students, it can also positively contribute to their lives and play salient positive and developmental roles.

**Challenges for Working Students**

**School-work-life balance.** Work can present challenges to students along different points in their educational journeys. In addition to pulling them away from traditional, comprehensive high schools, even in alternative programs that provide multiple forms of flexibility (e.g., flexible scheduling and attendance requirements, rolling and open enrollment, independent study, individualized instruction), students who work and face multiple commitments, can continue to endure challenges. Indeed, participants struggled with being able to consistently turn in coursework to earn required credits in the study’s alternative program—an integral component of maintaining progress toward completing their diploma in the program.

When asked whether they worked on school assignments outside of class for the study’s alternative program, most participants (85%; n = 17) indicated they did so in order to maintain progress toward credits they needed for their diploma. However, students struggled with this and
found it difficult to regularly turn in coursework. Alejandra recognizes she needs to dedicate more time to her assignments in order to make better progress and obtain her diploma—“I just need to improve in having more time for school and having to not focus on anybody else. I just need to improve on myself and realizing that school is the future.” Alejandra’s lived experiences underscore the complexities of having multiple commitments—school, work, and family—and the challenges associated with fulfilling commitments when stretched for time. Alejandra discusses how she manages to complete class assignments outside of school:

I even try to take [my homework assignments] to work, like my hour lunch break. . . . I try to at least get something done. . . . I [also] try to do homework assignments . . . out of work.

However, like other students, although Alejandra attempts to work on school assignments outside of school (i.e., “I try to at least get something done”), she has multiple responsibilities, including two jobs in order to help support her family and she relies on public transportation, which places additional constraints on her time.

In addition to work and other commitments, participants also shared adverse life experiences that negatively impacted their school attendance and interfered with schoolwork completion in both traditional school settings and the study’s alternative program. In addition to demanding work responsibilities, Lucas experienced an intense setback that kept him away from the study’s alternative program—he and his longtime girlfriend lost their unborn child:

I didn’t want to go [to school] . . . I [felt] sad too. Cause I was getting excited because . . . I was gonna be a dad. . . . Then it threw me off, you know, when [my girlfriend] had the miscarriage. Then months passed . . . and I’ve been just working again, just working and working, and working again with my studies to try and finish it off.

Prior to his loss, Lucas moved out of his mother’s apartment into his own apartment in order to provide for and support his girlfriend and once born, their child. In order to afford rent and other expenses on his own, he needed to work more hours, particularly because of the high costs of
living (e.g., rent, utilities, food) in the area of Southern California he lived in. Understandably, the aftermath and grieving from the traumatic loss of his child and his breakup with his longtime girlfriend, kept Lucas away from school and this impacted his ability to maintain progress toward his diploma in the study’s alternative program. Instead of going to school and completing assignments for his diploma, following his loss and breakup, Lucas immersed himself in his job. However, at the time of the study, Lucas was working to finish 2 classes that he had remaining to complete the coursework portion of his diploma (i.e., he also had to pass 5 subject tests to get his equivalency credential and earn the remaining credits needed for his diploma).

Further, Lorena, who worked as a grocery store manager approximately 48 hours a week, exemplifies the demands placed on students who juggle multiple commitments and face stressors:

[To] turn in homework . . . I have to almost always—I have to stay until 12[pm] then I have to work early at 7:30[am] or sometimes I have work until 12[am] in the night, so I’m just like all stressed out and sometimes I want to sleep in the day, but I can’t sleep because I have to finish my homework, so it’s like overwhelming.

Lorena’s multiple commitments place constraints on her time and weigh heavily on her emotionally. Beyond school and work, Lorena’s physical separation from her husband due to immigration issues adds another layer of stress. Hence, work was not the only challenge and commitment that competed with school and students’ progress. For some students, adverse experiences and life circumstances played salient roles and impacted their ability to regularly attend the study’s alternative program and maintain steady progress toward completing their diploma.

Indeed, in response to an interview question that asked participants what a typical day was like for them outside of school (i.e., the study’s alternative program), nearly all participants described multiple tasks and responsibilities, including work, raising their own child, and caring
for other family members (e.g., siblings, parents). Participants described demanding schedules with rigidity and emphasized how busy they were and how much they worked. Lucas, who works approximately 45 hours a week and has two different management shifts at work, describes what a typical day outside of school is like for him with three words—“work, work, work.” Martin also describes his life outside of school as, “Busy. I always have to do something.” Similarly, Gael, a 20-year-old Latino, shares:

[I] work then come home. [I’m] tired. [I] take a shower, take care of the baby, and then go back to doing homework if I have enough time. If not, [I] take care mostly of my little princess here [his daughter].

Further, Gabriela, who has two jobs and works an average of 70 hours a week, describes her demanding work schedule and daily routine in the following way:

I get up, take care of my mom, clean the house, I take my mom to her errands then I try to be with her as much [as I can] because I do have to be with her. I go to the gym then I go to work—the night job. I am there for the rest of the night then come home to sleep and same routine.

Based on her responsibilities and daily routine, it appears Gabriela has little time and space for much else—including school. Like Gael, Gabriela’s description of her responsibilities underscores the demanding nature for students of juggling multiple responsibilities (e.g., school, work, family).

Importantly, students differentiated between work that was meaningful to them and work that was not, and underscored opportunities for career advancement, as Lorena, who works as a grocery store manager approximately 48 hours a week describes:

I’m working at a Valencias right now and I really don’t like it. . . . I really want to study and get a better job. . . . I also want kids and would want them to have a good life—not like mine. . . . I mean, I want to have a house and doing this, you really don’t get paid much to get a house or a car or things like that. That’s why I come [to school].
Lorena’s lived experiences underscore the value of quality and meaningful work opportunities that align with students’ interests and provide opportunities for career advancement and economic mobility, which is particularly important for low-income communities like the students in the study who live in areas with high costs of living. Importantly, the overall emphasis among students was not on any type of work and work over training and education, but valuable opportunities that promote their career development, which itself is a multifaceted concept connected to quality of life.

**Benefits of Working for Students**

Although work interfered with school, students also benefited from the positive and motivational role of work in their lives. In the study, the benefits of quality and meaningful work experiences centered on career development and quality of life—beyond immediate benefits connected to income, meaningful work experiences offered opportunities for skill development and career advancement, which contributed to the quality of students’ lives (e.g., sense of purpose, economic mobility).

**Skill development.** Lucas describes salient returns from work experiences vividly—he emphasizes opportunities for skill development and economic mobility—“[B]ecause of work, it has given me a lot of skills to be out in the world too.” Lucas underscores the value of marketable soft skills he has gained from work experiences over time, which in Lucas’ case, can be applied to the development of his future business of operating his own chain of grocery stores. At the same time, Lucas values opportunities for growth and development and intends to obtain additional education and training beyond his high school diploma in order to gain improved job security and to develop and specialize his skills:

[If the company you work for goes out of business], and you don’t have a job, what else you gonna do? If you don’t have education, if you have a degree or a diploma backing
you up, you’re like, ‘I went to school for these years, I’m certified to do this and that, I’m learning a lot of things. . . .’ And I want to open my own business. If I want to do that, I want to know how to become a businessman—how to negotiate with people. Cause I do that a lot. I actually know [how] to be a manager [and how to] always be on top of everything. . . . Like you always gotta be a step ahead of [your employees]. Cause sometimes in my job . . . I have to step up. Cause I’m the second face of the department and that’s where all the three years that I’ve been [at my job], that I was supposed to be here [in school], . . . actually doing school, I was doing it at work.

Lucas raises several important points that juxtapose the challenges and benefits of student employment, including work commitments that interfere with the time students dedicate to schoolwork and yet, on-the-job experiences and training that provide opportunities for growth and development and promote valuable skills (e.g., leadership and soft skills, including communication and collaboration). Yet, these benefits can be accompanied with difficulties, as Lucas further emphasizes:

    If you learn your job well, you don’t need school, but . . . you’re killing yourself more and . . . now I wish I could go back to high school and . . . finish it when I was there instead of . . . ditching . . . thinking I’m gonna take a break . . . and I’m going to keep getting behind, and behind, and . . . I’m still behind.

Although Lucas has learned a vast amount from his work experiences, he presently works approximately 45 hours a week as a grocery store manager in addition to covering his supervisor’s demanding management position while he is out. Lucas expresses pressure and feels behind since his work demands and life circumstances have interfered with his schooling (e.g., attendance, schoolwork and diploma completion). However, although Lucas and other participants described the challenges of working while in school, the negatives do not outweigh the positives—participants emphasized the value of work experiences and opportunities that provide essential and immediate returns (e.g., income that contributes to their quality of lives and wellbeing).
Further, participants discussed the value of specific skills they gained from work experiences over time. Martin describes his responsibilities as a sales lead at a cellphone store in the following way:

I pretty much check on employees—[are] they following rules? . . . I still do manager stuff, but as sales lead I see when [our employees] are struggling with sales [and] I help out [with] bringing in customers. I jump in and ask if there is anything I can do to help them and customers. I have to make sure there is money for profit. . . . I do pretty much everything. . . . I do inventory, schedul[ing], and sales.

Martin’s extensive combination of skills and experiences, which he gained from his current job and work experiences over time are marketable and valuable—he has gained a tremendous amount of experience in sales and business and intends to develop his own business with his family. At the same time, Martin values his education and development. Martin shares that he left his former job because he was there “too many years . . . [and] wasn’t getting any . . . further . . . [and] need[ed] a better job” that pays more. Indeed, he “wanted to open [his] opportunities and see what [was] out there . . . [he] knew [he] had to get a diploma.”

Socio-emotional support. In addition to valuable and marketable skills gained from work experiences, some participants value interpersonal connections with co-workers and having a separate environment that provides a level of solace from everyday stressors. Alejandra illustrates this dynamic:

Actually my co-workers, . . . I mean we support each other. . . . They have like their own little problems where somebody gives them advice. . . . Except there is this guy, . . . he gives us all advice on like things in life and like what you want to become and stuff like that. So he’s kind of like a therapist because the way he talks and everything. So he’s actually a really good person. I feel like he’s a good person.

Alejandra’s lived experiences underscore the value of socio-emotional support gained from positive networks at work. For Alejandra, a supportive climate among co-workers is a positive addition in her life.
In summary, participants underscored the immediate and long-term returns of work (e.g., essential income, skill development, opportunities for career advancement, job security) while they attended both traditional high schools and alternative programs. Understanding that some students need to work (e.g., those from low-income communities) can serve to inform how to better align academic programs and supports with the interconnected needs of students (e.g., financial needs, basic needs, career development).

**Aspirations**

In response to an interview question about where they saw themselves in 5 years, participants described what they intended to become and achieve. Students’ aspirations center on five key themes—career, quality of life, education, family, and uncertainty and pressure about the future. Taken together, participants’ responses illustrate the interconnectedness of aspects of life beyond the school context that are valuable to students—beyond money and jobs, the different aspirational themes underscore the multi-dimensional nature of factors that contribute to growth and development. Further, students’ uncertainty about their goals can serve as an opportunity to discuss their interests and to promote career exploration activities.

Descriptives for students’ aspirations are presented in Table 4.5.

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<td>Career Aspirations</td>
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<td>Quality of Life Aspirations</td>
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<td>Familial Aspirations</td>
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<td>Uncertainty and Pressure about Future</td>
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Aspirational domains are not mutually exclusive—students often described different aspirations and did not discuss them in isolation from each other. For example, in describing her aspirations, Lorena shares, “Hopefully with a car, finishing college maybe, my husband over here, paying a house, maybe one child, and happy.” Several themes emerge in Lorena’s response, which center on her quality of life and wellbeing, education, and family—which underscores the multifaceted nature of aspirations. Importantly, interview questions were framed in an open-ended manner that gave participants autonomy and flexibility to focus on and describe the aspirations that mattered to them. Participants’ aspirations are described in order of prevalence.

**Career Aspirations**

Most participants shared career aspirations. Some participants described concrete occupations they saw themselves in, and others talked about their career as the multi-dimensional concept that it is—various life domains that contribute to quality of life, including job security to support the quality of family life. For example, a young father of an infant, Gael reports that he sees himself with a “steady job.” Similarly, Gabriela, who has two jobs and works an average of 70 hours a week to help support her siblings and disabled mother, maintains that she sees herself with a “better job” that pays more and offers stability. Like Gabriela, Alejandra reports that she sees herself with a “better job” that aligns with her interests in fashion and interior design, which she will enjoy in contrast to pursuing an occupation solely for its economic returns, as she specifies in the following—“I would like to . . . be going to a university and having something I admire doing. And . . . a better job.” In addition to economic mobility (i.e., “a better job”), Alejandra’s desire to pursue an occupation she will “admire doing” underscores tenets of a meaningful career that aligns with personal interests and enjoyment. Participants’ descriptions of
a personally meaningful career and quality of life underscore the need for academic and career paths and opportunities that consider students’ interconnected aspirations and their immediate financial and basic needs to support their own and family’s livelihood (e.g., high return short-term programs).

Quality of Life Aspirations

Equally important to most participants were aspects of their lives central to a good quality of life. Students described living conditions and social activities that positively contributed to their quality of life. Kaila, an 18-year-old African American who resided in a foster care placement facility, shares, “Living in my own apartment, living life, having a job, having fun, going out, hiking, just living my life.” For Kaila, having her own apartment and working to provide for herself is important. Also vital is independence and flexibility to live her life without the restrictions placed on her by the facilities she has lived in (e.g., group home rules and policies). Indeed, for Kaila, simply “living life” and “having fun” and health and physical activities like “hiking” are key.

Alejandra also speaks about the importance of having her own home and “not focus[ing] on everybody else, but just [her]self.” Alejandra resides with her mother and siblings, but she wants to be on her own so she can concentrate on her life and career goals without the pressures of supporting others. Alejandra shares, “Having just a home where I can relax, but that’s pretty much it. I do look forward to that.” Alejandra’s living conditions and financial responsibilities seem to weigh heavily on her. Alejandra continually shared her desire to focus more on herself instead of others:

I need to focus on myself. If I can’t make myself happy and do things I have to do, then I can’t make anybody happy, not even myself. And I feel like in order to be happy and be successful, you have to focus on yourself first and then focus on somebody else or something else . . . I want to be independent, like do things I have to do on my own and
have things to do and pay things on my own. I don’t want somebody to have to do all of that for me . . . I don’t want to depend on anybody so I feel . . . I need to focus on myself and become the person I want to become.

Alejandra’s response reflects a deep maturity and understanding of how to improve her quality of life (e.g., becoming financially self-sufficient). Focusing more on her own happiness and life goals seems to be something she regularly thinks about.

Education Aspirations

The next most salient aspiration for participants centers on their education. Most students described education aspirations, with most aspirations centered on college. Martin maintains, “In 5 years I can probably see myself . . . with a business or maybe finishing my 4 years in business administration going towards a big company that has a lot of benefits [and is] worth working for.” In addition to developing a cellphone business with his family, Martin discusses another possible path—one centered on college. He described his interests in pursuing a traditional college degree in business administration and working for a large company that provides benefits. Martin’s response underscores the value of considering and exploring different paths across one’s career and education, which Martin seems to have gained insight about from his work experiences over time. Martin is considering two main paths—pursuing his own business with the support of his family and building off his 7 years of relevant and hands-on work experiences and training, and pursuing a more traditional college path (i.e., a 4-year degree in business administration). Martin frames this college path as one that can lead to work with a large company that offers health insurance to its employees and is “worth working for,” which underscores the value students place on benefits beyond income (e.g., health insurance, stability).

Further, an understanding of students’ aspirations can be used to provide accurate information and demystify academic and career pathways. Gabriela embeds a college-related
question in her response, “With a house—hopefully by 25. Better job like more financially ready or stable and/or finishing college or finished with college because it’s like 4 years, right?”

Questions like Gabriela’s can be an opportunity to provide accurate information and resources—and in this particular case, to demystify college processes and discuss the multiple variables involved (e.g., in completing a traditional undergraduate degree in 4 years) and to also provide information about nontraditional paths, including adult education programs and high return short-term programs that may better align with the immediate financial needs and career goals of working adults.

**Familial Aspirations**

Some participants also described aspirations centered on family. Lorena shares, “Hopefully with a car, finishing college maybe, my husband over here, paying a house, maybe one child, and happy.” As described earlier, Lorena’s response illustrates the interconnected nature of aspirations. Yet, family seems central and pressing in Lorena’s response (i.e., “my husband over here,” “maybe one child”). Lorena wanting her husband to be “over here” is salient. Although married, at the time of the study, Lorena’s husband was in Mexico because of immigration issues, and she hired an immigration attorney to reunite with him in the U.S., which is where she wanted to build a family. Lorena sees herself being reunited with her husband and living in the U.S. in a home of their own.

Gael also describes family aspirations in his 5-year plan. Gael’s response centers on building his family, “Maybe after 5 more years, another kid. . . . I don’t want to have them too far apart.” Gael wants to grow his family and maintains he wants a “steady job.” A young father of an infant, Gael wants to add to his family and is considering specific characteristics of his
growing family, including the age difference of his children, and the importance of having steady work to support the quality of his family life.

Further, Martin describes his plans for building a family business and providing his family members concrete work opportunities. Martin’s plans have various implications for his family’s livelihood, particularly as connected to economic mobility. Martin describes these dynamics:

I tell my family to save money because I want to open up a family business and have my sister—well, she is also involved in the same path—[help] with sales and customer service. And she is already taking classes for business administration so together we would start something in the future, it would be a cellphone store.

Even as a young adult, Martin has amassed 7 years of work experience in sales and business, having worked since he was 16. Martin holds a lead sales position in a cellphone store and describes opportunities for career mobility and advancement he has experienced over time. Importantly, Martin’s family also plays a critical role in his career plans. Martin talks about building a family business and describes the various ways his family will be involved—from his family saving money to fund the family business, to the role his sister will play in sales and customer service, which aligns with the college classes she is taking in business administration. Martin’s tangible and critical involvement of his family in his career plans are intentional and collectivistic in nature. Involvement of multiple family members in the family business can also strengthen and extend the reach of Martin’s family business by capitalizing on various resources—from venture capital to seed the business from family savings, to social capital and the combined strengths of multiple family members.

**Uncertainty and Pressure about the Future**

On the other hand, some participants also expressed uncertainty when they spoke about where they saw themselves in the future. While expressing uncertainty when speaking about the
long-term future is not cause for alarm—it can be an opportunity to discuss concerns with students and provide supports where needed, including concrete action steps that align with students’ goals and more immediate financial and basic needs. Samantha, a 19-year-old Latina, describes:

Samantha: Where do I see myself in 5 years? That’s actually hard. . . . I don’t know. I ask myself this every day—where I see myself in 5 years. But, probably in school or being the person I want to be.

Interviewer: And what person do you want to be?

Samantha: Either a dentist or cosmetologist or RN, having a nice place, a car, and who knows . . . maybe a dog.

Interviewer: You’d have a dog?

Samantha: Yeah probably, that’d be my baby.

Initially, Samantha shared her aspirations in a more general sense—to complete additional education beyond her high school diploma and to grow and develop into “the person [she] wants to be.” Following this, she pointed out more specific aims, including precise occupations she is considering pursuing and future life circumstances that are more positive and stable than her current living conditions (e.g., “a nice place, a car . . . [and] a dog”). Samantha’s current living conditions are unstable, and she is not working, but she is looking for work, as she underscores earlier in her interview:

I want to be successful. I don’t want to be living a shitty life. I believe I can make myself stable. . . . I’m currently trying to look for a job cause when my uncle moves out, I’m going to have to pay rent and bills.

Similarly, Alejandra expresses, “I don’t know what I see myself doing in 5 years. Hopefully [I’ll] see my life together.” Like Samantha, Alejandra’s uncertainty is coupled with pressure to have her “life together.” Earlier in her interview, Alejandra speaks about living conditions and circumstances she wants to move away from by getting a place of her own, which
will contribute to a more peaceful quality of life—“Having just a home where I can relax.”

Again, Alejandra carries stressors and great financial responsibility in her family home, which consists of her mother and siblings, and she has two jobs. She expresses a strong desire to have a place of her own and to focus on her career and life goals, but alongside this, describes pressure to finish her high school diploma and pursue her education and a career path that leads to work as a veterinarian or designer:

I need to start looking into things because I need to start thinking about what I want to do and become. . . . It’s just something I think about and it’s just like what if I don’t think of something and it’s like too late.

Alejandra’s response underscores the complex process of education and career planning, which has important implications for school-based initiatives and supports that can be provided to students to promote their career development. Importantly, for Alejandra and others, the tension and pressure to make education and career decisions on their own and the expressions of “feeling behind” speaks to the importance of providing career development assistance and supports (e.g., career planning and exploration) within schools, and to advising students about academic and career paths that better align with both their immediate financial needs and future goals.

Questions about the future. In addition to analyzing the role of work in students’ lives, a fundamental purpose of the dissertation is to underscore the value of supporting students’ career development through work and other initiatives in schools (e.g., career advisement, exploration) in order to promote students’ paths to career success. To this point, while participants had future aspirations, most participants had questions that remained unanswered, which in practice, can be addressed with career development assistance and support services—implications for practice that I will address in the next chapter (i.e., discussion chapter).

Participants’ questions about the future are driven by uncertainty and clarification—uncertainty
about educational paths required to pursue specific occupations and how to evaluate different occupational interests, to how to balance schooling with work commitments and other life demands.

Although students’ desire for continuing their education beyond a high school credential is evident (e.g., 70% of participants indicated they intended to go to college), participants had questions about educational paths required to pursue specific occupations and how to evaluate various occupational interests. To this point, participants’ questions underscore various aspects central to the career decision-making process—from weighing options and evaluating occupational interests, to considering various personal needs and future payoffs and returns (e.g., ability to purchase a home). The array and depth associated with students’ questions underscores the value students place on having rewarding and sustainable careers (e.g., financially and personally rewarding). Indeed, students’ responses pointed to them having dedicated considerable thought to the future. It was evident that they had engaged in critical thinking and reflection over time about their career development and goals. Alejandra illustrates this:

I see everybody becoming nurses. And I know that’s good money to make, but it’s like do you love it? Do you or are you just doing it for the money? Like I don’t want to become that person who just becomes a nurse because it’s good money. Like I actually want to build myself in something that I love doing. And having to wake up and go to work and be like, ‘Oh I love doing this—I love coming to work.’ But it’s like I don’t want to do something I don’t love, like I don’t want to be there.

Alejandra’s response underscores important aspects of career development, and the complex process of education and career planning. Her response points to a vital understanding of choosing a career that meets various personal needs—something she will enjoy (i.e., “something that I love doing”) and will also allow her to maintain a good quality of life. Although nursing may pay well and is an occupation that is in demand, Alejandra questions pursuing an occupation solely for money (i.e., “I don’t want to become that person who just becomes a nurse because it’s
good money”) and she places value on pursuing an occupation that she will enjoy and will contribute to her happiness. Alejandra’s response also highlights a critical understanding of pursuing an occupation that provides opportunities for growth and development (i.e., “I actually want to build myself [emphasis added] in something that I love doing”). Alejandra’s depiction of “build[ing] [her]self” speaks to various forms of development—from growth in a career where she can learn and develop skills, to advancing in a career and experiencing economic mobility. Again, Alejandra’s response is centered on a varied and deep understanding of the nature of pursuing a career path that meets various needs and leads to positive outcomes and returns that influence various aspects of a good quality of life (e.g., sense of purpose, economic mobility).

Although Alejandra sees “everybody becoming nurses,” nursing does not seem to be a good fit for her. To this point, critical questions become—what is a better fit for her, and how can she be guided and supported along her journey? Indeed, Lorena expresses interest in obtaining help with developing her education and career plans—“Yeah, [I’d like help] because I don’t know what I should do and I’m still back and forth. . . . Even where should I study, like what schools?” Similarly, Isabel, a 20-year-old Latina, talks about having someone to go to at school that can provide guidance regarding her education and career plans—“Just a person to go to and ask questions on what’s next and what they can do to help me.” Indeed, there are many implications that can be drawn from participants’ unanswered questions and how they described their education and career plans, including work and career readiness initiatives within schools and outside of them, which I will address in the next chapter (i.e., discussion chapter).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I present three major findings—(1) the compelling need to work for students facing difficult economic realities, which also intersects with other factors outside of
school (e.g., personal adversities, family commitments, school mobility) and pulls students away from traditional high schools and also presents challenges in alternative programs that offer high school credentials; (2) in addition to the costs of work, the developmental and motivational roles of work—students benefit from work experiences and on-the-job training in important ways (e.g., sense of purpose and fulfillment, immediate income to support their own and family’s livelihood, skill development, opportunities for career advancement); and (3) students’ aspirations and unanswered questions about the future, which have important implications for integrating students’ academic and career development in schools, which I address in the next chapter (i.e., the discussion chapter).
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The main motivation for the study was to describe the student experience from the student point of view. In the process emerged the centrality of the need to work. According to students’ own accounts, difficult economic realities compel them to work. Further, I found that work plays both negative and positive roles in students’ lives and educational journeys, which do not always balance out. Yet, although it may seem that school and work are at odds, I found that work plays crucial roles for students from low-income communities—working benefits the many facets of students’ livelihoods, which underscores the need to integrate learning and work across multiple and diverse levels of education (e.g., traditional and alternative programs in secondary education and adult education).

Building upon students’ own accounts of the multifaceted role of work in their lives—the need to work and its intersection with other factors in students’ lives, and the challenges and benefits of working—in this chapter, I argue that schools should consider the needs of students who work and provide them supports and opportunities for career readiness and development (Blustein, 2006; NCDA, 2011). I apply the multifaceted concept of career development for its central role in human functioning and wellbeing and to better understand how to promote students’ paths to both academic and career success (Blustein, 2006, 2008; NCDA, 2011).

At the center of the study are the following guiding research questions: What role does work play for students who are pursuing their secondary education in alternative programs, and what implications can we draw from this understanding to promote students’ career development? To examine these guiding questions in depth, I developed specific sub-questions and discuss the study’s central findings next.

**Why Students Leave Traditional High Schools and Struggle in Alternative Programs**
Although important contributions have deepened our understanding of school dropout (e.g., school pushout; Fine, 1991; Lukes, 2014, 2015; Rumberger, 2011; Tuck, 2011, 2012), dropout is not a fixed outcome (Barrat, et al., 2012). Yet, limited scholarship has focused on students who leave traditional high schools and reignite their secondary education in alternative and adult education programs (Aron, 2006; Barrat et al., 2012; Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). Further, although the challenges students encounter in alternative and adult education are documented (e.g., episodic participation due to the demands and commitments associated with adult life; Comings, 2007; Comings & Cuban, 2007; St. Clair & Belzer, 2010), students’ strengths and other protective factors are less documented, including persistence and resilience (e.g., as students pursue their education, make progress toward their academic and career goals, etc.)—productive constructs that move beyond an exclusive focus on student deficits (Morrison et al., 2006).

In addition to intrinsic factors and mechanisms (e.g., cognitive, psychological), push and pull factors outside of students are also parts of the equation, including systemic barriers and life circumstances that hinder success in school. Yet, limited research has examined life circumstances and lived experiences centered on the economic realities and basic needs of adult learners from the student point of view, which is the aim of the study. In addition to deepening our understanding of students’ aspirations and questions about the future, the findings underscore the need to consider the nuances of students’ everyday lives and their commitments outside of school (e.g., economic realities, life circumstances, personal adversities). Indeed, for the students in the study, the decision to work went beyond a matter of choice and a lack of desire to succeed.

Further, I found that students can struggle to complete their secondary education in both traditional, comprehensive high schools and in alternative programs. In comparison to traditional
high schools, even with the multiple forms of flexibility typically offered by alternative programs that offer high school credentials and follow an independent study model (e.g., flexible scheduling and attendance requirements, rolling and open enrollment, individualized instruction), I found that students can continue to struggle with traditional high school curriculum requirements and with being able to consistently turn in assignments required for general education courses—an integral component of some alternative programs for maintaining progress toward completing credits needed for a high school diploma. Although nearly all students in the study’s alternative program indicated that they work on course assignments outside of school, they struggle to regularly turn in coursework. While students are expected to turn in course assignments and to meet with their teacher once a week, the alternative program’s leading independent study model places extensive accountability on students to independently complete coursework and to consistently turn it in. Although they can borrow textbooks to complete assignments outside of school and they have access to teachers, teacher assistants, and other support staff (e.g., students are expected to meet with their teacher once a week, staff reach out to students when they do not submit coursework and attend school), students struggle with regularly turning in work, which negatively impacts their progress toward completing their diploma.

**Beyond Choice, the Necessity to Work**

Although push and pull factors inside and outside of the school context have been found to affect student outcomes, the need to work emerged as a significant pull factor in the study, which mostly consists of students from low-income communities of color who live in areas with high costs of living. Students who had one job while they attended the alternative program of the study worked an average of 34.2 hours per week, and those who had two jobs worked an average
of 47.5 hours per week. According to students’ own accounts, difficult economic realities compel them to work and intersect with other factors in their everyday lives (e.g., personal adversities, family commitments, school mobility). Most students described having multiple commitments centered on school, work, and family, and some students’ demanding schedules and circumstances weigh heavily on them and strain them both physically and emotionally.

**The Challenges and Benefits of Working**

Recent estimates suggest that student employment is widespread. According to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, in 2018, 23% of high school students were employed or looking for work (i.e., participating in the labor force), compared with 37% of 16- to 24-year-olds enrolled in high school or in college (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). However, as a research topic, the reasons students work is understudied—particularly because the perspectives of students themselves have been mostly overlooked (Howard, 2002).

I found that central to the dynamic of student employment is the nuance of balancing school, work, and life. I found that juggling multiple commitments (e.g., school, work, family) can negatively interfere with students’ progress and advancement in school, and negatively impact them at different junctures in their educational journeys. Work can also pull students away from traditional educational settings and continue to present challenges while they attend alternative programs to pursue high school credentials (e.g., traditional diploma, high school equivalency credential). According to students’ own accounts, over time, working negatively impacts their attendance, schoolwork completion, and focus on school, and some students are pushed out of traditional high schools because of rigid requirements (e.g., attendance, credits). Further, I found that some students question the value and quality of their schooling experiences (e.g., traditional curriculum) and instead of attending school, work because of its positive
contributions and more immediate gains and payoffs (e.g., quantifiable and immediate economic returns, and developmental and psychological benefits, including sense of responsibility and purpose).

The study provides a new way of understanding the role of work for students from low-income communities of color and its effects on students’ paths to academic and career success. I found that beyond the costs of student employment, there are important and meaningful benefits. In addition to supporting the findings of previous studies and frameworks that underscore the instrumental role of work in students’ lives (e.g., Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Hanson, 2012), the findings also demonstrate that work serves developmental and motivational roles. According to students’ own accounts, they benefit from income which allows them to support their own and family’s livelihoods and the quality of their lives, skill development from on-the-job training, and opportunities for career advancement. Some students also described the benefits associated with working which took them away from negative schooling experiences (e.g., described in the literature as push factors which push students away from school, including unengaging learning experiences, disrespectful treatment from teachers and school personnel, arbitrary school rules, high stakes testing; Fine 1991; Tuck, 2011, 2012).

The findings also emphasize the role of work in human functioning and wellbeing, including its impact on self-esteem, responsibility, and productiveness (Adams, 2002; Blustein, 2006; NCDA, 2011) and corroborate previous findings on the developmental role of work, emphasizing the positive role work plays in promoting students’ career development and other facets of development, as students’ descriptions of the positive contributions of work on their sense of “pride” and “motivation” exemplify. Most participants’ experiences underscore the multifaceted benefits of working—particularly those centered on the interconnection of work and
quality of life. Some students negatively described their experiences in traditional high schools (e.g., as one student exemplifies—“I [was] just losing my time, cracking my head.”). And other students shared that work experiences and the income they gain from working positively contributes to their sense of responsibility and motivation, which can be influenced by the economic mobility they experience in comparison to the unstable and difficult economic realities of their childhood (e.g., as one student exemplifies—“I was more proud of myself. . . I felt motivated, but I got motivated in a different way—not school, but to work . . . this is helping me—not school.”). Taken together, beyond the economic returns of paid employment, which importantly contribute to students’ own and family’s livelihoods and the quality of their lives, students’ career development can be positively impacted by work experiences that contribute to their development, growth, and wellbeing. The benefits of meaningful work experiences (e.g., skills such as leadership and collaboration, social capital) can be applied to future occupations and to multiple aspects of students’ lives (e.g., as one student exemplifies—“[Be]cause of work, it has given me a lot of skills to be out in the world.”).

In summary, the benefits that students gain from working come in many forms—from taking them away from negative and unengaging schooling experiences, to immediate income to support their own and family’s livelihoods, to personal development and skills that provide dividends to their career development and can be applied to multiple areas of their lives (e.g., sense of purpose, economic mobility).

Aspirations

The Interconnected Nature of Aspirations

In addition to their education, students’ aspirations provide a glimpse into diverse aspects of their lives—career, family, and quality of life. The findings suggest that while improving their
financial circumstances and stability is important—beyond income and outside of occupations, students aspire to have well-rounded and fulfilling lives. Participants’ narratives corroborate findings and frameworks in the literature that frame career development holistically based on its interconnectedness with multiple life domains, including family and wellbeing (Adams, 2002; Blustein, 2006; NCDA, 2011).

To this point, the findings support the value of the concept of career development—the development of a person’s career that takes place over most of their lifetime and considers work a central aspect of human functioning and wellbeing (Blustein, 2006; NCDA, 2011). Indeed, rather than focusing on specific occupations, participants described aspirations and values centered on multiple domains across their career, education, family, health, and wellbeing (e.g., as one student exemplifies—“Hopefully with a car, finishing college maybe, my husband over here, paying a house, maybe one child, and happy.”).

However, some participants expressed uncertainty and pressure about the future, expressing “feeling behind,” which indicates a need to provide students personalized guidance and support, including career advisement to help them develop action steps that align with their immediate needs. Indeed, the findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating the importance of supports that engage students in career planning and exploration, particularly students from working-class communities of color who may not have access to career readiness and development supports outside of school (Adams, 2002; NCDA, 2011), as well as understanding students’ individual needs, strengths, and aspirations to provide personalized guidance and support (Lanford & Maruco, 2018; Pullias Center for Higher Education, 2018).

Questions About the Future
In addition to analyzing the role that work plays in students’ lives, a purpose of the dissertation is to underscore the role of students’ career development in their paths to academic and career success. Although many students in the study intend to pursue their education beyond a high school diploma (e.g., 70% of participants indicated they intended to go to college), they shared concerns driven by pressure and uncertainty. Students’ questions center on the educational paths required to pursue specific occupations and how to evaluate different occupational interests, to how to balance schooling with work commitments and other life demands. Overall, students’ questions center on their education and career plans, and they remain unanswered. The findings corroborate findings of previous studies that highlight the importance of supporting students’ career development and emphasize the value of career development interventions in broader educational reforms (Castellano et al., 2003; Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson, & Perry, 2006).

**Broad Contributions to the Literature**

More broadly, the findings also contribute to our understanding of: (a) factors that pull students away from school and pull them back to it (e.g., work); and (b) life circumstances and everyday realities that shape students’ experiences and academic and career outcomes, including the compelling need to work.

**The Push-Pull Dynamic**

In addition to factors inside the school context, factors outside of school, including work should be considered as factors that contribute to student outcomes in not only adverse but in positive ways too. I found that both types of factors (i.e., school factors, including rigid attendance requirements, unengaging learning environments, and rote assignments; and factors outside of school, including work) play compounding roles in pushing and pulling students away
from school. Yet, students’ life circumstances and everyday realities emerged as central to their experiences and outcomes in school across time—particularly as connected to work. According to students’ own accounts, difficult financial circumstances compel them to work, which also intersect with other factors in their everyday lives (e.g., personal adversities, family commitments, school mobility).

Further, the findings underscore the dynamic nature of work as a pull factor. Although work can pull students away from school, it can also pull them back to it (e.g., to complete their high school credential, to make progress toward their education and career goals). Participants value their education and want to be successful, but the circumstances they encounter within schools and outside of them, including difficult and unstable economic realities, can pull them away from both traditional and alternative programs in secondary education. Instead of adding restrictions and pressures to some students’ taxing schedules and living conditions, in the implications section of this chapter, I suggest that academic programs and paths align with and support students’ everyday realities and career development. As I discuss in the implications for practice section of this chapter, I suggest that we consider the lived realities of students when designing and structuring academic programs and paths, integrate career development supports into programs (e.g., “linked learning” approaches, which prepare secondary education students for a range of postsecondary options and incorporate work-based learning—e.g., Linked Learning Alliance, 2019; competency-based learning models—e.g., Jones & Voorhees, 2002), and systematically provide diverse options and opportunities that align with students’ needs and interests (e.g., for working adults, options and pathways beyond more traditional ones—i.e., outside of the traditional curriculum).
In addition to factors outside of school that influenced students to leave their traditional high schools for the study’s alternative program (e.g., difficult economic realities, physical and mental health issues that prompted excessive absences), negative schooling experiences were also parts of the equation (e.g., disengaging and rote learning experiences). Indeed, structural factors and barriers that reproduce educational and social inequities (e.g., through tracking, grade retention, bureaucracy) and are indicative of system-level failures have been found to push students out of school (e.g., focus on rule enforcement and standardized and rote learning experiences that are disengaging, constraining, and demoralizing; Fine 1991; Romo and Falbo, 1996; Tuck, 2011, 2012). Yet, pull factors connected to difficult economic realities and life circumstances emerged as salient themes from the findings—work pulled some students away from school and also pulled them back to it because they wanted to complete their secondary education, and also served positive and contributive roles (e.g., immediate economic returns, and developmental and psychological benefits, including sense of responsibility and purpose)—dynamics that contribute to the literature.

**Everyday Realities and Difficulties**

The study’s findings provide a new way of understanding the lived realities and life circumstances of students from low-income communities who want and need to work. I found that students are compelled to work because of difficult financial circumstances that intersect with other factors in their lives (e.g., personal adversities, family commitments, school mobility). Hence, the decision to work and to pursue their schooling in the study’s alternative program went beyond a matter of choice and a lack of desire to succeed.

Further, although students can be negatively impacted by working (e.g., attendance, schoolwork completion, focus on school) and it can pull them away from multiple and diverse
programs (i.e., both traditional and alternative programs and schools in secondary education), students will continue to work because they need to (i.e., because of difficult economic realities, high costs of living). Further, for some students in the study, work took them away from negative and unengaging schooling experiences and served positive and motivational roles in their lives—from immediate income to support their own and family’s livelihoods, to skills and experiences that provide dividends to their career development and to multiple areas of their lives (e.g., sense of responsibility and motivation).

Taken together, for some student populations, particularly adults who need to work because of difficult economic realities and challenging life circumstances, the more immediate returns and multifaceted benefits of working seem to outweigh prolonged and uncertain returns from traditional academic programs, pathways, and curricula in secondary education. In addition to addressing negative and unengaging schooling experiences, creative measures that reflect the educational journeys, needs, strengths, and aspirations of students and provide personalized guidance and support are needed to pull students back to school and to keep them there (Lanford & Maruco, 2018; Pullias Center for Higher Education, 2018). However, rather than promoting a one-size-fits-all approach to academic pathways and curricula, I argue that it is essential to provide students with diverse options and opportunities that align with their individual needs and interests without adding restrictions and pressures to already taxing schedules, commitments, circumstances, and living conditions (e.g., high-quality short-term programs that align with students’ career interests).

**Implications for Practice**

As they were from working-class communities and lived in areas with high costs of living, most participants felt compelled to work in order to support their own and family’s
livelihoods. In addition to the costs of working to students both inside and outside of the school context (e.g., interference with schoolwork completion, stress associated with having multiple commitments), findings provide insight into the immediate and cumulative returns of student employment (e.g., immediate economic returns, and developmental and psychological benefits, including sense of responsibility and purpose). Hence, creative measures that combine both quality academic curricula and employment for students who need to work and are more inclusive of their everyday realities would be helpful. The findings call for meaningful and personalized learning, training, and employment opportunities that provide more immediate returns and positively impact students’ daily lives and paths to success (e.g., students’ aspirations and questions about the future underscore the need to understand the quality of their lives in both the short and long run). I suggest that we consider the realities of students’ lives and integrate meaningful learning and career readiness measures that support students along more timely paths to success (e.g., for working adults, high return short-term programs that align with their interests).

With today’s updated version providing students of all ages academic and field- and occupation-specific skills to prepare them to succeed in further education and careers, career and technical education (CTE) aims to bridge the gap between education and workforce preparation (Advance CTE, 2019; Carnevale et al., 2012). Because CTE is career-focused, students who need to work can benefit from CTE pathways in multiple ways, including by developing career-relevant skills and work experience that pay immediate dividends (Carnevale et al., 2012). In addition to the economic returns of CTE pathways, as supported by the findings, students can also benefit from the developmental contributions of working on their quality of lives in both the short and long run (e.g., sense of responsibility, purpose, motivation).
**Career Development Supports**

The findings provide additional evidence for the need to integrate career development initiatives in academic programs (Castellano et al., 2003; Kenny et al., 2006; Meeder & Suddreth, 2012; NCDA, 2011). In this section, I recommend that academic programs support students who need to work and embed supports designed and structured to complement the lives of working adults—not compete with them.

The concept of career development incorporates facets central to meaningful, positive, and healthy lives (Adams, 2002; Blustein, 2006; NCDA, 2011). Indeed, how participants talked about the factors that contribute to the quality of their lives went beyond their education and career and included indicators of happiness and wellbeing. This finding of the study supports the concepts of career development and career, which go beyond the attainment of jobs, particularly ones that perpetuate a person’s impoverished status (Adams, 2002; NCDA, 2011).

Further, most students shared questions about their education and career plans that in practice, can be addressed with career development assistance and support services (e.g., career advisement). Equally important, in addition to being compelled to work because of difficult and unstable financial circumstances, some students felt behind in their schooling. To this point, diverse and personalized alternative paths and options are important avenues to further explore, including postsecondary certificates, apprenticeships, industry-based certifications, and other high-quality short-term programs (Carnevale et al., 2012; NCDA, 2011). In today’s era of rising college costs, high rates of attrition without degree completion or transfer, and the student loan debt crisis, postsecondary certificates have been found to represent a cost-effective alternative for adults because of their short, focused training and earning advantages (Carnevale et al., 2012; Rodríguez, Hughes, & Belfield, 2012). Indeed, as the findings suggest, some working adults
pursuing secondary education programs struggle to maintain progress and to stay on top of school assignments. I recommend that administrators and policymakers reconsider and reevaluate curriculum requirements and pedagogies (e.g., reevaluate traditional high school curriculum requirements and the quality and quantity of assignments required for course credits for the diploma in alternative programs, update the curriculum and assignments to promote applied and experiential learning, ensure that earning credits for work experience and prior learning are viable and accessible options for students who need and want to work).

The findings corroborate the value of embedding career development assistance and support services in academic programs and curricula. Indeed, career development assistance has been described as a community partnership effort involving multiple entities, including the education system (NCDA, 2011). Without supports in schools, students who do not have access to career assistance outside of school may face additional barriers. Equally concerning is that certain youth, particularly those who have been socially and historically marginalized are not benefiting from the important developmental and social and psychological benefits of employment (e.g., agency, economic empowerment, human capital, social capital; Becker, 1993; Gillen, 2019; Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). Indeed, the young adults in the study reported that they want career assistance, which speaks to the limited career development supports they receive along their educational journeys, particularly along critical junctures as they work to attain high school diplomas and make decisions about what to do next. Further, previous research underscores the value of providing students options beyond traditional academic programs, including postsecondary certificates, apprenticeships, industry-based certifications, and associate degrees (Carnevale et al., 2012). As traditional school environments and general education paths focused on breadth may not work for everyone, diverse and
individualized alternative options, pathways, and curricula may better align with the unique and immediate needs of students who are pressed to work to support their livelihoods (Aron, 2006; Carnevale et al., 2012; Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006).

**Study Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

The findings question widely held negative assumptions about student employment. According to students’ own accounts, difficult economic realities compel them to work. In semi-structured interviews, students were asked questions that tapped into specifics about their jobs, including their job title and how long they had worked for their current employer. Narratives about work and the role it plays in students’ lives also organically came up in responses to other questions throughout the interviews (e.g., “What do you believe led to you leaving high school?”). However, more broadly, the focus of data collection was to understand students’ experiences across time from their point of view in order to better understand how to support students’ paths to both academic and career success. The more general aim of the multiphase qualitative study centered on understanding students’ educational journeys, their experiences in the study’s alternative program, their daily lives outside of school, and their education and career plans—which together, provided the space to unveil the difficult economic realities in students’ lives and the centrality of the need to work.

I propose that future research probe for specific information about income and wage trajectories across time to underscore implications for policies that protect students against exploitation. Information about income and wages was not gathered in the study as the focus was on understanding the student experience. However, to protect those who have been historically disenfranchised and tracked into cheap labor and jobs that leave them at and below the level of poverty (Adams, 2002), I recommend that future studies utilize a critical analysis to shed light on
disparities across different subgroups of students (e.g., race and ethnicity, gender, immigrant generation) and diverse employment conditions (e.g., low-wage jobs, jobs without benefits). Indeed, in the study, students were mostly from working-class communities of color and nearly all students who worked did so to financially support themselves and their families. Taken together, future studies should delve into dynamics that protect students and measures in schools that embed supports and do not place additional constraints on students’ already taxing schedules, commitments, and circumstances. In addition to quantitative analyses that may unveil important numerical disparities (e.g., economic outcomes, mobility), qualitative analyses may further underscore the nuances in students’ experiences that affect their paths to career success and unveil gaps in supports (e.g., economic empowerment, social capital).

Further, while the findings support previous research demonstrating the importance of preparing students for the workforce—not any type of work, but promoting exploration, development, training, and learning opportunities that enhance future earning potentials and economic empowerment (Adams, 2002; NCDA, 2011), the findings also reveal the nuances of student employment—the good, the bad, and its multifaceted nature (e.g., the pros and cons of student employment which do not always balance out). Most students in the study both benefited from and were negatively impacted by their jobs and other circumstances and commitments outside of school. Most adult students who worked, struggled to make progress toward their high school credential and to comply with the study’s alternative program’s requirements, which at its bare minimum asks students to turn in schoolwork and to meet with their teacher once per week.

Yet, gains accompany the costs of working. According to students’ own accounts, work plays positive and motivational roles in their lives—in addition to immediate economic returns that improves their livelihoods, students benefit from opportunities for skill development and
career advancement and work positively contributes to their sense of “pride” and “motivation.” However, even if they work, some adult students’ realities can continue to be difficult—they continue to struggle, to feel pressure, and to feel behind on their progress toward their academic and career goals, particularly those with taxing work and life commitments and those facing adversities associated with complex family and personal dynamics.

Hence, the findings provide further support for employing an integrated framework around the world of school and the world of work (Castellano et al., 2003). Castellano and colleagues (2003) suggest that school and work be better integrated to prepare students for adult life (e.g., social aspects of work, career ladders, labor markets, job-seeking and job-keeping skills, resource allocation, interpersonal skills). The findings provide additional support for the need to more effectively integrate curricula and supports that take the realities of students’ lives into account (e.g., structuring and personalizing programs to integrate students’ interests and needs to work so that they can improve the quality of their lives in both the short and long run).

Further, most participants reported that they want to pursue their education beyond their high school diploma and to advance in their careers. CTE, which comes in many forms and aims to bridge the gap between education and workforce preparation, provides opportunities for career exploration and an alternative applied pedagogy that encourages persistence (Advance CTE, 2019; Carnevale et al., 2012). Because it aims to promote students’ academic, technical, and employability skills and knowledge for the workplace and further education, CTE is embedded within multiple systems of education (e.g., secondary education, adult education) (ACTE, 2019). Carnevale and colleagues (2012) exemplify the strengths of CTE—“In the new knowledge economy, access to good jobs and earnings in the American system are driven by the complementary relationships among general education, occupation preparation, and the resultant...
access to learning and technology on the job” (p. 16). However, while research on the role of CTE in school reform suggests that CTE participation can provide positive financial outcomes to students, less work has explored CTE’s academic impacts (for important exceptions, including decreased dropout and increased on-time graduation, e.g., see Ames, 2019; Dougherty, 2018; Plank, 2001). Research moving forward can draw upon the study’s findings to examine how students’ everyday lives and personal and career development may be impacted by enrollment and program completion in CTE (e.g., wellbeing, quality of life, standard of living, family life).

**Conclusion**

While the main motivation for the study was to describe the student experience from the student point of view, in the process emerged the centrality of work for students from low-income communities. According to students’ own accounts, difficult economic realities compel them to work, which also intersects with other factors in their lives and presents both challenges and benefits. Taken together, the findings suggest that work plays both negative and positive roles in students’ paths to academic and career success, and yet, the need to work may be especially crucial for students from low-income communities.

The findings provide a glimpse into factors not always considered to contribute to academic outcomes and trajectories—both adverse and positive circumstances and everyday realities outside of school. Further, although important scholarship has examined school dropout and pushout (e.g., Fine, 1991; Lukes, 2014, 2015; Rumberger, 2011; Tuck, 2011, 2012), limited scholarship has focused on the lived experiences of students who reignite their secondary education in nontraditional programs, including alternative programs (for important exceptions, e.g., see Kelly, 1993; Tuck, 2011, 2012). The findings suggest that students’ economic realities can both pull them away from traditional programs and pull them back to school to pursue
alternative programs and pathways in secondary education. We must consider the experiences of adult students who are pursuing their secondary education in alternative programs, as well as students’ aspirations and questions about the future. In addition to underscoring the need to integrate learning and work in educational pathways and curricula, building upon students’ own accounts of the multifaceted role of work in their lives—the need to work and its intersection with other factors in students’ lives, and the challenges and benefits of working—I suggest that both traditional and alternative programs consider the needs of students who work, and provide them multiple and meaningful supports and opportunities for career development.
APPENDIX A: EDUCATION JOURNEY MAPS

Sofia’s education journey map.
Note: All “X”s in education journey maps are to maintain confidentiality.
Lucas' education journey map.

Born 1998

Elementary

Kindergarten

First Grade

Second Grade

Third Grade

Fourth Grade

Fifth Grade

Sixth Grade

Seventh Grade

Eighth Grade

High School

College

Graduated from University
Samantha’s education journey map.
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Student Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES (EDUCATION JOURNEY DRAWING/DISCUSSION)

1. Students have different educational journeys. To get a sense of your journey and what it has been like for you, let’s make a visual:
   a. Preschool: Did you attend preschool? If yes:
      i. What preschool(s) did you go to?
      ii. Where was the preschool?
      iii. When did you attend preschool?
      iv. Did you change preschools at any time (and if so why)?
         1. If yes: How many times?
         2. If yes: What was this like for you?
      v. What was preschool like for you?
      vi. Did you have a favorite teacher at the time? What did you like about him/her?

 b. Elementary school:
    i. What elementary school(s) did you go to?
    ii. Where was the elementary school?
    iii. When did you attend elementary school?
    iv. Did you change elementary schools at any time (and if so why)?
       1. If yes: How many times?
       2. If yes: What was this like for you?
    v. What was elementary school like for you?
    vi. Did you have a favorite teacher in elementary school? What did you like about him/her?

 c. Middle school:
    i. What middle school(s) did you go to?
    ii. Where was the middle school?
    iii. When did you attend middle school?
    iv. Did you change middle schools at any time (and if so why)?
       1. If yes: How many times?
       2. If yes: What was this like for you?
    v. What was middle school like for you?
    vi. Did you have a favorite teacher in middle school? What did you like about him/her?

 d. High school:
    i. What high school(s) did you go to?
    ii. Where was the high school?
    iii. When did you attend high school?
    iv. Did you change high schools at any time (and if so why)?
       1. If yes: How many times?
       2. If yes: What was this like for you?
    v. What was high school like for you?
    vi. Did you have a favorite teacher in high school? What did you like about him/her?
    vii. What grade were you in when you left high school?
viii. Students leave high school for many reasons, what led to you leaving high school?
ix. How many times did you leave high school?
   1. If left high school and then returned: What was this like for you?
x. What do you believe could have helped you stay in high school and graduate?

   e. Adult school:
      i. Have you attended any adult school(s)?
         1. If yes: Which one(s)? Where?
         2. If yes: When did you attend?
      ii. Did you ever leave adult school and then return/re-enroll?
         1. If yes: Students leave school for many reasons, what led to you leaving at the time?
         2. If yes: How many times did you leave?
         3. If yes: What was this like for you?

2. What made you decide to return to school to get your diploma/equivalency credential?
   a. When you get discouraged or the going gets rough, what keeps you coming to class?
   b. Have you ever thought about leaving school again?
      i. If yes: What made you stay?
   c. What personal traits do you draw on to keep going?

3. Is there anyone in your family that provides you support?
   a. Who and in what ways?

4. What about friends and co-workers? Do you have any friends or co-workers that provide you support?
   a. Who and in what ways?
   b. Do you have any friends in the [study’s alternative program]?

5. What about teachers, counselors, or administrators in the [study’s alternative program]?
   Does anyone here provide you support?
   a. Who and in what ways?

6. Who is your favorite teacher of all time? What did you like about him/her?

[STUDY’S ALTERNATIVE] CLASSROOM/PROGRAM EXPERIENCE:

7. When did you begin the [study’s alternative program]?
   a. What was your first day in the program like for you?
   b. What did you do?

8. What is a typical day in the [study’s alternative program] classroom like for you?
   a. What do you do?
   b. Who do you talk to?
   c. Where do you sit? Why?

9. What class(es) are you currently working on/completing assignments for?
   a. If you could help create the assignments that students complete in the [study’s alternative program], what would they be like?

10. If you’re struggling with something during class, what do you do?
    a. Can you describe an example of a time when you were struggling with something and what happened?
11. Who has been the most helpful to you when you’re in the [study’s alternative program] classroom?
   a. How have they been helpful?
   b. Can you describe an example of a time when they were helpful and what happened?
12. How would you describe your interactions with your teacher?
   a. How would you describe your interactions with the teacher assistants?
13. What do you wish you had more of in class?
   a. What do you wish you had less of in class? (or: How could your experience in the [study's alternative program] classroom be improved?)

LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES/COMPETING COMMITMENTS:

14. What is a typical day like for you outside of class?
   a. What responsibilities do you have outside of school?
   b. Do you work?
   c. If you currently work, how many hours a week do you work?
   d. Where do you work?
   e. What do you do? What is your job title?
   f. How long have you worked there?
15. Do you work on your schoolwork/assignments outside of class?
   a. Why or why not?

EDUCATION/CAREER PLANS/NEEDS:

16. What are your career plans?
17. Have you participated in any school or career-related events or activities within the [study's alternative program]?
   a. If yes: What was the event/activity called and what was it like?
   b. If no: Is there something you’d be interested in attending?
18. Do you need help developing your education and career plans?
   a. What questions do you have about your education plans?
   b. What questions do you have about your career plans?
19. Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

20. Is there anything else you’d like to share with me about your educational experiences?
APPENDIX C: SURVEY

Student Survey

Student Experience

1. What was high school like for you?

2. What grade were you in when you left high school: (choose only one)
   _____ 1) 9th grade
   _____ 2) 10th grade
   _____ 3) 11th grade
   _____ 4) 12th grade
   _____ 5) Other: _________________________

3. Students leave high school for many reasons, what led to you leaving high school? (check all that apply)
   _____ 1) Lack of credits
   _____ 2) Attendance (please describe): ______________________________
   _____ 3) Someone at your school (example: counselor, administrator, teacher, etc.) counseled you to leave school
   _____ 4) Class assignments (example: you fell behind; assignments were difficult, uninteresting, etc.)
   _____ 5) You didn’t complete/pass your school’s assessments, exit exams, etc. (example: CAHSEE)
   _____ 6) Lack of support (social, emotional, informational)
   _____ 7) Personal health issue (your own)
   _____ 8) Family member health issue (someone in your family was dealing with health issue)
   _____ 9) Disciplinary issue (example: classroom/school behavior, suspension, expulsion, etc.)
   _____ 10) Pregnancy (your own or your partner’s)
   _____ 11) Work/job demands
   _____ 12) Transportation difficulties (please describe): ______________________________
   _____ 13) Changed schools: How many different high schools did you attend? _______
   _____ 14) Moved (home): How many times did you move homes? _______
   _____ 15) Family commitment/obligation (please describe): ______________________________
   _____ 16) Unfavorable conditions at home
   _____ 17) Life event (please describe): ______________________________
   _____ 18) Your age
   _____ 19) Other: ______________________________
4. Please describe the reasons (in more depth) that led to you leaving high school:

5. How many times did you leave high school? (choose only one)
   ______ 1) One time
   ______ 2) Two times
   ______ 3) Three times
   ______ 4) Four times
   ______ 5) More than four times (please indicate how many times you left high school):

6. If you left high school and then returned, what was this like for you?

7. What do you believe could have helped you stay in high school and graduate?

8. How did you first hear about the [study’s alternative program]? (choose only one)
   ______ 1) Another Student in the [study’s alternative program]
   ______ 2) Counselor from High School/Continuation School
   ______ 3) Teacher from High School/Continuation School
   ______ 4) Other Staff from High School/Continuation School (please indicate their title):
   ______________________________________
   ______ 5) Staff from [study’s alternative program] (please indicate their title): __________
   ______ 6) Friend
   ______ 7) Girlfriend/Boyfriend
   ______ 8) Family Member (example: Parent, Sister, Brother, Cousin)
   ______ 9) In the Mail (Class Schedule)
   ______ 10) Other (not listed above): __________________________

9. Why did you decide to enroll in the [study’s alternative program]?
10. What are you currently working toward in the [study’s alternative program]? (choose only one)
   _____ 1) Only High School Diploma
   _____ 2) High School Diploma + Equivalency Credential
   _____ 3) Only Equivalency Credential

11. When did you begin the [study’s alternative program] (month and year; example: August 2016)? ______________

12. What was your first day in the [study’s alternative program] like for you?

13. Have you ever left the [study’s alternative program] and then returned/re-enrolled in the program? (choose only one)
   _____ 0) No
   _____ 1) Yes
   a. If you marked “Yes” above, please answer the following:
      i. Students leave school for many reasons, what led to you leaving the [study’s alternative program]? (check all that apply)
         _____ 1) Attendance (please describe): _________________________
         _____ 2) Someone in your program (example: teacher, teacher assistant, advisor, counselor, etc.) counseled you to leave the program
         _____ 3) Change in education/career plans
         _____ 4) Class assignments (example: you fell behind; assignments were difficult, uninteresting, etc.)
         _____ 5) You didn’t complete/pass your school’s assessments, exit exams, etc.
         _____ 6) Lack of support (social, emotional, informational)
         _____ 7) Personal health issue (your own)
         _____ 8) Family member health issue (someone in your family was dealing with health issue)
         _____ 9) Disciplinary issue (example: classroom/campus behavior, suspension, expulsion, etc.)
         _____ 10) Pregnancy (your own or your partner’s)
         _____ 11) Childcare needs
         _____ 12) Work/job demands
         _____ 13) Financial difficulties
         _____ 14) Transportation difficulties (please describe): ________________
         _____ 15) Changed schools/program
         _____ 16) Moved (home)
         _____ 17) Family commitment/obligation (please describe): ______________
         _____ 18) Unfavorable conditions at home
         _____ 19) Life event (please describe): _____________________________
         _____ 20) Your age
ii. Please describe the reasons (in **more depth**) that led to you leaving the [study’s alternative program]:

iii. How many **total times** did you leave the [study’s alternative program]?  
    (choose only one)  
    _____ 1) One time  
    _____ 2) Two times  
    _____ 3) Three times  
    _____ 4) Four times  
    _____ 5) More than four times (please indicate how many times you left the program): __

iv. What was leaving the [study’s alternative program] and then returning like for you?

14. How many high school credits did you have when you **first enrolled** in the [study’s alternative program]? (choose only one)  
   _____ 1) Provide the number of high school credits you entered the [study’s alternative program] with here: _____  
   _____ 2) Don’t know

15. How many classes do you currently have **remaining** in order to complete your diploma?  
   (choose only one)  
   _____ 0) I don’t have any classes remaining (I’m done!)  
   _____ 1) Provide the number of classes you have remaining to complete your diploma here: _____  
   _____ 2) Don’t know

16. What days do you **tend** to come in to the [study’s alternative program] each week?  
   (check all that apply)  
   _____ 1) Monday  
   _____ 2) Tuesday  
   _____ 3) Wednesday  
   _____ 4) Thursday  
   _____ 5) Friday

17. How long do you **tend** to stay in the [study’s alternative program] classroom on the days you come in? (**indicate the average hours for each day**; example: **Monday: 3 hours; Friday: 0 hours**)  
   1) Monday: _____ hours
18. Do you wish you spent more, less or the same amount of time in the [study's alternative program] classroom? (choose only one) 
    _____ 1) More time  
    _____ 2) Less time  
    _____ 3) Same amount of time  

19. What is a typical day in the [study's alternative program] classroom like for you? 

20. What do you like about your experience in the [study's alternative program] classroom? 

21. What do you dislike about your experience in the [study's alternative program] classroom? 

22. How could your experience in the [study's alternative program] classroom be improved? 

23. What class(es) in the program are you currently working on/completing assignments for (example: Algebra I; Health): 
   ____________________________________________________  
   ____________________________________________________  

24. On average, how many assignments do you tend to complete and submit to your teacher per week? (choose only one) 
    _____ 0) None  
    _____ 1) 1 assignment per week  
    _____ 2) 2 assignments per week
3) 3 assignments per week
4) 4 assignments per week
5) 5 assignments per week
6) 6 or more assignments per week (please indicate the number here): _____

25. What do you like about your assignments?

26. What do you dislike about your assignments?

27. As you complete assignments, what most helps with your learning?

28. As you complete assignments, what are the biggest obstacle(s) for your learning?

29. If you’re struggling with something during class, what do you do?

30. On average, on the days you’re in class working on assignments, how many times do you ask the following individuals for help (example: teacher: 1 time per class; teacher assistant: 0 times per class):

   1) I ask my teacher for help: _____ times per class
   2) I ask a teacher assistant for help: _____ times per class
   3) I ask another student/classmate for help: _____ times per class
   4) I ask the [study’s alternative program] advisor for help: _____ times per class
   5) I ask another person (not listed above) for help: _____ times per class (Who is this person?: ________________)

31. Who has been the most helpful to you when you’re in the [study’s alternative program] classroom? How have they been helpful?
32. What do you **like** about the **physical aspects** of the [study’s alternative program] classroom?

33. What do you **dislike** about the **physical aspects** of the [study’s alternative program] classroom?

34. Do you spend time on school grounds **outside of the** [study’s alternative program] classroom? *(choose only one)*
   - _____ 0) No time
   - _____ 1) Little time
   - _____ 2) Average amount of time
   - _____ 3) A lot of time
   - _____ 4) Quite a lot of time

35. Would you recommend the [study’s alternative program] to other students? *(choose only one)*
   - _____ 0) No
   - _____ 1) Yes

36. Why would you/wouldn’t you recommend the [study’s alternative program] to other students?

37. What advice would you give to students enrolling in the [study’s alternative program] in the future?

38. Have you taken or are you currently taking other classes at an Adult School? *(choose only one)*
   - _____ 0) No
   - _____ 1) Yes
   a. **If you marked “Yes” above**, please answer the following:
      i. Which other class(es) have you taken or are you currently taking at the Adult School? *(indicate the name of the class)*; example: *Reading, Computer*
Please put additional classes on a separate blank paper and submit with your survey.

ii. If you didn’t complete these classes, please answer the following:

1. Students leave classes/programs for many reasons, what led to you leaving your classes at the Adult School? (check all that apply)

   _____ 1) Attendance (please describe): _______________________________________________________
   _____ 2) Someone at your school (example: teacher, counselor, administrator, etc.) counseled you to leave the program
   _____ 3) Change in education/career plans
   _____ 4) Class assignments (example: you fell behind; assignments were difficult, uninteresting, etc.)
   _____ 5) You didn’t complete/pass your school’s assessments, exit exams, etc.
   _____ 6) Lack of support (social, emotional, informational)
   _____ 7) Personal health issue (your own)
   _____ 8) Family member health issue (someone in your family was dealing with health issue)
   _____ 9) Disciplinary issue (example: classroom/campus behavior, suspension, expulsion, etc.)
   _____ 10) Pregnancy (your own or your partner’s)
   _____ 11) Childcare needs
   _____ 12) Work/job demands
   _____ 13) Financial difficulties
   _____ 14) Transportation difficulties (please describe): ___________
   _____ 15) Changed schools/program
   _____ 16) Moved (home)
   _____ 17) Family commitment/obligation (please describe): ___________
   _____ 18) Unfavorable conditions at home
   _____ 19) Life event (please describe): _______________________
   _____ 20) Your age
   _____ 21) Other: _______________________

2. Did you ever return to these classes/programs? (choose only one)

   _____ 0) No
   _____ 1) Yes

3. If you did return to these classes/programs, what was this like for you?
39. What responsibilities do you have outside of school? (list them separately; example: I work, I'm a parent, I take care of my mother who is sick, I help clean the house, I help with grocery shopping, etc.)

1) ____________________________________________________________________
2) ____________________________________________________________________
3) ____________________________________________________________________
4) ____________________________________________________________________

*Please put additional responsibilities on a separate blank paper and submit with your survey.*

40. Do you work? (choose only one)

_____ 0) No
_____ 1) Yes

41. If you currently work, what is your job title? ____________________________________________

42. If you currently work, how many hours a week do you work (example: 20 hours/week)?

_____ hours/week

43. Do you work on your schoolwork/assignments outside of class? (choose only one)

_____ 0) No
_____ 1) Yes

a. *If you marked “Yes” above, please answer the following:*

i. On average, how many hours a week do you work on your schoolwork/assignments outside of class? (choose only one)

    _____ 1) 1 hour per week
    _____ 2) 2 hours per week
    _____ 3) 3 hours per week
    _____ 4) 4 hours per week
    _____ 5) 5 hours per week
    _____ 6) 6 or more hours per week (please indicate hours here): _____

ii. What helps you complete schoolwork/assignments outside of class?

iii. Does anyone help you with your schoolwork outside of class? (choose only one)

    _____ 0) No
    _____ 1) Yes
iv. If someone does help you with your schoolwork outside of class, **who helps you** and **how do they help you**?

44. Does anything get in the way of school? **(choose only one)**
   - _____ 0) No
   - _____ 1) Yes
   - _____ 2) Sometimes

   a. **If you marked “Yes” or “Sometimes” above**, please answer the following: What gets in the way of school?

45. If you **have** already completed your high school diploma and/or equivalency credential requirements, when did you complete them (example: March 2017)?

46. If you **haven’t** completed your high school diploma and/or equivalency credential requirements, when do you **intend** to complete them (example: June 2017, Dec. 2017)?

47. When it comes to your **education**, what are you proud of?

48. When it comes to your **job/career**, what are you proud of?

49. Do you intend to complete additional education after you get your high school diploma and/or equivalency credential? **(choose only one)**
   - _____ 0) No
   - _____ 1) Yes

   a. **If you marked “Yes” above**, please answer the following:

      i. **Where** do you intend to complete additional education and **in what** [example: EMT program at XYZ Occupational Center]?
50. Do you intend to go to college? (choose only one)
   _____ 0) No
   _____ 1) Yes

51. What are your career plans?

52. Have you participated in any school or career-related events or activities within the [study’s alternative program]? (choose only one)
   _____ 0) No
   _____ 1) Yes
   a. If you marked “Yes” above, please answer the following:
      i. What was the event/activity called and what was it like?

53. What questions do you have about your education plans?

54. What questions do you have about your career plans?

55. Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
Demographic Information

56. Gender: (choose only one)
   _____ 0) Male
   _____ 1) Female
   _____ 2) Other: ________________________

57. How old are you (in years; example: 19 years old)? _____ years old

58. In which group do you most identify yourself? (choose only one)
   _____ 1) African-American/Black
   _____ 2) American Indian/Alaskan Native
   _____ 3) Asian/Pacific Islander
   _____ 4) Caucasian
   _____ 5) Hispanic/Latino
   _____ 6) Other: ___________________________

59. Were you born in the United States? (choose only one)
   _____ 0) No
   _____ 1) Yes
   a. If you marked “No” above, please answer the following:
      i. How old were you when you first arrived in the United States (example: 16 years old): _____ years old

60. Was at least one of your parents born in the United States? (choose only one)
   _____ 0) No
   _____ 1) Yes

61. What is your current marital status? (choose only one)
   _____ 1) Single (Never Married)
   _____ 2) Married
   _____ 3) In Committed Relationship
   _____ 4) Widowed
   _____ 5) Divorced
   _____ 6) Separated

62. Do you have children? (choose only one)
   _____ 0) No
   _____ 1) Yes (including step or adopted)
   a. If you marked “Yes” above, please answer the following:
      i. How many children do you have: _____ child/ren
      ii. What are their ages (example: 7, 9, and 11 years old): __________________________

63. What city do you live in: ________________________________
64. What is your primary mode of transportation to work and school (check all that apply):
   _____ 1) You Drive Yourself to Places
   _____ 2) Someone Else Drives You to Places/You Get Rides (example: you get rides from a Parent, Cousin, Friend, Boyfriend/Girlfriend, etc.)
   _____ 3) Motorcycle
   _____ 4) Public Transportation (example: Bus, Metro, Train, etc.)
   _____ 5) Walk
   _____ 6) Bicycle
   _____ 7) Uber or Lyft
   _____ 8) Other: ______________________________

65. On average, how much time do you spend commuting to work and school each week (in hours per week): ______ hours/week

66. What language do you primarily speak at home (choose only one):
   _____ 1) English
   _____ 2) Spanish
   _____ 3) Chinese
   _____ 4) Tagalog
   _____ 5) Korean
   _____ 6) Armenian
   _____ 7) Vietnamese
   _____ 8) Farsi
   _____ 9) Japanese
   _____ 10) Russian
   _____ 11) Other: ______________________________

67. What other languages do you speak (check all that apply):
   _____ 1) English
   _____ 2) Spanish
   _____ 3) Chinese
   _____ 4) Tagalog
   _____ 5) Korean
   _____ 6) Armenian
   _____ 7) Vietnamese
   _____ 8) Farsi
   _____ 9) Japanese
   _____ 10) Russian
   _____ 11) Other: ______________________________
68. What are your parents’ **highest level** of education **completed** (mark only one for each parent):

a. **Mother:**
   - _____ 0) No Schooling Completed or Less Than 1 Year
   - _____ 1) Some Elementary School
   - _____ 2) Elementary School
   - _____ 3) Middle School
   - _____ 4) High School
   - _____ 5) Some College
   - _____ 6) College Degree
   - _____ 7) Unknown

b. **Father:**
   - _____ 0) No Schooling Completed or Less Than 1 Year
   - _____ 1) Some Elementary School
   - _____ 2) Elementary School
   - _____ 3) Middle School
   - _____ 4) High School
   - _____ 5) Some College
   - _____ 6) College Degree
   - _____ 7) Unknown
REFERENCES


Carnevale, A. P., Jayasundera, T., & Hanson, A. R. (2012). Career and technical education: Five ways that pay along the way to the B.A. Washington, DC: Center on Education and the Workforce.


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