# ABSTRACT

MCCANN, HEIDI NOELLE. Community College Instructor Experiences with Employability Skills Curricula: A Phenomenological Study. (Under the direction of Dr. Diane Chapman).

For years United States employers have reported encountering a critical skills gap in the recruitment of work-ready employees. Specifically, hiring managers indicate difficulty finding job candidates who have requisite employability skills (sometimes termed soft skills), such as the ability to communicate effectively and perform team-based work. At the same time, and against a backdrop of record unemployment levels, recent studies have determined that many occupations will become automated over the next decade. Workforce development through higher education is seen by policymakers as a way to counter these trends and meet employer needs.

Community colleges are legally designated providers of workforce education within North Carolina. In conjunction with this responsibility, the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) supports federal and state-funded initiatives that focus on job readiness. Employability skills curricula created and purchased with workforce development monies, and provided by community colleges throughout the state, include the SkillsUSA Framework, Charlotte Works' Working Smart, and the NC-NET Employability Skills Resource Toolkit. Faculty and instructional staff at the state's two-year public postsecondary institutions are charged with use of these teaching resources. Given the main role that educators play in implementing curricula, surprisingly no studies have centered on the perceptions of community college instructors who are teaching employability skills related courses.

The purpose of this qualitative study was therefore to address a lack of insight on how North Carolina community college educators experience employability skills curricular instruction. Through use of a transcendental phenomenological approach, this dissertation

explored instructor engagement and the elements that were described as helping or hindering use of an employability skills curriculum. Ten participants were selected from nine North Carolina community colleges. Multiple interviews with these current and former instructors yielded rich descriptive data and thematic findings which suggested implications for research, theory, practice, and policy. Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory (SDT; 2000) of motivation provided a lens through which to view study results and identify social and environmental supports for educators' feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Key findings reveal that educators were highly invested in their work with employability skills curricula, as their instructional experiences were portrayed in personal, urgent, and emotive terms. For study participants, employability skills curricular instruction was perceived as a social endeavor that benefitted from connections with students and teaching colleagues. In addition, a lack of institutional encouragement or pedagogical tools was indicated as hampering wider adoption or professionalization of employability skills curricular efforts. A shared model of leadership is recommended for community colleges as a means to capitalize on the expertise and enthusiasm of grassroots instructional leaders such as the participants in this study (Kezar & Lester, 2011).

These findings are of value to higher education policymakers and institutional leaders implementing faculty-driven initiatives. This research sheds light on the crucial but understudied experience of community college educators who teach using employability skills curricula. As two-year public colleges consider adopting or mandating employability skills workforce education, instructor-led curricular reform efforts stand to benefit from this qualitative phenomenological study.

Community College Instructor Experiences with Employability Skills Curricula: A
Phenomenological Study


by
Heidi Noelle McCann



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APPROVED BY:



_____          _____
Dr. Diane Chapman                                                   Dr. Audrey Jaeger
Committee Chair



_____          _____
Dr. Meghan Manfra                                                  Dr. Carrol Warren

**DEDICATION**

To Heather, my friend and co-advisor of the MWCC International Club, and to the students who have inspired me over the years: Morgan, Margaret, Jorge, Faheem, Sashka, Cheikh, Afolabi, Tim, Alex and so many others – you can never know how much your kindness meant to me. Thank you for believing in and supporting me.

I also dedicate this work to the participants in this study – without whom my dissertation would not have been possible. Kudos to you and your colleagues for all you do for students. I hope that my dissertation in some small way honors your efforts and dedication to student success.

**BIOGRAPHY**

Originally from Massachusetts, Heidi grew up on the North Shore before moving to the western part of the Bay State, where she called Amherst home for more than a decade. She earned a BA in Journalism from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, a Master of Science degree in Library and Information Science from Simmons College in Boston, and an MBA from the Isenberg School of Management at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Heidi is grateful for the opportunity to return to school once more and earn a PhD in Educational Research and Policy Analysis from North Carolina State University.

Before moving to North Carolina to attend NC State, Heidi served as Dean of Library and Academic Support Services at Mount Wachusett Community College. Prior to her work as an administrator, she enjoyed helping community college students, faculty, and staff as a Reference and Instructional Services Librarian. She also taught online and seated First Year Experience course sections as an adjunct instructor. In addition to developing a passion for classroom-based learning, Heidi became a strong believer in the importance of extracurricular opportunities and met many amazing students through her service as an advisor to the MWCC International Club, which she founded in 2002.

For fun, Heidi enjoys playing competitive tennis, supporting local animal shelters, and seeing the world, when she's not busy preparing something delicious with her patient, kind, and supportive husband Mike.

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On the home front, I am appreciative of our cats (Cupcake, Star, Stripey and Grey Cat) for keeping me company when it was a lonely venture and for waiting patiently for me to finish. And to my Mimi, Auntie Eva and Grandpa Johnny who helped me get here – I only wish you could see me now. I know this wouldn't have been possible without having grown up in a family that nurtured my education.

Last but not least – Mike, I owe this all to you. I am so grateful for you every day. Thank you for helping make this dream come true. You have shown me what it is to truly enjoy life. To the next chapter in our life together – cheers!

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**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

> The inescapable reality is that ours is a society based on work. Those who are not
> equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to get and keep good jobs are denied
> the genuine social inclusion that is the real test of full citizenship. (Carnevale, 2013, p.
> 26)

Year after year, surveys document employer frustrations with worker skills (Chamorro-

Premuzic & Frankiewicz, 2019; Griffin & Annulis, 2013; Lund et al., 2019). According to the

most recent ManpowerGroup Talent Shortage survey, in 2019 69% of U.S. companies polled

reported problems finding skilled workers, the highest percentage documented by this annual

poll, and a level three times more than a decade earlier (2020). In January of the same year, the

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a record-setting 7.5 million open jobs (McCarthy &

Akinyooye, 2020). This gap between available work and people qualified to fill vacant positions

is exacerbated by a 21st century knowledge-based economy that requires a very different set of

abilities than the more agrarian and industry-oriented marketplace of centuries past. Today's

work environment is increasingly online and automated, displacing workers who lack the skills

needed to compete for jobs in stable and lucrative fields.

Responding to these concerns in North Carolina, the myFutureNC Commission was

formed in 2017 (https://www.myfuturenc.org/) to address economic disparities and increase

educational attainment. The effort brought the state's thought leaders in education, business, and

philanthropy together with the heads of various faith-based and nonprofit organizations, in

addition to a number of ex-officio governmental representatives. Beginning with a 15-month

listening tour that facilitated conversations across the state, myFutureNC sharpened its focus on

the critical role that academic attainment plays in confirming that residents of North Carolina are

ready and able to meet the needs of a growing workforce and economy. On February 20, 2019,

myFutureNC unveiled its vision for the next decade: to ensure that by 2030, two million North

Carolinians have a high-quality postsecondary degree or credential. In the commission's report, myFutureNC Commission co-chair Andrea Smith stated that:

> Two of every three new jobs now require some form of post-secondary education – whether that's training credentials, an associate degree, a four-year degree, or higher. This reality underscores how critical education is to career growth and how important it is to increasing economic mobility. (myFutureNC Commission, 2019)

Acknowledging myFutureNC's efforts, in May 2019 the State Board of Community Colleges adopted a resolution that declared "the North Carolina higher education community must improve student outcomes, reduce the time to graduation, and create opportunities that meet the needs of today's students" (State Board of Community Colleges, 2019). To bolster this commitment, the Board's 2018-22 strategic plan entitled "Putting Education to Work" promised to expand "access to high-quality workforce training [that] places more graduates into the workforce more quickly, reduces student debt, and increases the supply of skilled workers in North Carolina, making the state a more attractive place to start, expand, or relocate a business" (State Board of Community Colleges, 2019). In late 2020 the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) office further endorsed these goals, issuing a statement that "the 58 community colleges are proud to support myFutureNC," and highlighting NCCCS institutional outreach to the "nearly 700,000 students a year [that] take advantage of programs at any point in life — from Career and College Promise high school dual enrollment, to associate degree and transfer degree programs, to short-term workforce preparation" (MyFutureNC, 2020).

The efforts of myFutureNC and the North Carolina Community College System are congruent with national workforce education trends. After years of focus on access and student retention, followed by a more recent emphasis on student success and degree completion,

community college leaders across the United States are revisiting the roles their institutions play in both helping students attain post-graduation employment and also in supplying regional employers with a skilled base of workers (Bishop, 2019; Carnevale, 2013; Jacobs & Worth, 2019; Myran & Ivery, 2013; Wyner, 2017). As an academic degree or credential of value is increasingly recognized as a key element in the attainment of steady work and adequate wages, two-year public postsecondary institutions are seen as a vital pathway to the American dream (Carnevale et al., 2011; Mikelson & Hecker, 2018; MyFutureNC Commission, 2019).

This vision for the role of community colleges, as preparing graduates who are work ready, has resulted in increased scrutiny of the programs and classes currently taught at two-year institutions (Chen, 2020). Policymakers are increasingly looking for evidence of a skills-based curriculum, as proof that higher education is attuned and responsive to the needs of local employers (Tomlinson, 2012). With this new emphasis on post-graduation work outcomes, community college instructors serve as a crucial linchpin, by recognizing and teaching employer-identified necessary skills in their programs and coursework. In this capacity, instructional staff function as "core operators" (Levin, 2013, p. 233) controlling the levers of institutional learning outcomes (Wallin, 2003).

Karen Stout, President and CEO of Achieving the Dream, identified the critical role of the classroom instructor saying, "faculty have always been and will always be the first and most frequent point of ongoing contact with our students" (2018, p. 5). Similarly, David Leslie, former president of the Association for the Study of Higher Education noted that "change in colleges and universities comes when it happens in the trenches; what faculty and students do is what the institution becomes. It does not happen because a committee or a president asserts a new idea" (1996, p. 110). As community colleges continue to retool the curriculum and attempt to meet

employer needs, increased attention must be paid to the experiences and insights of instructors who are teaching students using skills-focused curricula. Without adequately exploring and using instructor feedback, workforce development efforts are missing a crucial opportunity to improve current and future curricular initiatives.

The following sections provide a brief overview of community college workforce education, in addition to a synopsis of the research methodology and theory used to frame the findings of this study. The chapter closes with a description of the purpose and significance of the dissertation.

## Community Colleges and Workforce Development

Many policymakers see community colleges as integral to a national upskilling and reskilling effort, especially given the historically workforce-driven mission and reach of these two-year public institutions (Gallagher & Maxwell, 2019; Jacoby, 2017). Sandra Kurtinitis, President of the Community College of Baltimore County (Maryland), and former chair of the American Association of Community Colleges conveys this in her article "Driving the Workforce":

> Taken as a whole, America's community colleges are the largest network of workforce providers in the nation, educating 12 million Americans this year alone. We are a force to be reckoned with! For our business partners, we provide well-prepared employees at the middle skills level. (Kurtinitis, 2018, p. 1)

Kurtinitis summarizes the role of the community college by stating that "Few institutions can lay claim to our bold premise: Everything we do is workforce development. Everything" (Kurtinitis, 2018, p. 1).

Serving approximately a third of all students enrolled in credit-bearing courses, community college instructors teach 35% of undergraduates in the United States according to data from fall semester 2017 (Ginder et al., 2019). These open access institutions are a crucial starting point for adult learners, offering lower-cost associate degrees, certificates, and non-credit learning opportunities, along with financial aid and support services (Bumphus, 2018). Affordable, geographically close to many, and responsive to local economies, community colleges are an important source of talent for their regions (Gallagher & Maxwell, 2019).

Longstanding federally-funded education initiatives such the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act recognize the community college's role in workforce preparation with financial support for career and technical education (CTE) initiatives. More recent workforce education programs such the Obama-era Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program have likewise invested millions of dollars in two-year postsecondary institutions.

These federal efforts were designed to take into account the needs of local employers. For example, CTE programs of study funded with Perkins money must sponsor regular industry advisory board meetings hosted at community colleges that receive this grant funding (Shulock & Offenstein, 2012). Likewise, North Carolina Community College System documentation indicates a requirement that adult education providers using WIOA monies participate in regional workforce development boards, in order to work closely with local employers (North Carolina Community College System, 2019, September 10). Federal grant initiatives that partner with community colleges and are funded by private philanthropy, such as the Casey Jobs Initiative and the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, similarly encourage the engagement of employers (Barnow & Spaulding, 2015).

Over a decade ago, the national community college workforce development charge was thrust into the spotlight by former President Barack Obama's 2008 speech at Macomb Community College, which proposed the American Graduation Initiative (AGI). Obama's plan targeted community colleges as a means of increasing the number of Americans holding college credentials by the year 2020. Seeing a need to "reform and strengthen community colleges from coast to coast so that they get the resources students and schools need—and the results workers and businesses demand" (White House, 2009, para. 3) the AGI requested 12 billion dollars for community colleges, with much of the money earmarked for workforce development programs and initiatives (Garza Mitchell & Sawyer, 2017). While the entirety of this proposal was not funded, the resulting financial backing spawned numerous community college workforce initiatives across the United States (Garza Mitchell & Sawyer, 2017) and created a renewed interest in the role of two-year public higher education.

## North Carolina Community Colleges: Workforce Education

On a state level, North Carolina General Statute 115D-1 designates the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) office as the lead agency for delivering workforce development, which includes adult literacy training, in addition to workforce education programs. As a result, NCCCS has been at the forefront of state-sponsored workforce skills development since 1970, with the founding of the first Human Resources Development (HRD) program at Lenoir Community College (North Carolina Community College System, 2018, slide 5).

In fulfilling this central role in workforce education, the NCCCS office's most recent large-scale skill-focused effort was created in response to the findings of NCWorks' 2014-2015 "1,000 in 100" listening tour of North Carolina employers. According to survey results, forty-

four percent of tour participants identified soft skills as a top workforce need, insufficiently met by current and prospective employees (State Board of Community Colleges, 2018). Spurred by these survey results, the Employability Skills Alignment Project (ESAP) was initiated by the North Carolina Community College System in 2017 using WIOA, Perkins and NCCCS monies.

ESAP, as designed by NCCCS staff and instructors for the community colleges of North Carolina, is intended to address skill deficiencies. By better aligning community college students' abilities with employer needs through ESAP's web-based curricular modules, North Carolina public sub-baccalaureate institutions are able to both improve students' post-graduation work outcomes and also provide employers with a base of better-skilled workers (State Board of Community Colleges, 2018).

Created during the course of two year-long phases spanning 2017-2019, and with input from all 58 community colleges, the Employability Skills Alignment Project's online content was made available for use during the 2019-2020 academic year. ESAP focuses on eight skill areas: critical and analytical thinking, problem solving and decision making, cultural sensitivity, interpersonal skills, communications, reliability and dependability, teamwork, and time and resource management (North Carolina Community College System, 2019). Additional instructional content and assessments continue to be under development as of early 2021.

ESAP is only one of numerous employability skills curricula currently in use statewide. Others that are deployed at community colleges across North Carolina include the NC-NET Employability Skills Resource Toolkit (ESAP's predecessor), the ACT WorkKeys Curriculum (used in support of the National Career Readiness Certificate), the SkillsUSA Framework, Charlotte Works' Working Smart curriculum, and WIN (Worldwide Innovation Network)

Courseware. Implementation of these employability skills curricula at NC community colleges is underwritten by both state and federal dollars (State Board of Community Colleges et al., 2020).

## A National Skills Deficit

Numerous curricular initiatives have been created and launched over the last three decades, which were intended to address the skills deficit documented by *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Gardner et al., 1983). This report announced that the country's position as a superpower was threatened by global competitors, a mediocre system of education and a lagging educational attainment rate. According to study findings, the United States' "unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 9). The American Society for Training and Development was next to express similar concerns, with the publication of a national study titled *Workplace Basics: The Essential Skills Employers Want* (Carnevale et al., 1990) which highlighted numerous deficiencies in the U.S. education system.

In 1991 the Department of Labor issued the *Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS)* report, a document that paralleled earlier accounts and named the basic abilities that were deemed necessary for employment (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills [SCANS], 1991a). Specifically, the study recommended three clusters of foundational skills (basic skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities) as well as five competencies (resources, interpersonal skills, information, systems, and technology) that students and future employees should develop and possess. The secretary's commission subsequently released to educational institutions a suggested framework for the implementation of a SCANS core skills curriculum entitled *Blueprint for Action: Building a Community Coalition* (SCANS, 1991b).

These documents were some of the earliest to recommend that U.S. workers must have not only requisite technical skills, but also what have come to be known as employability skills (ES). While there is no universal definition for ES, within the United States the federal Department of Education's guidelines are often referenced and list employability skills as encompassing: interpersonal skills, personal qualities, resource management, information use, communication skills, systems thinking, technology use, applied academic skills, and critical thinking skills. These nine skills are grouped under three classifications: applied knowledge, effective relationships, and workplace skills (Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, n.d.). Department of Education documentation alludes to the complexity of the topic, indicating that depending on the setting or audience, employability skills may be referred to by an extensive array of alternative phrasings including soft skills, 21st century skills, people skills, basic skills, generic skills, graduate abilities, key skills, or essential qualities (Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, n.d.).

## Nature of the Problem

Nationally, employment is projected to expand by six million jobs over the decade from 2019-2029, an increase from 162.8 million to 168.8 million according to the most recent U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) employment projections (2020). Twenty of the 30 fastest growing occupations listed by the BLS typically require either a postsecondary education degree or non-degree certificate (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). North Carolina's economy is quickly evolving like that of the United States, and the state's higher education system is attempting to keep up with the changes (myFutureNC, 2019). At least half of all occupations available today in North Carolina are predicted to be gone by 2050, and many fields of work are transforming rather than simply vanishing (Walden, 2017).

While North Carolina experienced a net loss of 6,000 high-quality blue-collar jobs between 1991 and 2015 (in occupations such as manufacturing, transportation, and construction), the state also experienced a net increase of 196,000 skilled services jobs in areas such as finance, business, education, and healthcare (Sims & Siddiqi, 2018). According to some predictions, by 2024, an additional 100,000 new jobs will exist, many which will require a higher education credential (Bartlett & Howze, 2018; Tippett, 2017; Tippett, 2018). It has become clear that work in the future economy will necessitate skills beyond those acquired in high school (D'Amico & Chapman, 2018). The bottom line, according to research conducted by myFutureNC which takes into account the state's current attainment trajectory, is that more jobs will exist than North Carolinians qualified to fill them (myFutureNC, 2019).

The North Carolina Community College System has indicated that it is ready to meet this workforce challenge with financial and staff support for various employability skills initiatives and curricula such as ESAP, the ACT WorkKeys Curriculum, and SkillsUSA. However, despite the outsized role that educators play in curricular instruction, input from this stakeholder group appears to be an undervalued source of feedback, with the insights of faculty and instructional staff understudied in research literature (Bensimon, 2007; Birnback & Friedman, 2009; Jenkins, 2011; Rhoades, 2012; Wallin, 2003). In particular, the experiences of community college educators and their instructional use of employability skills curricula have not been examined. Unfortunately, this is not atypical for higher education research on curricular initiatives. Rather, according to Stout, many curricular innovations and reforms "have lacked an explicit focus on teaching and learning as a primary lever for institutional transformation" (2018, p. 5). As indicated by Josh Wyner, founder and executive director of The Aspen Institute's College

Excellence Program, "Current national- and state-level strategies to reform higher education center on everything *but* teaching" (2014, p. 67).

Despite this oversight, the success of a classroom-based innovation such as use of an ES curriculum is dependent upon how participating instructors experience and engage with the initiative in their teaching. Educational research suggests that curricular reform efforts are reliant on classroom instructor involvement and willingness to invest time and energy in making changes to existing lesson plans (Cerit, 2013; Kezar et al., 2015). However, as Newton indicated, the experiences and perspectives of instructional staff who are the "'front-line' actors engaged in implementation of policy" (2003, p. 50) such as that related to classroom use of an employability skills curriculum, are often neglected when creating and deploying educational innovations.

As stated in Wallin's 2003 study, "community and technical colleges are teaching institutions. Nothing is more important to the success of the institution and its students than well-prepared, high-performing, intrinsically motivated faculty" (p. 331). Considering the linkages between instructor use of curricula, and the outcome of curricular initiatives, a close examination of instructor engagement with curricula is warranted. This qualitative phenomenological study therefore explored North Carolina community college educator experiences with employability skills instruction. A better understanding of instructor perceptions of ES curricular use is vital to improving future and related programs which aim to achieve alignment between community college graduates' employability skills and the needs of the workforce.

## Statement of the Problem

The limited research that exists regarding community college-based employability skills curricular initiatives is generally focused on student or employer perceptions of an ES program's objectives or outcomes. Little is understood about community college instructor experiences

with, or motivations to teach using employability skill-focused curricula and yet scholars implore that "any attempts to implement generics [employability] skills effectively, require self-motivation and enthusiasm of both teachers and learners" (Ho et al., 2014, Different Perceptions of Generic Skills section, para. 4). The Education Advisory Board (2016) similarly suggests that success of a curricular initiative hinges "on the willingness of faculty to redesign the institutional approach and carry out a new set of procedures, but many academic administrators have neglected to involve faculty from the outset" (p. 3). Therefore, as Bensimon explains, "if, as scholars of higher education, we wish to produce knowledge to improve student success, we cannot ignore that practitioners play a significant role" (2007, p. 45).

Workforce development efforts such as those run by the state of North Carolina are well funded. In 2020 the state of North Carolina received $24,910,558 in federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funding (Employment and Training Administration, 2020) and according to the Fiscal Year 2020-21 budget, the NCCCS office distributed $11,619,650 in federally sponsored Perkins grant monies to community colleges in support of career and technical education programs (State Board of Community Colleges. Division of Finance and Operations, 2020, p. 31). Given the significant amount of state and federal dollars invested in employability skills initiatives such as those taking place at NCCCS institutions, and the pivotal role that teaching staff play in curriculum-based workforce development efforts, it is surprising that community college instructor engagement with existing ES curricula has not been studied or documented in research literature. Considering the prevalence of ES programs within higher education, and especially within community colleges, there is a need to examine these instructor experiences and use this information to improve employability skills curricular initiatives.

The problem that this study addressed concerns the critical lack of information about community college instructor experiences with employability skills curricula. By exploring community college educators' instructional use of employability skills curricula, this study also sought to uncover frontline staff insights into what helps or hinders this teaching. The findings of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study are viewed through a motivational theory lens to identify the socio-environmental elements that influence the instructor experience. This study can be used to inform policy and practice related to community college employability skills instruction and ultimately improve employment outcomes for students.

## Purpose of the Study

In order to address this problem, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore North Carolina community college educator experiences with instructional use of an employability skills curriculum. The study's findings also reveal elements that help and hinder ES curricular instruction. Current and future ES curricular initiatives can be improved by better understanding instructor engagement with these efforts. In speaking directly with educators who have taught using an employability skills curriculum, this work foregrounds the perspective of practitioners. All participants interviewed are current or former instructors at North Carolina community colleges.

## Research Questions

The central research question that guided this study was: what are the experiences of North Carolina community college instructors who have taught using an employability skills curriculum? Accompanying research sub-questions were:

- What elements do educators describe as helping their instructional use of an employability skills curriculum?

- What elements do educators describe as hindering their instructional use of an employability skills curriculum?

Through these questions, the goal of this study was to explore community college educators' experiences with instructional use of employability skills curricula, and to uncover the socio-environmental elements that influence motivation and engagement with the instruction, using a phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry.

## Theoretical Framework

This work, which involved community college instructors' experiences with employability skills curricula, necessitated familiarity with existing scholarly research on educator involvement in similar curricular efforts. However, phenomenology as detailed by Husserl (1931) is the sole theoretical framework which may be used in a study that employs a phenomenological approach. As explained by Peoples, bracketing in transcendental phenomenological research is intended to place the researcher in the position of "being a stranger in a strange land" and that only by "being in this state of intentional suspension one can get to the essence of something" (2021, pp. 30-31). Use of additional theoretical models or frames would therefore stand to hinder the data collection, analysis and reduction process that is central to this methodology, according to phenomenologists (Giorgi, 1985; Hycner, 1985; Peoples, 2021). Anfara and Mertz likewise indicate that "no preconceived notions, expectations or frameworks guide researchers" (2006, p. xxii) using phenomenology. In light of these directives, care was taken not to allow other theories to intrude on the initial data gathering or analysis process. Only after the study's findings were established was an additional theoretical framework employed as a lens that allowed for novel ways in which to appreciate the experiences detailed by participants.

While following guidance of phenomenologists such as Husserl and Giorgi, and holding presuppositions in abeyance, I found it necessary to situate my study within existing research on postsecondary employability skills instruction. Therefore, in order prepare interview questions and better appreciate the experiences as described to me, I reviewed scholarly literature on instructor engagement with the teaching of ES in colleges and universities. In doing so, I realized that organizational behavior as a field of study, and motivational theories in particular could be used to examine the results of this study.

Consequently, the findings of this phenomenological study are framed by Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) of motivation (2000). By using an SDT framework through which to recognize instructor experiences with employability skills curricula, this work adds to the limited body of research that attempts to identify socio-environmental elements that influence the motivation of community college instructors. SDT is based on initial research conducted over three decades ago that considered intrinsic and extrinsic rewards and motivation (Deci, 1971; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). These early studies laid the groundwork for SDT which is defined as "an empirically derived theory of human motivation and personality in social contexts that differentiates motivation in terms of being autonomous and controlled" (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 416).

SDT posits that for humans, motivation spans a continuum from controlled (less self-determined) to autonomous (more self-determined). Influencing intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are socio-environmental components that support basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. According to Ryan and Deci, imbuing an individual's participation in activity with higher levels of these three elements increases the well-being of the participant, and allows for optimal growth and functioning, as well as increased intrinsic

motivation (2000). Utilizing in-depth interviews with participants, this dissertation employs Self-Determination Theory and identifies the complex interplay of psychological, social, and environmental elements at work for community college instructors in order to interpret study findings and reach conclusions.

## Conceptual Framework

Instructor experiences with employability skills curricula are a nuanced phenomenon informed by a multitude of elements. Viewing the instructor experience through the lens of Self-Determination Theory showed how psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness were met or unmet (see Figure 1) by social and environmental components. Interviews that capture participant experiences also provided evidence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators.

**Figure 1**

*Viewing Instructor Experiences with Employability Skills Curricula Through an SDT Lens*
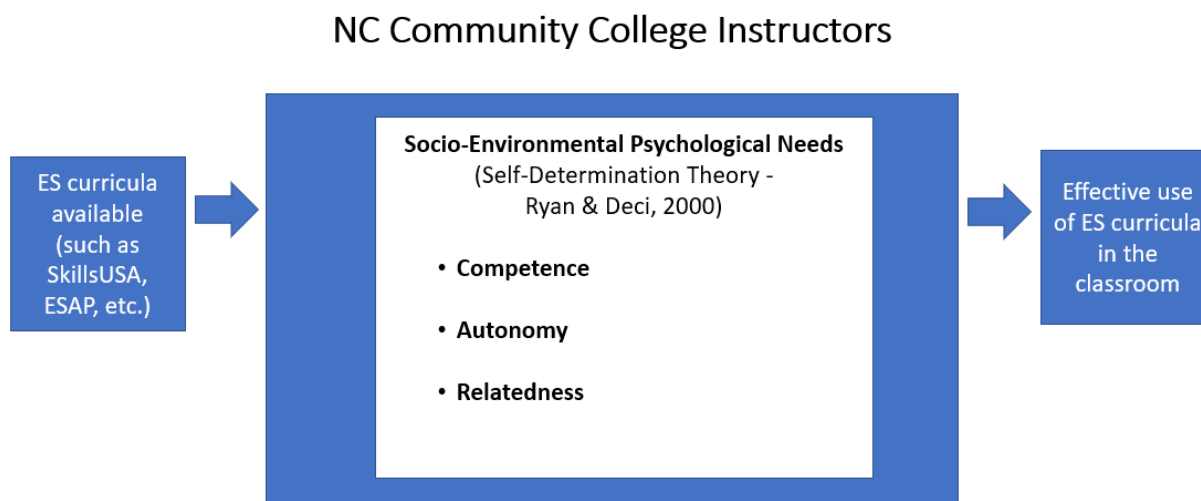


*Note.* This figure demonstrates the introduction of various employability skills curricula to North Carolina community college educators, their experience with instructional use of these curricula, and the resultant use of the curricula. The three psychological needs designated by SDT and

supported by socio-environmental elements are shown in the white box, and should be met for instructors, in order for intrinsically motivated behavior to occur.

## Significance of the Study

The improvement of student employability skills is a problem that continues to elude the U.S. educational system (Lerman, 2013). For many years it has appeared as a top concern for employers, who complain that college graduates are deficient in skills such as communication and critical thinking (Hom, 2019). Higher education, asked by policymakers and industry groups to better align student abilities with employer needs, has found little traction with employability skills efforts thus far (Barrie, 2006).

The issue becomes even more urgent in light of faltering confidence in higher education according to recent Gallup and Pew surveys (Doherty & Kiley, 2019; Marken, 2019). In addition, corporations such as Google and Amazon have seemingly given up on higher education, creating their own internal educational programs and certifications (Burke, 2019; Scott, 2019). Vendors such as Degreed are encroaching on traditional community college continuing education and market online employability skills tutorials and products directly to employers (Broom, 2020). Virtual reality employability skills training is reportedly ready to be deployed at scale (PricewaterhouseCoopers International Limited, 2020). The efforts of these workforce development providers are especially problematic for postsecondary institutions that have traditionally partnered with companies and are currently faced with steadily decreasing enrollments and disappearing revenue streams.

Community college instructors and institutions in the state of North Carolina have access to a wide array of employability skills curricula that are intended to ensure students graduate able to meet the skill demands of the workplace. Teaching students non-cognitive abilities such as

employability skills may require that educators adjust preconceived ideas about what constitutes instruction. For some, teaching employability skills falls well outside their usual curricular practices and requires a significant adjustment in thinking about instructional priorities. This type of change can be challenging for educators and difficult for organizations to sustain (Barr & Rossett, 1994; Bess & Dee, 2014). However, community college instructor support of and engagement with employability skills curricula is central to the success of initiatives such as ESAP, SkillsUSA and Working Smart. The classroom is the crucible where institutional change meets student learning. And while much institutional activity remains invisible and hidden within the "black box" of the classroom, the outcomes of community college instruction are more scrutinized than ever by both industry and policymakers.

This phenomenological study serves to enhance the very limited body of literature that reports on the experiences of instructors who are using an employability skills curriculum. Despite the growing volume of employability skill-related instruction taking place at community colleges across the United States, there is no study that focuses on the experiences of instructors at two-year public postsecondary institutions who are involved in such initiatives.

North Carolina community colleges' employability skills curricular efforts would benefit from exploration of the instructor experience and a consideration of what helps or hinders instructional use of an ES curriculum. There is already evidence in higher education research literature that similar skill-focused initiatives have faced challenges from instructors (Bailey et al., 2015; de la Harpe et al., 2000; Deil-Amen, 2006). For example, some instructors (especially those worn out from what O'Banion (2014) terms "initiative fatigue") may perceive employability skills initiatives as a passing trend and see the teaching of these non-cognitive skills as irrelevant to their work in the classroom (Bailey et al., 2015; Deil-Amen, 2006). Other

studies have documented faculty resentment of curricular input from employers (de la Harpe et al., 2000; Zemsky, 1997). There are also signs that postsecondary educators see employer requests for specific skills as intrusive to an institution's traditional academic agenda (Holzer, 2015; King & Prince, 2015) and to the academic freedom of instructors (de la Harpe et al., 2000). In summary, there is ample indication that employability skills curricula may encounter resistance to instructor use and institutional deployment. Chapter two provides an overview of questions and concerns that have arisen in consideration of ES instruction in higher education settings.

## Study Design and Methods Overview

According to Moustakas, phenomenological research begins with a topic very personal to the researcher, and to which the investigator has an "intimate connection" (1994, p. 59). Moustakas (1994) advises that for researcher "The puzzlement is autobiographical, making memory and history essential dimensions of discovery" (p. 59). In following these guidelines, this study was inspired by my own experiences working at a community college in Massachusetts. Over fourteen years of my career were spent at an institution where I often found myself working closely with a particular group of faculty, both full and part-time and from several program areas. This was a tightknit group of professionals, and we were jokingly referred to by at least one administrator as "the usual suspects." The projects we worked on typically involved additional time and unpaid effort, often outside of normal work hours. Despite this, I always felt like I was learning something new, in addition to making a difference in students' lives. Simply put, I found my participation in these initiatives enjoyable and worthwhile.

Looking back, I wonder why we consistently and voluntarily became involved with new initiatives. What motivated us to put in the unpaid hours and to care so much? And, what

deterred others from participating? In trying to answer these questions, I am drawn to study instructor experiences and work motivation.

I believe that conceptualizations of reality are shaped by both context and social interactions with the world (Merriam, 2002) and thus approach the work using a constructivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). A qualitative method was appropriate for this study, as the research attempted to capture instructor experiences with regard to context and determine how participants make meaning of their lives within a given setting (Patton, 1982). Use of a transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) shed light on the work of NC community college educators and attempted to answer the overarching research question: What are the experiences of community college instructors who are using employability skills curricula in their teaching?

Phenomenology is based on the premise that an individual's conscious interpretation of their experience (the phenomenon) matters more than any attempt at discovering an objective truth about an experience (Giorgi, 1985). The transcendental phenomenological method as developed by Giorgi, and based on Husserl's writings, was chosen for this dissertation, and requires that the researcher set aside any personal preconceptions and prejudgments through the technique known as epoché (or bracketing), so that the data emerge unbiased (1985). By using transcendental phenomenological techniques, this study sought to portray the experience as the participants themselves understand and describe it.

The phenomenon examined by this study involves the experience of instructors who have taught using an employability skills curriculum. In order to solicit study participants a letter was shared with NC community college administrators that asked for help in distributing a study invitation and screener survey to instructional staff. An announcement about the study that

invited educator participation was also shared with numerous statewide associations that are concerned with the teaching of employability skills such as the SkillsUSA North Carolina chapter and the NC Work-Based Learning Association. As a result of this outreach and recruitment, a group of ten participants were chosen from screener survey respondents as the population for this qualitative study. Data were collected through multiple in-depth interviews. Analysis of collected data was conducted using Giorgi's method of explication (1985) in order to produce findings that describe the essence of the phenomenon for participants.

## Overview of the Study

As learning facilitators and implementers of curricular initiatives, instructors are the main cog that drives student learning. Understanding the dynamics of educator engagement is critical to the implementation of curricular change such as that introduced by use of an employability skills curriculum. And yet instructor experiences with employability skills curricular initiatives are generally not studied, nor utilized in the creation of ES initiatives. Elements that help and hinder instructor participation in these efforts are likewise not well understood.

While public two-year postsecondary colleges are increasingly recognized for their vital contribution to the workforce and economy, the experiences and perspectives of instructors (both full and part-time) at these institutions are too often unconsidered in scholarly research. Use of Self-Determination Theory as a lens through which to view the findings of this study, in order to identify socio-environmental elements that address instructor psychological needs and influence educator motivation, represents a unique approach to the nascent study of community college classroom-based ES teaching.

**Definition of Terms**

**ACT WorkKeys Curriculum -** According to the ACT website this curriculum: "helps individuals build the essential career-relevant skills needed for learning, personal development and effective job performance" and is "the only curriculum built from the ground up to align with the WorkKeys National Career Readiness Certificate assessments" (ACT, 2020, WorkKeys Curriculum section, para. 1).

**Competence, Relatedness, and Autonomy** - The three psychological elements named by Deci and Ryan for healthy functioning. From the *Oxford Handbook of Human Motivation*, people: "need to feel competent in negotiating their external and internal environments; they need to experience relatedness to other people and groups; and they need to feel autonomy or self-determination with respect to their own behaviors and lives" (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 88).

**Employability** - Knight and Yorke's widely quoted definition: "A set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (2003, p. 5).

**Employability Skills** - The skills that are necessary for career success at all levels of employment. These are transferable skills required by the 21st century workplace (Overtoom, 2000).

**Employability Skills Alignment Project (ESAP)** - Objectives for the NCCCS Employability Skills Alignment Project (ESAP) are: "assessment of employability skills training and tools currently utilized in the NC Community College System; identification of employability skills that employers have defined as 'in-demand'; alignment of existing employability skills training with current industry needs through a skills-gap analysis; curation of existing resources and

materials addressing industry needs; development of new employability skills training materials such as courses and modules to reflect the needs of North Carolina employers and workforce; creation of a framework for disseminating integrated resources and materials; and professional development for vested stakeholders including faculty and staff" (North Carolina Community College System, 2017, p. 4).

**Extrinsic Motivation** - "Involves doing an activity because it leads to a separable consequence—the goal is separate from the activity itself. Carrots (rewards or accolades) and sticks (punishments or threats) are the classic extrinsic motivators" (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 88).

**Hard Skills -** Hard skills are the technical expertise and knowledge needed for a job (Robles, 2012).

**Human Resource Development (HRD) courses -** NC-sponsored classes run at NCCCS campuses that are designed to "to provide short-term training opportunities which address specific employability needs. Students gain valuable lessons respective to skills needed to successfully navigate job entry, retention and performance, so as to achieve the individual's potential and contribute to the strategic direction of the enterprise" (North Carolina Community College System, 2018, slide 4).

**Intrinsic Motivation** - "Involves doing an activity because it is interesting and enjoyable. It is often said that when people are intrinsically motivated, doing the activity is its own reward" (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 89).

**NC-NET Employability Skills Resource Toolkit** - An online suite of "teaching resources [that] consist of classroom lessons and related student handouts for teaching employability skills. The activities contain preparatory instructions, student learning objectives, directions for conducting

the activity, student materials, and follow-up questions for reflection and discussion" (Center for Occupational Research and Development, 2017, p. viii).

**Self-Determination Theory** - "As a macrotheory of human motivation, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) addresses such basic issues as personality development, self-regulation, universal psychological needs, life goals and aspirations, energy and vitality, nonconscious processes, the relations of culture to motivation, and the impact of social environments on motivation, affect, behavior, and wellbeing" (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182).

**SkillsUSA Framework** - According to SkillsUSA, this curricular framework:

- Provides a common language for students to articulate what they gain from SkillsUSA participation to employers, school administrators, parents and other students;

- Assesses student skill development along a learning continuum of awareness, demonstration, and mastery; and

- Creates a vision for SkillsUSA programs at the local, state and national levels to ensure quality student-led experiences that build skills in all members (SkillsUSA, 2021, What it does section).

**Soft Skills -** "Personality traits, goals, motivations, and preferences that are valued in the labor market, in school, and in many other domains" (Kautz et al., 2014, p. 2). Sometimes used synonymously with employability skills.

**Workforce Development** - According to NCWorks, workforce development encompasses the programs, systems, and networks primarily designed:

- to enable individuals to succeed in the workplace by providing skills assessment, skills development, training, or employment services; and

- to help businesses obtain a skilled workforce by providing recruitment assistance, customized training, or structuring work-based learning opportunities (Bryant, 2015, slide 2).

**Workforce Education** - "A system of components that interact to equip students or adult workers with the knowledge, habits, and skills to perform jobs that are available and that are emerging" (Gray & Herr, 1998, p. 213).

**Working Smart -** "Created in response to increasing employer demands for workers with skills beyond their technical expertise, *Working Smart: Soft Skills for Workplace Success* is a five-module, 16-lesson curriculum that enhances job-seeker skills such as communication, problem solving, time management and accountability" (Charlotte Works, 2019, Working Smart for community partners section).

**Worldwide Innovations Network (WIN) Courseware** - According to the WIN website, use of this curriculum will "help learners understand and prepare for the realities of the workplace through personalized career readiness instruction with career readiness courseware. With these standards-aligned, web-based and blended learning programs, education and workforce entities can make sure all learners and job seekers are fully engaged in relevant career-driven education and training" (Worldwide Innovation Network, 2020, para. 1).

## Chapter Summary

Chapter one provided an introduction and background to the study, a description of the problem, a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research question, a theoretical framework through which to view the study's findings, the conceptual framework, the significance of the study, the study design and methods used, and definitions of terms. Chapter two provides an in-depth review of the literature that focuses on the context of the problem, and

relevant studies that help to inform this work. Chapter three describes the phenomenological approach and methods used to explore educator experiences with employability skills curricular instruction. Chapter four introduces the study's participants and thematic findings. Finally, Chapter five highlights key findings of the study and summarizes study implications. This concluding chapter also suggests recommendations for policy and practice based on findings, as well as areas for future research.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As presented in Chapter one, this phenomenological study addresses North Carolina community college educators' instructional use of employability skills curricula. I provided a background of the study, including a discussion of concerns with workers' skills gaps and overview of the community college's role in workforce development and education. In addition, the statement of problem, purpose, significance, and nature of the study were introduced, along with the research questions, sub-questions and related theoretical framework.

The literature reviewed in this chapter examines the concept of employability skills (ES), and research related to the teaching and assessment of ES in higher education. Next, a brief historical introduction to motivational theories is provided. The theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) is then presented along with a description of the dynamics of motivation per SDT. The three psychological components of SDT (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) are then described in the context of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Research that uses SDT in studying postsecondary faculty is also outlined.

A literature search was conducted using the entirety of the North Carolina State University library collection including article databases and the online catalog (in conjunction with WorldCat), plus Google Scholar. Formulating search queries proved a significant challenge given the multitude of search terminologies that are synonymous with employability skills. Also, given the dearth of research that focuses on motivation in community college instructors, a degree of creativity and persistence was warranted in determining the necessary keywords and ensuring a comprehensive inquiry.

**Workforce Skills Gap**

Employers are deeply concerned with a lack of qualified workers, and in particular with workers' skills. There is no shortage of articles or surveys that attest to perceived deficiencies in employee abilities. Today's technology-enriched, knowledge-based work environments demand employees who not only have requisite academic skills such as literacy, numeracy, and information technology fluency, but also the full complement of soft skills, such as the ability to communicate effectively, display a strong work ethic and exhibit creativity. A report by the International Association of Administrative Professionals, OfficeTeam and HR.com indicated 67% of HR managers surveyed would hire a candidate with strong soft skills who lacked technical abilities versus just nine percent who would hire someone with strong technical credentials and weak soft skills (Feffer, 2016). According to another survey, 44% of executives polled indicated a lack of soft skills as the largest inadequacy in the United States workforce (ADECCO, 2020). In a 2018 LinkedIn survey, 57% of managers surveyed ranked soft skills as more important than hard skills (Petrone, 2018). Bruce Tulgan, author of *Bridging the Soft Skills Gap* was quoted as saying that with regard to soft skills, "unfailingly, the trend has been that managers say new hires are below expectations and standards" (Feffer, 2016, Think Long Term section, para. 4).

These matters are not isolated to jobs traditionally considered white collar work, and appear to be applicable to all fields, positions, and levels of employment. According to a report by the Aspen Institute Economic Strategy Group, a survey of manufacturing companies revealed that "eighty-four percent of manufacturing executives agree there is a talent shortage in United States manufacturing and estimate that 6 out of 10 open skilled production positions are unfilled due to the shortage" (Giffi et al., 2015, p. 100). This shortfall is a result of jobs that increasingly

require both occupational and employability skills, rather than the general skills that many associate with a college degree (Kearney & Ganz, 2019). Worker productivity was seen by employers as heavily dependent on the soft skills that employability encompasses, such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, reliability, and responsibility (Kearney & Ganz, 2019).

In fields with projected job growth, there is a documented need for employees who are able to successfully work with people rather than data or things (Dickerson & Wilson, 2012; Merisotis, 2020). And, despite the rise of automation systems and artificial intelligence, these technologies are not yet sophisticated enough to respond as humans to unique interactional situations, or to emotions (Merisotis, 2020; Weise, 2021). Soft skills, which are often deemed synonymous with employability skills, are more relevant than ever in a rapidly evolving and increasingly technologically advanced world of work.

Work-based learning (WBL) such as internships and apprenticeships are well-documented as helping students develop desirable employability skills (Spaulding & Martin-Caughey, 2015). However, there are a number of issues with such opportunities. For example, there is an issue with equity, as higher-income students generally have better access to work-based learning, when compared to low-income students (Council of Economic Advisers, 2015; Reardon, 2011). Apprenticeships have also been found historically less accessible to women and students of color (Toglia, 2017) who are overrepresented in the lowest-wage apprenticeship programs (Hanks et al., 2018).

Additionally, there are trepidations about potentially opportunistic employers who may view WBL as a way to exploit a low or no-cost source of labor (McDonald & Grant-Smith, 2020). And, some studies point to no benefits (National Association of Colleges and Employers,

2013) or even negative outcomes of work-based learning experiences for students, with lower hourly wages as a result, post-graduation (Cerulli-Harms, 2017; Holford, 2017).

Crafting effective instructional opportunities for use in teaching skills has proved challenging (Hammer & Green, 2011; Phillips & Bond, 2004). Associations such as the Society for Human Resource Management have acknowledged the difficulty of teaching soft skills, as well as problems with measuring these skills in potential and newly hired employees (Feffer, 2016). Colleges and universities, despite these matters, see a role for higher education in supplying businesses with work-ready employees, and have attempted surmount problems by enhancing existing instruction with employability skills learning opportunities. Products such as the ACT WorkKeys Curriculum, and the SkillsUSA Framework have been created and marketed to higher education as offering solutions to the increasing demand for student employability skills competency.

### Role of Community Colleges

With a third of all students enrolled at community colleges across the nation, public two-year colleges are seen by many as an important resource, well poised to address the skill deficiencies and workforce needs identified by employers. Serving a population of students that are often economically disadvantaged, first generation, or that come from underserved groups, community colleges are located throughout all 50 states, with the majority found in rural areas (Krupnick, 2019). State and federal administrations, as well as industry leaders, look to community colleges as a key source of labor for an evolving and increasingly technologically advanced workplace (Jacobs & Worth, 2019; Rainie & Anderson, 2017).

Less resourced than four-year schools, yet equally ambitious in their goals of helping students be successful in post-graduation employment, community college administrators and

instructors are charged with implementing workforce initiatives created to satisfy regional employer needs. For example, the U.S. Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program was a large-scale federal effort focused on public two-year institutions, created to reskill unemployed workers for current workforce needs. TAACCCT was administered by the Department of Labor in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education and implemented at public two-year institutions in 50 states from 2011 to 2018 (Employment and Training Administration, n.d.-a).

Providing billions in funding to more than 60% of all community colleges in the United States, the TAACCCT program represented a massive workforce investment designed to assist public two-year institutions across the nation grow their capacity to provide education and training programs for in-demand jobs (Employment and Training Administration, n.d.-b.). Over the course of seven years, these grants allowed 478,434 community college students to enroll in academic programs intended to impart the skills needed for work in five industry areas: health care, manufacturing, energy, information technology and transportation (Employment and Training Administration, n.d.-a). Today, TAACCCT is seen by many policymakers as a success and is being used as a model for the next round of federal workforce education funding (Dembicki, 2019).

Historically, and according to research studies, similar curricular alignment efforts have not had consistently positive results. Higher education scholars such as Kevin Dougherty of Columbia University's Teachers College declared that the community college "dances to the rhythms of the labor market, but it rarely keeps very good time" (1994, p. 67). When community colleges attempt to establish closer ties with employers, these higher education institutions often struggle to forge effective partnerships (Barnow & Spaulding, 2015; Maguire et al., 2010).

Tamar Jacoby, president of Opportunity America, writes about these efforts saying "Community colleges bring many advantages to the task of workforce education. They also face many challenges and have a mixed record. But they are the institution we have—the most likely and potentially adaptable training infrastructure in most cities and states" (2017, p. 1). Jacoby continues, explaining that the challenge for policymakers is "to create incentives for these widely varied and uneven schools to put skills and skills training more at the center of their missions" (Jacoby, 2017, p. 3).

The following sections provide background on the concept of employability skills, along with a review of literature that details major themes, as well as the ways in which ES has been studied at various institutions and through multiple fields of research.

**Employability Skills**

Authors writing about employability decry the lack of a universal definition. McQuaid and Lindsay write that "Despite, or perhaps because of its ubiquity, the concept of employability continues to be used in a number of contexts and with reference to a range of meanings" (2005, p. 197). Peter Knight, a prolific U.K.-based employability skills scholar regards employability as a kind of "chameleon concept" (2001, in Cranmer, 2006, p. 6). In their article on employability skills Knight and Page deem study of these abilities "wicked" and opine that it falls into a category of concepts that are "so complex that you have to be highly intelligent and well informed just to be undecided about them" (2007, p. 0). Others see employability as simply a buzzword, not often understood by those who use it (Philpott, 1998). Gazier wrote about employability calling it "a fuzzy notion, often ill-defined and sometimes not defined at all" (1998, p. 298).

Compounding the complexity of understanding the concept, and adding to the confusion (Atkins, 1999), different countries use different phrasings, as evidenced in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*International Terminologies for Employability Skills*

| Country | Phrases used |
| --- | --- |
| Australia | Employability skills<br>Generic skills<br>Key competencies |
| Canada | Employability skills |
| Denmark | Process independent qualifications |
| France | Transferable skills |
| Germany | Key qualifications |
| New Zealand | Essential skills |
| Singapore | Critical enabling skills |
| Switzerland | Trans-disciplinary goals |
| United States | Basic skills<br>Necessary skills<br>Workplace know-how |
| United Kingdom | Common skills<br>Core skills<br>Key skills |

*Note.* Adapted from "Terms used in various countries to describe generic skills," by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2003, *Defining generic skills: At a glance.* https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/defining-generic-skills-at-a-glance

Scholars have recognized the potential for difficulty inherent in the abundance of synonymous terminologies and looked to employers for guidance but found that no precise definition exists there either (Woollard, 1995). Yet, no matter the terms used, these difficult-to-define or quantify abilities are those that employers say they value most highly. Employability skills are consistently identified in employer surveys as the most sought-after qualities in new hires. Unfortunately, lost in this struggle for consistent terminology or a definition, according to Chris Humphries, former Chief Executive of the United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills, is the reality that higher education continues to waste precious resources while industry gets increasingly impatient with ES efforts that fall short (Stanistreet, 2008). According to Humphries, institutions "have spent too much time seeking to define employability skills and too little time effectively developing them in our young people and our workforce" (Stanistreet, 2008, p. 13).

**Employability Defined**

Examining the history of the verbiage associated with employability skills yields clues as to how the concept has evolved through different meanings and why it remains confusing. Usage of the term employability may be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century when both U.S. and U.K. publications used the word in categorizing people as simply employable or unemployable (Gazier, 2001). By mid-century employability had taken on socio-medical meanings in U.S. and European publications and was typically used in describing the difficulties those with disabilities faced in joining the labor market (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005).

More recently, scholars such as Hillage and Pollard (1998) have equated employability with the gaining and retaining of fulfilling work. Fugate et al. (2004) describe employability as "proactive adaptability" (p. 30) that takes into account additional dimensions of career identity,

personal adaptability and social networking skills (social and human capital). Asonitou writes

that "employability is understood as the possession of basic 'core-skills', or an extended set of

generic attributes, or attributes that a type of employer (discipline-linked, sector-related,

company-type) specifies" (2015, p. 284). In addition, employability is not seen as solely a

function of labor market forces, but reliant as well upon personal elements such as a willingness

to maintain flexibility on the job by changing shifts or working beyond a job description (Misra

& Mishra, 2011). "Employability is ultimately about learning, with less of an emphasis on

'employ' and more on 'ability'" according to Harvey (2003, p. 3).

**Employability Skills Defined**

The phrasing of employability skills began to appear in U.S. publications, during the mid-

1970s. "Goals and Roles of Vocational Education" published in *Developing the Nation's Work*

*Force* (Cross, 1975), was one of the first articles to connect employability skills acquisition to

education. Schubert et al.'s 1977 article in *Rehabilitation Psychology* described the importance

of certain skills in helping those with disability find work. These scholars found through their

study that "Skill level is associated with job-getting ability, both because it is an important

bargaining point in itself and because it may indicate persistence" (Schubert et al., 1977, p. 85).

A decade later, secondary education scholars Bhaerman and Spill's 1988 publication *A Dialogue*

*on Employability Skills* would define ES as the abilities that help a young person be ready to

apply for and keep a job.

By the 1990s researchers were starting to link higher education with ES, as evidenced by

steadily increasing appearances of the concept of employability skills within educational policy

discussion (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Taylor, 1998). An early

example is Spille's 1994 article entitled "Postsecondary Curricula Must Emphasize Generic

Employability Skills" which appeared in the journal *Adult Learning*. Around this time, labor

market policy in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia had become

increasingly attuned to supply-side approaches and as a result, the concept of employability

became 'hollowed out' according to scholars such as McQuaid and Lindsay (2005). This

hollowing out translated into "a singular focus on the individual and what might be termed their

'employability skills'" (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005, p. 205) in place of a critical consideration of

the role of employers and hiring practices in employment. Or, in the words of another scholar,

"the term 'employability skills' gradually replaced the terms 'generic' or 'soft' skills, increasing

the focus on the needs of the employer" (Hill, 2017, p. 19). Employer labor requirements and

needs had thus become the overriding concern according to some labor scholars, to the detriment

of worker necessities such as job opportunities and job security (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Hill,

2017; Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2017).

This shift coincides with changes in employment and hiring patterns seen worldwide. For

example, according to a 2003 U.K. governmental white paper on 21st century skills, "The global

economy has made largely extinct the notion of a 'job for life'. The imperative now is

employability for life" (U.K. Government, 2003, p. 11). This change in the definition of

employability, moving from an individual getting a job to one that instead focuses on an

individual's acquisition of a set of attributes that makes one appealing to a wide range of

employers is seen by some scholars as part of larger neoliberal trends (Rose, 1989).

**Soft Skills and Employability Skills**

A footnote in the U.K. Undergraduate Curriculum and Employability report indicates that

as of 2003, "Outside the UK, 'employability' is neither widely used nor clearly distinguished

from 'getting a graduate job'" (Yorke & Knight, 2003, p. 2). There is evidence though, that

today the phrase employability skills has now claimed its place, alongside use of the expression soft skills, in the vernacular of U.S. higher education. However, and worth noting, while the phrasing soft skills may still be more familiar to the layperson, it is not synonymous with employability skills, as illustrated in the ES models which follow.

In addition to being a recognition of documented industry preference for use of the word employability (Blades et al., 2012), a linguistic shift in U.S. scholarly literature from soft skills to employability skills also may be due to a chorus of protests by higher education pundits who take issue with use of the word soft. For example, Matt Reed, author of Inside Higher Ed's weblog *Confessions of a Community College Dean* has written about the importance of soft skills but takes umbrage with the use of the word soft, concerned that the word choice demotes the importance of these abilities (2017). Likewise, education blogger Trevor Muir begs the reader to stop saying soft skills and instead call them essential skills, pointing out their importance beyond any facts or equations to be memorized (2019). In Muir's opinion, these crucial skills are the ones that serve an employee throughout their lifetime, and not just for one particular job or industry's current set of needs and thus should be renamed (2019).

### Employability Skills Efforts in the United States

The United States Department of Education defines employability skills as the "general skills that are necessary for success in the labor market at all employment levels and in all sectors" (College & Career Readiness & Success Center at American Institutes for Research, 2016, slide 13). Working with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, the Perkins Collaborative Research Network (PCRN) has developed the following employability skills framework:

**Figure 2**

*PCRN Employability Skills Framework*
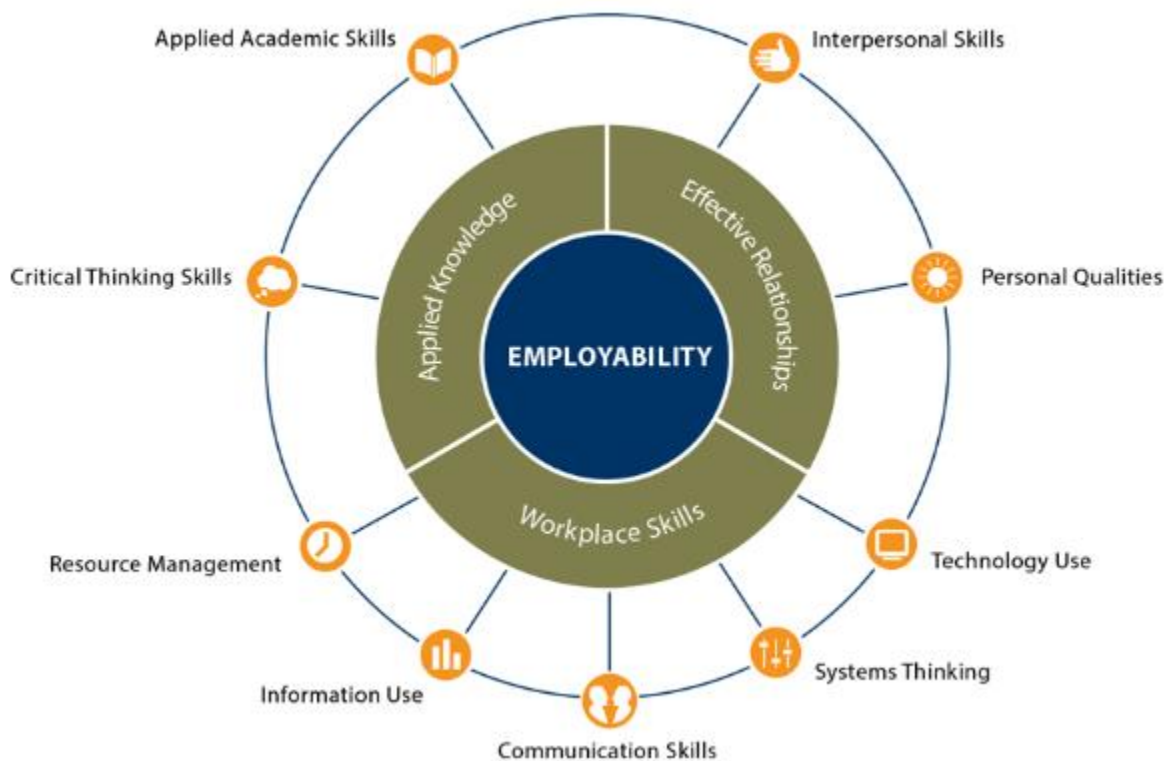


*Note.* From "Employability Skills," by the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. United States Department of Education, n.d. (https://cte.ed.gov/initiatives/employability-skills-framework). Reprinted with permission.

Made up of three sectors, this framework categorizes harder, more academic skills involving literacy and numeracy, as well as scientific procedures, under applied knowledge. Softer skills such as communication, critical thinking and time management are distributed throughout the model and constitute the majority of the abilities referenced.

**Figure 3**

*PCRN Employability Skills Framework: Three Sectors*



*Note.* From "Employability Skills," by the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. United States Department of Education, n.d. (https://cte.ed.gov/initiatives/employability-skills-framework). Reprinted with permission.

**State and Regional Employability Skills Initiatives**

Interest in employability skills shows no signs of abating with numerous related initiatives having launched in the United States over the last decade. Grant-funded programs such as those supported by Perkins and TAACCCT monies represent some of the most far-reaching, federally underwritten efforts that have designated employability skills as a top priority. As a result of these funds, ES campaigns have flourished at the state and regional level. For example, the Colorado Community College System, using TAACCCT grant funding, created the Colorado Helps Advanced Manufacturing Program (CHAMP). In recognition of oft-cited ES deficits, CHAMP assembled an Employability Skills for Industry MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) that included "an openly licensed rubric that instructors can use to assess students'

mastery of basic employability skills, e.g., professionalism, initiative, and teamwork" (Colorado Community College System, 2012, p. 17, in Michael et al., p. 100).

The Illinois Essential Employability Skills Framework is another example of a statewide initiative. According to the framework documentation, "essential employability skills are those general skills that are required to be successful in all sectors of the labor market and are separate from the technical skills attained in career pathways or academic skills such as math and reading" (Illinois Essential Employability Skills Taskforce, 2017). By bringing together the Illinois Community College Board with various stakeholders including chambers of commerce, businesses, and K-16 educators, the architects of this effort were able to compile a document that identified key skills and the areas where gaps exist. The framework is supported by suggested activities for the classroom as well as ways for instructors to self-assess their efforts.

There are also a number of multi-state and regional ES efforts ongoing in the United States. In 2011, the Association of Public Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the University Industry Consortium (UIC) initiated a collaborative effort that resulted in a review of literature on employability skills. The group assigned to this initiative studied articles and surveys by government, non-profit, and industry-affiliated organizations from across the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia in order to identify soft skills that are relevant for graduates (Crawford et al., 2011). Using the resultant list of skills, this APLU-UIC joint effort went on to conduct a survey of over 8,000 participants, including students, faculty, and alumni from 31 institutions, as well as 282 employers. The outcome of this collaborative work appears in APLU publications, such as the report *Ready for Jobs, Careers, and a Lifetime* which recognized many new positions "will require college degrees that include key employment skills" and that "a four-year degree should also put graduates in a better position to adapt as

employment requirements change throughout their careers" (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, n.d., p. 5). Specific academic programs within APLU such as the Landscape Architecture and Allied Professions section have further focused on the topic of employability skills by conducting ES surveys unique to their field of study (Crawford & Dalton, 2012).

Other consortia-based efforts include the Commission on Higher Education and Employability, an initiative of the New England Board of Higher Education, underwritten with funds from groups such as the Lumina Foundation. The commission, which met from 2017-2018, was charged with developing a policy agenda that would help graduates make "successful transitions to work and sustained contributions to the well-being and competitiveness of the region and nation" (Commission on Higher Education & Employability, 2018, p. 4). Fueled by findings such as "while 64% of students think college graduates are highly prepared to work well in teams, only 37% of employers agree" and "while 62% of students think that graduates have adequate oral communications skills, only 28% of employers concur" (Hart Research Associates, 2015, pp. 9-10) the endeavor resulted in 18 recommendations intended to close the employability skills gap for New England states (Commission on Higher Education & Employability, 2018).

*Exemplar Institution*

One institution in the United States that has a well-established reputation as an ES leader is Alverno College in Wisconsin. Frequently cited by employability skills scholars, this small women's college has used since the 1970s what is termed an "abilities-based curriculum" (Alverno College, n.d.). Alverno College's eight core abilities are embedded throughout the curriculum (Alverno College, n.d.), and include skills such as communication, analysis and problem solving. While the nomenclature is different, these abilities are considered by a number of ES scholars to be synonymous with employability skills (Stephenson, 1998; Yorke & Knight,

2003). As a result, Alverno College has been studied extensively and is currently participating in the national Essential Employability Qualities (EEQ) pilot program led by the Quality Assurance Commons for Higher and Postsecondary Education (QA Commons), along with 14 other North American postsecondary institutions. The goal of this effort is to devise criteria leading to a certification process that officially recognizes EEQ-building programs (Alverno College, 2020).

**North Carolina Employability Skills Initiatives**

As discussed in Chapter one, North Carolina has a longstanding and legally codified commitment to workforce development and education within the state's community college system. Now approaching its fifth decade in existence, the NCCCS Human Resource Development (HRD) program is a good example of the state's investment in workforce education and is currently offered at all 58 colleges and across 100 counties (North Carolina Community College System, 2018, slide 5). HRD instruction "focuses on the assessment and development of employability competency skills identified as 'essential' for the workplace" (North Carolina Department of Labor, 2019, p. 56). Created to provide short-term training opportunities that address specific employment issues, HRD programs are operated within individual community colleges and are intended to be responsive to the needs of local labor markets and industry sectors.

In order to gauge the degree to which statewide workforce development requirements were being met by programs such as HRD, *Closing the Gap: 2012 Skills Survey of North Carolina Employers* polled businesses across the state about their needs. "Improved soft skills / personal effectiveness training" for employees was at the top of the list of training sessions of most value, followed closely by "occupational skills" training (North Carolina Business Services Representatives, 2012). Conducted by the Association of Workforce Development Boards, this

survey of more than 1100 NC employers included comments such as: "The lack of basic communication skills has been a large obstacle," "Employees who have an understanding of problem solving, teamwork, and continuous learning are very valuable," and "Attitude, enthusiasm, and appropriate attire are the key basics" (North Carolina Business Services Representatives, 2012).

Responding to these findings, in 2013 NCCCS launched the North Carolina Network for Excellence in Teaching (NC-NET) Employability Skills Resource Toolkit (Center for Occupational Research and Development, 2017). The effort, also known as Code Green, was the largest curriculum improvement project (CIP) ever undertaken by the NC Community College System office and addressed the soft skill deficits indicated by North Carolina employers in *Closing the Gap* (Center for Occupational Research and Development, 2017). This eight-module initiative was developed to provide instructional materials and activities that would help community college educators enhance their courses' ability to address the following employability competencies:

- interpersonal skills and teamwork;

- communications;

- integrity and professionalism;

- problem solving and decision making;

- initiative and dependability;

- information processing;

- adaptability and lifelong learning; and

- entrepreneurship (Center for Occupational Research and Development, 2017).

These eight areas would later serve as a starting point for the development of the NCCCS ESAP curriculum.

*Exemplar Institution*

In terms of individual institutions within the NCCCS, Guilford Technical Community College's commitment to workforce development stands out amongst its statewide peers, and is well-documented in numerous local, national, and international publications (Davis, 2009). GTCC has an established reputation as providing workforce education for the region, and deploying innovative efforts including the college's 2004 Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) which focused on improving the employability skills of its students, in conjunction with the institution's reaccreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (the recognized regional accrediting body for the eleven U.S. Southern states).

Guilford County, located in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina, has historically served as a geographic base of operations for numerous textile and furniture producers. When manufacturing in the region experienced a steep decline the 1980s due to plant shutdowns and offshore competition, the industries that remained sought to modernize their efforts, and achieve new efficiencies (Davis, 2009). As a result of these changes, GTCC examined its workforce education programs and responded by retooling its curriculum to meet the needs of local employers.

Appointed president of GTCC in May 1990, amidst a time of economic upheaval in the area, Dr. Donald Cameron recognized the role of the college in providing a highly skilled workforce (Davis, 2009). Establishing partnerships with regional corporations, Dr. Cameron developed curricula designed to produce workers with industry-specific skills to meet local needs. According to Dr. Cameron, "If our students receive the degree and go to work in a

company at an entry-level position, then they need to be able to perform the tasks for the company. If they cannot perform, then we need to reexamine our curriculum" (Kinard, 2008, p. 269).

In 1995, the college commissioned an outside agency to conduct a county-wide assessment of the region's workforce preparedness (Davis, 2009). The results of the study showed that employers found the overall quality of job applicants deficient, particularly in terms of employability skills such as responsibility, teamwork, problem solving, and communications (Davis, 2009). Despite efforts to improve these skills, which had become an integral part of the college's curriculum planning since 1997 (Davis, 2009), a follow-up survey in 2000 conducted of both employers and GTCC faculty, showed that pervasive issues remained, and laid the groundwork for the community college's 2004 employability skills focused QEP.

Tanya Davis' dissertation, completed in 2009, heralded Guilford Technical Community College's QEP efforts as a success, but there were also reservations as evidenced in the "Implications for Further Study" section of the report. For example, Davis recognizes an enthusiasm for employability skills instruction at the college, but notes the lack of assessment methods, and points to a need for additional research in this area. In addition, several groups of instructors are missing from the GTCC study, particularly part-time instructors who "far outnumbered full-time faculty" at the institution (Davis, 2009, p. 220). Davis also indicates that "further studies including non-curriculum faculty would be beneficial in determining motivations and differences in the two areas, and potentially forging understanding and closer working relationships between curriculum and non-curriculum faculty" (2009, p. 235).

My study of North Carolina community college instructional staff use of employability skills curricula endeavored to address some of these outstanding research needs, delineated by

Davis and others as areas for further research. Davis' comprehensive study of GTCC's QEP implementation is an important resource and provides a helpful benchmark for understanding the state of employability skills efforts within North Carolina, at the community college level, as of a decade ago.

### Concerns with Employability Skills in Higher Education

Despite the prevalence of ES efforts throughout colleges and universities worldwide, numerous concerns remain which question the fit of an employability skills agenda within higher education institutions. According to one talent management professional "most colleges aren't building out the skills students need to become value-added employees" (Feffer, 2016). The following section highlights some of the prevalent questions that emerge as themes through a review of the literature.

### Can Employability Skills Be Successfully Taught in the Classroom?

There is a general acknowledgement that teaching employability skills is very challenging (Bhaerman & Spill, 1988; Feffer 2016; Mitchell et al., 2010; Moore & Pearson, 2017). Bhaerman and Spill's article "A Dialogue on Employability Skills: How Can They Be Taught?" acknowledges that part of the challenge is due to the fact that student participants in ES programs "often have to unlearn poor work habits, attitudes, and behavior patterns before they can learn positive ones" and that "in some instances, the competencies to be taught may be in conflict with cultural values" (1988, pp. 50-51).

Constituting another hurdle, a number of studies have shown that instructional staff do not fully understand the concept of employability. According to one such report detailing the integration of ES at a university, the majority of faculty survey replies indicated that respondents believed that they were lacking "a clear understanding on the importance of employability skills"

(Hanapi et al., 2015, p. 485). The article's authors remind the reader that if instructors are to be tasked with teaching ES, "it is not sufficient if lecturers only have knowledge on the subjects [of their program area] alone" (Hanapi et al., 2015, p. 486).

The ability to teach ES well requires an awareness of how students best learn these non-academic skills, plus a willingness to creatively contextualize employability-related lessons. Unfortunately, not all teaching staff arrive on the frontlines with such pedagogical insights or desires (Lawton, 2010). Also, there is concern with adding to the already content-heavy and often accreditation-dictated curriculum that instructors work with in the classroom (Jenkins & Pepper, 1988). Some higher education researchers see too much of the burden of employability skills instruction as falling disproportionately on teaching staff, and believe local employers using actual work settings offer a more effective instructional setting (Cornford, 2005).

Boys and Kirkland's 1988 study identified a number of factors that inhibited faculty tasked with teaching employability skills. One concern was with the pre-existing volume of curriculum content to be covered in class, as designated by professional associations and certifications for the course subject area. Faculty in the study felt that certain topical content had to be taught, which led to an overcrowded syllabus. The researchers concluded, based on this assertion made by faculty, that without an emphasis by college administrations on the importance of integrated ES course content, educators teaching professionally accredited courses omitted employability skills instruction since they felt overly burdened with subject matter (Boys & Kirkland, 1988).

With this type of finding in mind, Stubbs and Keeping advocated for a way to help faculty to insert vocationally relevant skills content into courses that lead to professional qualifications (2002). These researchers acknowledged that teaching employability skills is quite

difficult and observed that academic programs and instructors too often pay "lip service" to the need for ES (Stubbs & Keeping, 2002). The authors found that Jenkins and Pepper's "tyranny of content" (1988) continues to be applicable to most teaching and suggested that academics should instead adopt a "deeply embedded approach" to teaching concepts using experiential or action-based learning in order to build a skills program that blends content and employability training (Stubbs & Keeping, 2002, p. 219). "It is insufficient in a course description to state that a course/module will, for example, 'lead to critical enquiry as a learning outcome'. Instead, it is necessary to demonstrate exactly how a practically based exercise (simulation, case study or other approach) will produce that outcome" (Stubbs & Keeping, 2002, p. 219).

Prior research also calls into question the best way to teach instructors about how to weave employability skills into the curriculum (Hanapi et al., 2015). According to Barr and Rossett's 1994 study of community college faculty, rates of involvement in professional development activities are generally low and initiatives that require change such as the teaching of ES "muster only moderate or little participation, often are relatively ineffective, and have particularly little impact on those who most need to improve their teaching" (p. 352). This is evocative of the research findings of Blackburn et al. (1980) which indicated that few community college instructors believe they need professional development.

Unfortunately, a historic lack of responsiveness on the part of higher education to employer needs has resulted in "serious gaps between higher education and employers" (The QA Commons, n.d.). Specifically, community college workforce development programs have been criticized for offering training that is misaligned with local employer needs (Holzer, 2015). Critics indicate that old equipment and outdated instructor skill sets often hamper the ability of students to thrive post-graduation (Holzer, 2015). Despite the fact that community college

leaders recognize a necessity to partner with local businesses, studies show that faculty are less than enthused about these relationships which often require a modification of coursework in order to meet industry needs (Hanks & Williamson, 2002).

In addition, according to Cranmer (2006), these kinds of tensions that are inherent in the ES teaching agenda consistently produce mixed results, no matter the good intentions of academics. Cranmer's 2006 report and research findings cast doubt on whether employability skills can be effectively taught in classrooms. So, while policymakers continue to emphasize ES initiatives in higher education as a means of enhancing post-graduation employment outcomes, there is unfortunately little conclusive evidence that such efforts actually produce results (Cranmer, 2006).

**Should Employability Skills Be Taught in the Classroom?**

The relatively recent prioritization of teaching employability skills has not been without a good deal of controversy as to whether or not an ES agenda in higher education benefits students. Indeed, some actually view these skills as outpacing and devaluing degree credentials as a way to gauge applicant abilities (Scott, 1995). In their examination of the ES agenda in the United Kingdom, Boden and Nedeva (2010), deem the trend alarming and write "the growth within universities of pedagogical approaches based around the 'delivery' of 'teaching materials' in a narrow set of 'skills and competencies' bodes ill for the execution of [higher education's] wider public intellectual role" (p. 50). Furthermore, some faculty have taken issue with the focus on employability skills, fearing ES instruction encroaches upon academic freedoms in the classroom (Morley, 2001).

Ng and Rosenbaum's 2018 article found much like Bailey, Jaggars and Jenkins' 2015 monograph *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* that sub-baccalaureate institutions have

historically cultivated a singular focus on teaching occupational or academic subject content. As a result, employability and related non-cognitive skills have not found an easy path into the established curriculum. An already crowded teaching agenda is perceived by Ng and Rosenbaum to be to the detriment of the employability skill-related lessons community college graduates need to be successful in their careers (2018). According to Ng and Rosenbaum, "researchers note that community college faculty often disregard various intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, such as social skills, time management, and metacognition, considering them outside the scope of course instruction" (2018, p. 358). Other faculty voice a concern that the addition of ES into the curriculum reduces the effectiveness of a liberal education (Gersten, 2012; Hovland & Schneider, 2011).

De la Harpe, Radloff and Wyber's 2000 case study on implementation of an ES program within a university is one of the few that focuses on instructor perceptions of an employability skills program. The faculty in this research were revealed to have numerous criticisms of this ES initiative at their institution. Comments from the instructional staff interviewed as a part of this qualitative study included:

- "I shouldn't have to teach this - it should be taught in a specific skills unit."

- "I don't know how to teach this. I'm an expert in X and can't be expected to teach anything else."

- "If we had decent students in the first place, there would be no need to teach these skills." (de la Harpe et al., p. 240)

The Australian university faculty interviewed for this study are not alone in their concerns with employability skills initiatives, especially those efforts that have originated outside the institution or stand to change the academic status quo. According to Dougherty and Bakia's

findings, higher education administrators may likewise view specialized skills preparation as a distraction from the more traditional missions of the community college, such as access or transfer (1999). As well, some administrators are wary of programs that stem from partnerships with local employers, due to associated costs and also the students they see such programs targeting‒namely low-income, undereducated students who are perceived by some staff as not "suitable for college" according to Jacobs (2001, p. 97). Administrator support of private sector partnerships is however imperative for the success of workforce development efforts. As reported by Dougherty and Bakia (1999) high level college officials have the ability to influence the success or failure of a community college's workforce education program through their willingness to advocate for these partnerships, and the removal of structural and policy barriers, as well as the provision of funding and facilities.

**What Ethical Concerns Exist Regarding Employability Skills Instruction?**

Some scholars have proposed that providing individuals with qualifications for employability is an ethical responsibility. "This is not just an economic issue," according to Bhaerman and Spill (1988), "it is one of equity and fairness" (p. 44). The authors admonish the reader to consider "employability skills development as one of the civil rights issues" and that "those responsible for programs in this area have a moral obligation to provide the most complete education and training possible for students" (Bhaerman & Spill, p. 44). Similarly, Rosove (1982) writes:

> Work is of central importance to the well-being of people in our society. We take a large part of our identification from it and thus it forms a significant part of our self-concept. ... There is a strong ethical and practical imperative facing all of us who help prepare people

for the labor market: to ensure that our clients or students are well-prepared to enter

working situations. (p. 114)

While impressing upon the reader the importance of employability skills, Yorke (2006)

argues that external factors such as economics and the labor market should also be recognized as

playing a major role in student post-graduation career success, despite the fact that higher

education is currently solely focused on making students more employable by enhancing

students' internal employability (the ability to find and keep a job). Graduate employment

opportunities and the economy are currently generally not given as much consideration in

educational policy conversations, according to Yorke and other scholars, as an individual's

employability skills (Taylor, 1998; Yorke, 2006). Unemployment is therefore now viewed as a

problem to be fixed by an individual's continuous upskilling (Harvey, 2003; Taylor, 1998;

Yorke, 2006).

Rather than discussing job opportunities afforded by the labor market, governmental

efforts are regarded as increasingly centered on marketing employability skill-centered

educational opportunities (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004). The responsibility for continuous

upgrading of employability skills falls on individuals, rather than industry. Gone are the days of

guaranteed work for life with an employer and job security (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Harvey, 2003).

In order to stay continuously employable within an ever-changing labor market, the message

being conveyed through the marketplace is that a worker must plan for the necessity of lifelong

learning and the regular refreshment of skill sets (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2003).

In light of this, a number of researchers have pointed out that employability skills are

social constructs and as such, there are problematic implications in terms of race, gender, and

class (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Burton, 1987). Some view employability as difficult to quantify

and see assessment of skills as highly subjective and often based on particular circumstances or settings (Morley, 2001). Employability skills have been problematized by researchers on various grounds such as gender (Burton, 1987) or racial bias (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). In one researcher's words, "Arguably, employability is a decontextualised signifier in so far as it overlooks how structures such as gender, race, social class and disability interact with the labour market opportunities" (Morley, 2001, p. 132).

Proponents of employability skills who consider ES an advantage may neglect the fact that employers' definitions of ES also unavoidably take into account each potential worker's identity and education according to Moreau and Leathwood (2006). And, according to these scholars, joining the ideology of equal opportunity and employability discourse frames the labor market as falsely meritocratic and, in this context, failure becomes highly personal and is reinforced by the emphasis on an individual's skills (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Deil-Amen (2006) examined these matters in research which considered the teaching of social skills in community colleges from multiple perspectives. On one hand, Deil-Amen evaluated Bowles and Gintis' argument presented in their seminal 1976 work, which found teaching non-cognitive social skills may be a disservice to community college students and wrote that a skills-focused curriculum could therefore be seen as socializing people into "subordinate positions within an oppressive capitalist labor market" (2006, p. 416). On the other hand, and following the logic of Pierre Bourdieu's theories of social and cultural capital, Deil-Amen conjectured that community colleges who do not teach ES "are doing their students a disservice by withholding crucial culturally-based knowledge, the lack of which may serve as a barrier to upward mobility for students" (2006, p. 416).

Melinda Karp, former assistant director of Columbia University's Community College Research Center, like Deil-Amen, supports the teaching of soft skills in community college and wrote that "explicitly teach[ing] students how to enact upper-middle-class expectations in the classroom could greatly enhance student outcomes" (Karp, 2011, p. 2). But, alongside this endorsement is a caution that teaching students ES should not mean diminishing students' home cultures or asking them to give up their identities (Karp, 2011). Karp sees any attempt that does so as counterproductive and instead, advocated for students becoming aware of postsecondary education's distinct culture and norms, in order to further their educations (Karp, 2011).

Finally, at least one researcher faults the superficiality of the skills agenda as only weakly related to the kind of qualities that middle-class graduates acquire through their education and wider lifestyles (Ainley, 1994). Others critique employability skills initiatives, questioning both their correlation to actual employer practices and also the extent to which they are truly "demand-led" (Wolf, 2007). The conversation around workforce education is complicated as well by a climate of heavily centralized planning and target-setting, currently surrounding skills-based education, and training (Tomlinson, 2012).

**How Should Higher Education Assess Employability Skills?**

While teaching ES in the postsecondary classroom is a challenge according to scholars, assessing employability skills is likewise fraught, given the subjective nature of both defining and measuring these abilities. Wilson-Ahlstrom et al. (2014) wrote that the creation of effective measures for ES were not keeping pace with the growing importance placed upon these skills. In their article for *Education Week*, Rafael Heller, Managing Editor of *Phi Delta Kappan*, and Mary Wright, Jobs for the Future's Director of Employer Alliances argued that while assessment of employability skills is big business for test creators, there is far too much at stake with tests that

are not well validated (2017). Considering the crop of ES assessments that are currently available for sale, these writers expressed concern with what they see as only minimally adequate tools (Heller & Wright, 2017). Many assessment instruments currently being used have been repurposed from past decades and were originally designed primarily to gauge cognitive skills and personality traits, rather than employability skills. Saterfiel and McLarty reiterated this, finding tests created to assess lower-level adult skills for academic purposes such as the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), and the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) have been deployed in order to meet the burgeoning demand for employability skills assessment (1995).

In their report *Mapping the Wild West of Pre-Hire Assessment*, Wilson, Kurzweil, and Alamuddin (2018) warned that misalignment between the content and goals of education, and employment testing is a significant flaw that will need to be corrected if seamless learning-to-employment pathways are to be constructed. Instead, the authors envisioned "a single, unified, cradle-to-grave competency-based assessment system that seamlessly tracks one's development throughout education and career" (2018). *Education Week*'s Heller and Wright proposed however that such initiatives, built for expressly for "the assessment of employability skills only promises to introduce more murk than ever" (2017, para. 12). Specifically, Heller and Wright are concerned about the implications of ES assessment tools that have been implicated as "invalid and discriminatory, particularly cognitive tests in written formats" (2017, para. 4).

In light of these concerns regarding inadequate assessment tools, Knight and Page (2007) were surprised to find in their survey of 83 university staff, that the majority thought employability skills were not difficult to assess. Knight and Page hold that educators should be more cognizant of the challenges inherent in assessing employability skills, as they are

"achievements that cannot be neatly prespecified, take time to develop and resist measurement-based approaches to assessment" (2007, p. 2).

Despite the complexities inherent in employability skills assessment, a number of models have been proposed by academics. One suggested by Riebe and Jackson (2014) uses both qualitative (holistic) and quantitative (analytic) rubrics. The framework for this assessment, which was implemented at Edith Cowan University in Australia, is based in part on the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) Initiative rubrics created by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2019). Riebe and Jackson, university faculty and architects of the tool, emphasized the importance of early instructor buy-in, and recognized the challenge faced by campuses attempting ES assessment (2014). In their words, "it cannot be stated strongly enough that buy-in from staff is the most important aspect of implementing rubrics for benchmarking and assessing employability skills" (2014, p. 336). In order to foster collegial use of rubrics Riebe and Jackson suggested that "definitions, advantages and disadvantages" of employability skills assessment should be fully explained to teaching staff (2014, p. 336). Without a full understanding of the need to change the current situation, the authors saw faculty as unlikely to adopt ES assessment tools.

Interestingly, the 2014 Riebe and Jackson article caused a stir due to a sentence that was included in an early version, submitted for publication. According to Kenworthy and Hrivnak's rebuttal essay (2014) from the same journal issue, Riebe and Jackson's submission originally stated, "The implementation of holistic standards rubrics will encourage a sense of purpose among HE [higher education] practitioners to improve the quality of teaching and learning of employability skills by ensuring the alignment of learning outcomes to assessments" (p. 346). Not only was the suggestion that faculty need a "sense of purpose" deemed offensive by

Kenworthy and Hrivnak, but the efficacy of institutionally mandating adoption of an ES

assessment tool was questioned. Forcing faculty to accept and utilize such an assessment would

be potentially "demotivating" and trigger faculty resistance and apathy according to Kenworthy

and Hrivnak (2014) and the literature cited in their response.

Despite such reservations, ES scholars Yorke and Knight believe that the use of

formative assessment holds great promise in helping faculty develop employability skills through

the curriculum (2003). In light of the concern that practitioners may lack confidence in using

formative assessment tools in their teaching (U.K. Commission for Employment and Skills,

2010), Pegg et al. in "Pedagogy for Employability" report that there is a broad array of ways for

instructors to "build in a variety of creative forms of assessment, including tests, project work,

presentations, reports, posters, group work, portfolios (including e-portfolios), work-based

(employer- or institution-based) and work-related learning, peer assessment and self-assessment"

(2012, p. 35).

In addition to instructor-developed ES measurements such as rubrics, there are a number

of employability skills assessments currently for sale. The SkillsUSA and ACT suite of products

provide both an ES curriculum and as well as assessment testing and are heavily used at

community colleges across the United States including institutions within North Carolina.

According to their North Carolina chapter website, SkillsUSA is a non-profit organization that

"gives students an opportunity to enhance both their technical and employability skills"

(SkillsUSA North Carolina, 2019, para. 2). The ACT Curriculum and Career Readiness

Certification are likewise widely deployed across the state at various NC community colleges

and allow participants to achieve and demonstrate proficiency in employability-related skills

(ACT, 2013).

A 2019 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* highlighted a new entrant to the ES assessment market (Blumenstyk). The QA Commons, a nonprofit funded by the Lumina Foundation, has developed a set of what are termed essential employability qualities (EEQ) that can be used to measure program outcomes at colleges and universities. The assessment considers the extent to which an academic department:

- develops skills in a work-based context, such as through a capstone project;

- coordinates its activities with the institution's career services;

- creates meaningful relationships with employers;

- engages with students to make sure they feel they are being prepared well; and

- reports how its graduates fare in the labor market (Blumenstyk, 2019).

This novel department-focused approach to measuring employability skills, is now available for purchase, and is touted by its creator Ralph Wolff, as a way to "legitimate that preparation for the workplace is part of the academic enterprise" (Blumenstyk, 2019).

**How Should Employability Skills be Taught?**

According to Pegg et al. (2012) work experience can have a profound impact upon student employability skills. Research studies on the long-term impact of work-based learning and placements (such as internships and apprenticeships) suggest that these experiences are invaluable to ES improvement (Hall et al., 2009; Mason et al., 2006). In recognition of the role that WBL can play, the Trump administration made apprenticeships a named priority with the signing of an executive order in June 2017 intended to increase the number of total apprenticeships from 500,000 to five million in five years' time (Breuninger, 2017).

Despite these claims and efforts, the United States has historically struggled to make experiential learning like apprenticeships a viable option for students (Ferenstein, 2018). In

recent years, spurred in part by rising costs of higher education, there has been renewed

recognition of the many potential benefits of work-based learning, such as an increased

likelihood of graduate employability (Pegg et al., 2012). "It is well known that most employers

use their internship pool of candidates first when considering new hires to fill full-time positions

within the company" (Loretto, 2019, para. 2). In fact, according to the National Association of

Colleges and Employers 2012 Internship & Co-op Survey, more than 40% of new hires for 2011-

2012 were expected to come from a company's internship program (Loretto, 2019).

Students are attuned to these trends, and display a consumer mindset, looking for

evidence that colleges and universities are using teaching methods that develop practical

experiences which will translate well in a job search (Gross & Hogler, 2005). According to

Tymon's 2013 study of undergraduate perspectives on employability, "all students said

employability mattered a 'great deal' or 'massively'" (p. 852). Trank and Rynes' (2003) findings

noted that business school students are increasingly emphasizing employability as a key

curriculum component and show negative attitudes toward courses in areas such as

organizational behavior, human resources, management, or any subjects not perceived as

"useful" in gaining employment post-graduation.

Tomlinson documented similar findings of students who saw a need to add value to their

credentials and placed importance on these so-called "soft currencies" (2008, p. 59). These

consumers of higher education "appear to be increasingly couching their employability around

personal and social credentials, and are attempting to make these fit into the changing demands

of employers" according to Tomlinson (2008). Cuadrado (2019) likewise found that students

"acknowledge that acquiring the necessary knowledge to perform a job is not enough to be

employable. They realize that developing a vocational identity, based in soft skills and

employer-friendly attitudes, is a necessary option to thrive in the labour market" (p. 330). Higher education is clearly aware of these issues and trends, as recognized by a proliferation of employability skills curricula available to and used by colleges and universities.

### Existing Employability Skills Research

Whitehurst wrote about the field of soft skills research, calling it a "Tower of Babel" with models for teaching and assessment insufficiently developed for educational use (2016, p. 3). Employability skills instruction in higher education is a closely related and equally thorny field of study, with the phrase being used as something of a catch-all, often subsuming a wide range of abilities that are considered by many to be soft skills, and sometimes the more academic or technical proficiencies such as literacy and numeracy. The focus of research on ES in postsecondary education has typically concerned which specific employability skills need to be taught, primarily according to two stakeholder groups: former students and employers. As a result, there is a proliferation of compiled employability skills lists in scholarly journals and monographs. Most of these articles and books document only recommended outcomes of teaching ES rather than providing guidance on classroom instruction in employability skills (de la Harpe & David, 2012). Many studies have used quantitative methodologies, which limit the ability of the work to portray the full range of elements that affect the teaching and learning of such non-cognitive skills (Nghia, 2017).

Also weakening the body of literature concerning employability skills instruction is a reliance upon anecdotal evidence regarding the long-term impact of ES programs and measures (Lowden et al., 2011). The field of study concerning employability skills would benefit from more empirical research. Some scholars believe that part of the difficulty in studying ES is "because employability development is multi-factorial and context dependent, and may in many

cases be long-term, any attempt made to evaluate a particular pedagogical approach will be limited, for example by the nature, volume and relevance of the evidence" (Pegg et al., 2012, p. 43).

The United Kingdom's Commission for Employment and Skills' 2008 *Review of Evidence on Best Practice in Teaching and Assessing Employability Skills* specifies that due to these complications, a common approach to ES research is to ask students to self-assess their employability skills after the deployment of a new pedagogical technique. While interesting and possibly useful, too often these findings are either trivial or unable to prove whether participants have become more employable as a result of the intervention (U.K. Commission for Employment and Skills, 2008).

**Community College Employability Skills Research**

In reviewing research on community college instructor experiences with employability skills initiatives, there is a notable lack of scholarly work in this area. As previously mentioned, the majority of research on ES within the public two-year college setting involves either student or employer opinions on which specific employability skills should be taught (Castillo, 2018; Coronado, 1996; Deese, 2003). An overview of the limited number of research studies most closely related to the focus of this dissertation (community college instructor experiences with employability skills curricula) follows.

Deil-Amen's 2006 article "To Teach or Not to Teach 'Social' Skills'" documented the reluctance of community college faculty to provide instruction for students on skills such as how to "work together as team members" or "communicate well with clients and customers" (p. 398). This study of both public and private two-year institutions found three main reasons given by the community college instructors interviewed, for not teaching non-cognitive skills:

- a lack of recognition of the problem and support to address the issue among administrators;

- faculty's view that the teaching of social skills is outside the institution's mission; and

- a definition of social skills as an innate personality attribute rather than a learned ability (Deil-Amen, 2006, pp. 406-407).

The community college health program faculty were an exception however, according to Deil-Amen's findings. Students in community college nursing and health related fields were exposed to social skill-related lessons since these were deemed by program instructors to be central to the profession. In general, Deil-Amen found nursing faculty more likely to teach non-cognitive abilities, as both instructors and students were receptive and adherent to skill standards set by professional associations (2006). Ultimately, in this qualitative research study, Deil-Amen documented that private, non-profit two-year college instructors, unlike their community college peers, perceived the teaching of social skills to be a necessary part of the curriculum, and imperative to the post-graduation success of students (2006).

Deil-Amen's study is one of the very few that highlight the community college educator experience with ES-related instruction. According to Google Scholar, in the 14 years since its publication Deil-Amen's work has been cited less than 30 times, which may give some indication as to scholarly interest in the instructional staff perspective on teaching non-cognitive skills. And this is despite the fact that in Deil-Amen's estimation, the research raised "the disturbing possibility that community colleges may be actively contributing to the social reproduction of inequality by avoiding instruction in the cultural competencies and social skills required in today's workplace" (p. 397).

Davis' 2009 qualitative inquiry which documented Guilford Technical Community College's (GTCC) employability skills-focused 2004-2014 Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is the other scholarly study most immediately relevant to the subject of this dissertation, as it focuses primarily on the experiences of public two-year college instructors. In this work Davis interviewed 15 full-time curriculum faculty teaching at GTCC, and three college administrators, as well as the institution's president at the time. Davis' research gathered impressions of the college-wide ES effort and addressed questions such as: "What has been the impact of GTCC's QEP on commitment of faculty to incorporating high-level workplace employability skills in the curriculum?" and "What were barriers to implementation of the QEP?" (2009, p. 11).

Acknowledging instructor experiences is crucial to the study of employability skills-related instruction in the community college classroom, and yet too often educator perceptions are crowded out by the views of students, administrators, and employers, or are missing from the research entirely (Williams, 2015). For example, Tribble's "The Importance of Soft Skills in the Workplace as Perceived by Community College Instructors and Industries" (2009) was a quantitative study which utilized the Foundation for an Independent Tomorrow (FIT) Soft Skills Survey and measured opinions on the importance of soft skills such as communication, motivation, leadership, and time management. However, of the 33 individuals surveyed, the number of employers in the sample group ($n=17$) outnumbered the instructors sample group ($n=16$).

Likewise, K. R. Parker's qualitative research (2019) on soft skills instruction within the Michigan community college system included 31 participants, of which faculty were in the minority. Specifically, the composition of the group surveyed was: 10 college executives (president, vice president, provost), 13 administrators (deans), and eight faculty (including

division chairs). Similarly, Danso's 2018 phenomenological work focused broadly on the skills gap (encompassing both hard and soft skills) and contained six total interviews: two employers, as well as two community college administrators plus two faculty members. Clearly these studies were not instructor-centric.

In conclusion, notwithstanding the incomplete nature of scholarly literature on employability skills and related higher education efforts in this area, there are some consistent areas of concern. For one, the lack of an agreed-upon definition complicates the study of ES and has served to weaken research on this topic. Coordination between government policies and initiatives, and education institutions is missing also, and there have thus far been no large-scale empirical studies on ES instructional outcomes in the United States. As a result, the teaching and assessment of employability skills in academia has been scattershot and understudied. And, despite the prevalence of ES efforts at community colleges, there is no research that focuses exclusively on public two-year postsecondary institutions and instructional staff involvement in employability skills curricular programs. The following section reviews motivation theory and highlights the importance of considering instructors' socio-environmental needs.

**Instructor Motivation**

Despite the key role instructional staff play in implementing and teaching a curriculum, there is surprisingly limited research into their classroom experiences (Mellow et al., 2015; Stout, 2018; Wyner, 2014). In order to secure meaningful and sustained educator participation, it is vital that community college administrators and academic partners better understand instructors' engagement with curricular initiatives. Motivation theory can provide a useful lens through which to examine encouragements and hindrances related to employability skills tuition.

Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000) of motivation is used therefore to frame the findings of this phenomenological study.

**Motivation Theories**

With etymological roots in the Latin word for movement, motivation guides individual behaviors and actions (Bess & Dee, 2008). Ancient Greek philosophers believed that hedonism drove motivations, and that humans were compelled to seek pleasure and avoid pain (Steers et al., 2004). Philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries, such as Locke, Bentham, and Mill studied these ancient theories in order to develop their own conceptually related works (Steers et al., 2004). However, it wasn't until later in the 19th century that the field of psychology emerged as a primary force in research on motivation. Displacing earlier philosophical beliefs, behavioral psychologists developed models late in the 19th century and early in the 20th century which held that human behavior was a response to cues in the environment (Steers et al., 2004).

Some of these early theories explained motivation as a byproduct of human instinct. James (1890) for example believed that elements such as fear, jealousy, curiosity, locomotion, sociability, and sympathy were prime instigators. Other psychologists such as McDougall (1908) developed models which portrayed instinct as an innate or inherited tendency which caused people to react to elements in their environment with excitement or in a specific way. Freud (1913) believed the ability to work and love were paramount to human instinct, and that individuals were compelled by the need to both connect with and dominate over others.

The next wave of motivation theories to emerge concerned human drives and reinforcements. Researchers in this group held that motivation acted in conjunction with basic biological needs. Food, drink, and sleep were the simplest elements to control in the motivational experiments of this time (Maslow, 1943). In this group of theorists, and one of the first

psychologists to describe intrinsic motivation, Woodworth (1918) suggested that activity may be spurred initially by an extrinsic motive but that "only when it is running by its own drive... can [it] run freely and effectively" (p. 70).

Seeking to understand the regulation of behavior, psychological researchers during this time tested reinforcements believed to strengthen the related bonds that controlled behavior (Hull, 1943). According to one model proposed by Hull, an associative bond is a link between a stimulus and a response, which prompts the response when that stimulus is present (1943). Hull's theory proposed that these bonds determined behavior and thoughts and were considered unrelated to the causes of behavior (1943). In addition, Hull (1943) believed that all behaviors revolved around four basic drives, called non-nervous-system tissue deficits: hunger, thirst, sex, and avoidance of pain.

Unexpectedly, in the process of manipulating these innate needs and recording the results, animal subjects as well as humans were observed to take part in exploratory behaviors simply for the sake of exploration (Butler & Harlow, 1954; Montgomery, 1953). Additionally, and around the same time, Lewin (1951) studied the psychological value an individual attributes to goals, under the assumption that behaviors are initiated and executed with an expectation that those actions will lead to desired outcomes. Intrinsic motivation also emerged at this time as a fully defined concept, in Harlow's 1950 study of monkeys and behavior.

**Content and Need Theories: Predecessors to Self-Determination Theory**

By the end of the 1950s, psychologists recognized that people exhibit behavior in order to attain outcomes, instead of simply acting in ways dictated by previous experiences. The models that emerged at this time, collectively termed content or need theories, focused on identifying the needs and objectives that propel human motivation. With this shift in thinking, the decade

ushered in a recognition that concepts such as goals, expectancies, and decisions (Lewin, 1951) were fundamental to behaviors and actions.

Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) grew out of these models and has basic psychological need satisfaction as an underlying mechanism that incites and guides people's behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Central to an individual's ability to function and thrive, need satisfaction is seen as essential for the well-being of humans according to Ryan and Deci (2017). The authors of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2014) indicate that it evolved from earlier content theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), Herzberg's Two Factor Motivation Theory (1968), McClelland's Needs Theory (1965) and Alderfer's ERG Theory which concerned existence, relatedness, and growth (1972).

According to Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory, human activity is in response to three innate psychological needs: a need for autonomy, which is congruent with a desire for self-determination and the ability to self-regulate behavior; a need for competence, which is analogous to the desire for effectance (the state of causal effect) and the ability to self-organize; and a need for relatedness, which corresponds to the desire for connectedness and affiliation (Arvanitis & Kalliris, 2017).

Ryan and Deci theorized that within any given social environment, individuals want to feel connected with others, able to function effectively, and experience a sense of personal initiative and volition, and that these three needs undergird behaviors that result in intrapersonal integrity and coherence (2017). All three psychological elements must be addressed and fulfilled in order for healthy and effective functioning to occur (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). For Deci and Ryan, basic psychological needs (1980) proved useful in understanding the results of their early experiments on intrinsic motivation. These researchers

observed that people tended to internalize the behaviors and values of their social environment in order to achieve a sense of belonging or relatedness within that environment, in addition to a sense of competence and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Thus, the conceptualization of all three basic psychological needs was essential for these two researchers, allowing them to integrate research results related to both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Self-Determination Theory is one of the most widely used and researched theories in the field of psychology, due to its confirmed practical value across different fields and domains (Ryan & Deci, 2019). The theory's three basic psychological needs are integral to autonomous motivation (which stands in contrast to controlled motivation) and "represent innate requirements rather than acquired motives" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 7). SDT states that individuals have a natural proclivity to strive for goals and achieve their full potential (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This intrinsic tendency is manifested as autonomous motivation, and can be juxtaposed with controlled motivation, which is a result of external forces such as demands made by others or obligatory reward possibilities (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

**Instructors and the Self-Determination Theory of Motivation**

Studies of higher education instructors that focus on motivation using the SDT framework are uncommon (Hardré, 2012; Stupnisky et al., 2018), however within existing research, intrinsic goals, such as affiliation, personal growth or contributions to a community have been found to satisfy basic psychological needs and are associated with educator well-being (Colbeck, 1992; Cook et al., 2009; Deci et al., 1997; Stupnisky et al., 2017). In contrast, extrinsic goals, such as those associated with the acquisition of external markers of worth (such as money or accolades) are identified as less likely to satisfy an instructor's psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Colbeck, 1992; Deci et al., 1997). Extrinsic goals, as a

result, stand to hamper educator well-being and work performance, because a focus on extrinsic goals is "more likely to encourage an outward orientation" (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011, p. 10).

Ryan and Deci found that social-contextual elements such as managerial behavior and organizational climate, also had a direct bearing on autonomous motivation (2000). Autonomous motivation is important if a job requires "creativity, cognitive flexibility, or deep processing of information" (Gagné & Deci, 2005, p. 341). Weinstein and Ryan found that when SDT was applied as a theoretical lens, those whose three basic psychological needs were met by their work expressed more autonomously motivated choices, actions, and thinking (2011). In other words, a work setting that satisfies a person's basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness will foster an autonomous motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Other researchers who have focused on academic organizations using SDT have had similar findings that indicate that in order to experience satisfaction and relatedness, faculty should have a sense of connectedness to and respect for the higher education institution where they teach (Vallerand & Ratelle, 2004; Waltman et al., 2012).

Deci, Connell, and Ryan's work found that employees report a higher level of trust in educational institutions' leaders, as well as elevated levels of job satisfaction, when they are given positive feedback, when their perspectives are acknowledged, and when they are allowed to make choices and problem-solve on their own (1989). In contrast, employees who experience control exerted by an institution of higher education and receive negative feedback, feel less determined and are more apt to execute tasks poorly (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011). Similarly, Pelletier et al. (2002) found that the more teachers perceive pressure from management to conform to performance or curriculum standards, the less likely they are to be autonomously motivated toward teaching.

**Chapter Summary**

In this literature review, I have shed light on employability skills and research involving instructors charged with teaching these skills in a higher education setting. Very little of this research is focused on the process of class-based instruction, and none have studied community college educator experiences with ES instruction using a phenomenological method. Self-Determination Theory offers a unique lens through which to view the findings of this phenomenological study, in order to uncover motivational elements for participants. This qualitative research examines community college educator engagement with employability skills curricula and addresses an identified gap in understanding instructional staff experiences.

**CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

This phenomenological study was intended to explore North Carolina community college educator experiences with instructional use of employability skills curricula. A lack of appreciation for instructor insights and feedback on ES curricular initiatives, as evidenced by a paucity of scholarly literature on the topic, provides the impetus for this study. Research on this subject is pressing given the significant number of employers who indicate an inability to hire appropriately skilled workers despite longstanding efforts by postsecondary institutions to graduate workforce-ready students.

The main research question that guided this study asks how North Carolina community college educators experience the phenomenon of employability skills curricular instruction. Two sub-questions concern elements that help or hinder instructors' efforts. I used Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory (2000) which addresses motivation, to frame and interpret study findings.

As shown in the literature review, there is little known about how community college instructors experience use of an employability skills curriculum. While employability skills instruction in higher education has typically been studied with a focus on objectives and outcomes (Crawford & Dalton, 2016; Tribble, 2009; Williams, 2015; Woollard, 1995) and mostly concerning student and employer perceptions (Danso, 2018; Hall et al., 2009; Lowden et al., 2011; Pope, 2017), there is scant exploration of how instructors experience ES curricular efforts. Even less research has been conducted that investigates the elements which motivate or inhibit educator engagement with ES curricular instruction.

Since there is currently much discussion taking place in both popular and academic publications that questions the value and role of a postsecondary degree in attaining and

maintaining employment (Caprino, 2017; Selingo, 2013; Slaughter, 2017; Zywicki & McCluskey, 2019), this study is timely. Because community colleges serve a large group of students across the country, the instructors teaching at these institutions play a critical role in ensuring employers are able to find qualified applicants for the workforce, yet there is negligible investigation into the experiences of educators who are using employability skills curricula in their teaching.

Specifically, this study qualitatively addressed the following research question and sub-questions:

- What are the experiences of North Carolina community college instructors who have taught using an employability skills curriculum?
  - What elements do educators describe as helping their instructional use of an employability skills curriculum?
  - What elements do educators describe as hindering their instructional use of an employability skills curriculum?

Through these questions, the goal of this study was to expand knowledge of how community college educators experience employability skills curricular instruction, particularly in terms of the elements that influence instructor motivation and engagement, using a phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry.

This chapter describes the design of this study and how the research was conducted. Beginning with an overview of the methodological rationale, I explain the choice of qualitative research and more specifically, why a phenomenological study was appropriate for this topic. Next, the method of participant sampling is described in detail. In addition, the steps in data

collection and analysis are provided, along with the measures taken to address trustworthiness in the study, and researcher subjectivity.

## Research Design

The following sections provide an overview of the design and methodological elements of this study. Included are a discussion of qualitative research and phenomenology, a description of the site selection and data sampling, and an overview of the data collection and analysis process, in addition to considerations of the study's trustworthiness and related ethical issues.

### Qualitative Approach

The central research question that guided this work concerned the experiences of community college instructors who have used an employability skills curriculum in their teaching. In order to respond to the research question, this inquiry required in-depth descriptive data that captured the experience and essence of the phenomenon for study participants. Whereas quantitative methods use a more traditional scientific approach and are well-suited to confirm or deny a pre-existing hypothesis, qualitative research allows for an investigation into an event. Qualitative research methodology affords participants a means through which to describe an inner world of emotions, thoughts, and reflections (Moustakas, 1994). This methodology is especially apt for a study within a higher education setting, since qualitative research is praised for an ability "to better illuminate our understanding of human behavior in academic organizations" (Duemer, 2007, p. 155).

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), scholars "conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people" (p. 45). Furthermore, qualitative researchers are interested in "the meanings others have about the world" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). Therefore, a

qualitative approach was ideal for this study and allowed me to review and record the experiences of instructors who had utilized an employability skills curriculum. Qualitative study also offered a holistic viewpoint and captured the multitude of individual and contextual elements that influenced the instructor experience as well as the encouragements and challenges to use of an employability skills curriculum.

Qualitative methods honor participant voices and stories. Researchers use qualitative data in order to attempt to make sense of nuanced phenomena (e.g., use of employability skills curricula) through impressions and reflections that emerge from individuals' recollection of the phenomena within a particular context (e.g., North Carolina community college instructor experiences) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This research approach was thus designed to capture each participant's personally significant and unique lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Explaining qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln write that it is "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" (2018, p. 10). This type of investigation was therefore well suited for this study, which aimed to uncover how North Carolina community college instructors experienced classroom use of an employability skills curriculum, and also the elements that served to help or hinder instructors' utilization of the curriculum.

Qualitative data collection attempts to capture the essence of the phenomenon, using in-depth interviews with participants. There are a number of theories that undergird qualitative research. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), "if knowledge exists essentially in the form of human constructions, then a paradigm that recognizes and accepts that premise from the start is to be preferred to one that does not" (pp. 67-68). Furthermore, Guba and Lincoln assert that if research requires "constructors to confront one another's constructions and to deal with them,

then the constructivist paradigm ought surely to be the paradigm of choice" (p. 68). I am guided

by this line of thought.

By positing that knowledge is a social construct, and that truth is defined as an informed

and mutually agreeable construction, the researcher and participants are able to create findings

by working together (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Using a qualitative methodology requires an

ongoing process of discovery, analysis, critique, re-discovery, and re-analysis that ultimately

generates a shared construction of new knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This was the goal of

my dissertation work.

Key points concerning ontology and epistemology are addressed by the constructivist

paradigm and align with my personal worldview (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Epistemologically

speaking, constructivists believe that knowledge is a co-creation, such as that which takes place

through the research interview (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Jones et al., 2006; Mertens, 2005).

Ontologically, constructivists hold that rather than reality being absolute, reality is a result of

conscious consensus between individuals (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Jones et al., 2006; Mertens,

2005). These assumptions match well with the research needs of this qualitative study which

attempted to identify the invariant experience of a group of community college instructors.

**Phenomenology**

Within qualitative research, there are a number of approaches to conducting a study,

including narrative inquiry, ethnography, and phenomenology, and each comes with a unique set

of assumptions, guidelines, and objectives. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018),

phenomenology involves a detailed examination of the experiences of people being studied in

order to convey the essence of a phenomenon, as experienced by participants. A

phenomenological research design was therefore appropriate for this study "not only because of

its rigorous descriptive approach but also because it offers a method for accessing the difficult phenomena of human experience" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 237), such as educators' use of an instructional curriculum.

Phenomenology is intended to more precisely and accurately relay the meanings that an individual expresses (Wertz, 2005). In writing about the concept of phenomenology, Giorgi (1984) explains that "the term phenomenon means that whatever is given in experience is to be understood simply as it presents itself. No other attribute is to be assigned to the given except the meanings that derive from what is presented in the concrete experience" (p. 14). It requires that the researcher suspend their personal experiences with the phenomenon in order to be able to delve into the experiences of the participants without bias or assumptions affecting the study (Moustakas, 1994). In choosing this approach, I have abided by these guidelines.

### *Philosophical Roots of Phenomenology*

While early evidence of the phenomenological movement can be found in the 18th century works of philosophers such as Kant and Hegel, Edmund Husserl is widely credited with founding the study of phenomenology, a century and a half later (Vandenberg, 1997). Eagleton describes the period of time following World War I, during which Husserl's theories emerged and were embraced by the philosophical community:

> The social order of European capitalism had been shaken to its roots by the carnage of the war and its turbulent aftermath. The ideologies on which that order had customarily depended, the cultural values by which it ruled, were also in deep turmoil. Science seemed to have dwindled to a sterile positivism, a myopic obsession with the categorizing of facts; philosophy appeared torn between such a positivism on the one hand, and an

indefensible subjectivism on the other; forms of relativism and irrationalism were

rampant, and art reflected this bewildering loss of bearings. (1983, p. 54)

In reaction to this ideological crisis, Husserl "sought to develop a new philosophical method

which would lend absolute certainty to a disintegrating civilization" (Eagleton, 1983, p. 54).

Husserl's phenomenological "lifeworld" therefore is anchored in "the world as it is lived, not the

world as it is measured, transformed, represented, correlated, categorized, compared, and broken

down" (Vagle, 2014, p. 22).

These philosophical theories, initially developed in Husserl's treatises *Logical

Investigations* (1900) and *Ideas* (1913), laid the groundwork for what is known as transcendental

(or descriptive) phenomenology. Scholars of Husserl's work include Martin Heidegger who

founded the study of hermeneutic phenomenology. In establishing what would become the two

main branches of phenomenology, Husserl and Heidegger both viewed phenomenology as a way

to make sense of the human experience. However, in Husserl's theory the focus is on

epistemology, while Heidegger goes beyond the epistemological questions and focuses on the

ontological question (Moustakas, 1994). A primary difference between the two methods is

evidenced in the Husserlian transcendental exploration of the *lifeworld* of a person who has

experienced a certain phenomenon, versus Heidegger's hermeneutic attempt to discover and

portray the *lived experience* of that phenomena (Finlay, 2009).

### *Phenomenology as a Method of Qualitative Inquiry*

As a result of divergent philosophies and theories, transcendental and hermeneutic

phenomenology are distinct in terms of method, knowledge, and subjectivity. Transcendental

phenomenologists such as Moustakas (1994) and Giorgi (1985) prescribe a systematic method to

phenomenological research, whereas the hermeneutic interpretative approach suggested by

scholars such as Van Manen typically involves an iterative and philosophical process (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). In considering these two main branches of theory, Creswell and Poth (2018) intimate that phenomenology is inherently challenging for the novice researcher and nudge the reader toward the more accessible and structured approach of transcendental phenomenology. This suggestion by these qualitative inquiry experts, is one element that informed my choice of Husserl's transcendental phenomenological framework.

Phenomenology as a philosophy and a research methodology has strong connections to the field of psychology. According to transcendental phenomenologist and psychological researcher Amedeo Giorgi, the links between phenomenology and psychology allow the researcher to delve deeper into the emotions and feelings expressed by participants, and in doing so, reveal the insights and meanings individuals locate within their lives (1985). Given my use of Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory to interpret study findings, and the psychological needs identified by this motivational theory (competence, autonomy and relatedness), Giorgi's transcendental phenomenological methodology, with its ties to and tested use in the fields of psychology and education, is a particularly good fit for the research of this dissertation and was therefore selected for my study.

In order to arrive at the essence of an experience, the researcher using transcendental phenomenology must recognize variants of experience between individuals and arrive at a shared interpretation of the invariant experience (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). There are three main elements needed in order to achieve this process: epoché, description and horizonalization. Epoché, which is also referred to as bracketing, is a Greek word meaning "to refrain from judgement" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33), and requires that the researcher set aside any presumptions or biases, in order to focus exclusively on the participant's experiences. Description (as opposed

to interpretation) is another core element to Husserl's transcendental approach and dictates that the researcher "carry out a concretely based descriptive examination of the intentional variables which make up our experience" (Spinelli, 2005, p. 21). Finally, horizonalization mandates that the researcher avoids assigning hierarchies of significance or importance to data. Instead, each element of the experience must be considered having equal value or significance. Horizonalization is described by one scholar, as akin to the experience of assembling a jigsaw puzzle, minus a picture to reference in the process (Spinelli, 2005).

While all three elements present complexities for the researcher, the ultimate goal is "to arrive at an explanation of your experience whose adequacy (or 'correctness') rests upon data closely derived from your immediate experience and not upon abstract, biased speculation" (Spinelli, 2005, p. 24). In my study, I aimed therefore to achieve epoché, record concretely based descriptions, and perform horizonalization, while bearing in mind that transcendental phenomenology "inspires one to examine biases and enhances one's openness" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 61).

In this work, I explored the phenomenon of instructor experiences from the perspective of those experiencing the phenomenon. I have focused on accurately recording and portraying the experiences of North Carolina community college instructors who taught using an employability skills curriculum. This study utilized interviews with these educators as a primary means of data collection. Phenomenologically oriented data collection and analysis requires the researcher "to suspend all judgments about what is real… until they are founded on a more certain basis" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 76). I have done so by intentionally practicing metacognition in order to be aware of my thinking as suggested by Peoples (2021) and aided by the use of memoing and detailed recordkeeping.

In reviewing existing ES studies, and as previously stated, the instructional staff voice is noticeably missing in most employability skills research. No phenomenological studies have been conducted on the subject of community college educator experiences with employability skills curricula. Instead, student or employer concerns with these skills have generally been the focus of past studies, and insights into instructor experiences are understudied or ignored. As a result of this gap in knowledge, many employability skills programs are designed without the benefit of practitioner insight. This phenomenological exploration of community college instructor experiences with ES curricula, as detailed in participants' own words, aims therefore to encourage the creation of future employability skills development programs that incorporate and reflect educator knowledge and feedback.

## Research Site

The North Carolina Community College System is made up of 58 institutions spread out across the state's 100 counties and is the third largest community college system in the United States (North Carolina Community College System, n.d.). Geographically speaking, according to the NC Rural Center, 80 of 100 North Carolina counties are classed as rural (2020), which makes the state's geographic composition roughly like that of the United States, with 72% of land nationwide considered rural (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2018). The Rural Community College Alliance reports that nearly two-thirds of all U.S. public two-year colleges serve rural communities (White, 2017), which is comparable to the percentage of areas deemed rural, that are served by North Carolina's community colleges (Newsom, 2019).

Collectively, North Carolina community colleges enroll more than 750,000 students annually (Parker, 2019). Over the 2016-17 academic year, nine percent of all state residents took a class offered by an NC community college, with the majority of these courses offered through

colleges' continuing education divisions (Quinterno, 2019). A community college is located within 30 miles of 99% of North Carolinians, and each county is assigned to a specific community college's service area (Program Evaluation Division, 2016).

The reach of the North Carolina Community College System, combined with the state's geographic diversity and commitment to workforce skills education, provided a unique environment as the research site for this phenomenological study. The community college's role in developing a workforce to meet employer needs is well documented on a state and federal level. For example, a 30-year study of 2,000 rural counties in 44 U.S. states found that rural counties with community colleges experienced significantly more job growth than those without (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). Information generated by this dissertation may be beneficial to community colleges across the United States that face similar geographic and economic challenges to those located in North Carolina, and also to comparable job markets that demand an increasingly skilled base of workers.

## Data Collection Strategies and Procedures

According to Giorgi, the aim of data collection in a phenomenological study is for the researcher to be able to describe what the participant experiences within a specific phenomenon (2005). Similarly, King (1994) wrote that the intent of data collection, within phenomenology, is to enable the researcher to view the research topic from the participant's perspective and thus attempt to understand how that individual views the phenomenon. Ultimately, the goal for this researcher was to "empathetically enter and reflect on the lived world of other persons in order to apprehend the meanings of the world as they are given to the first-person point of view" (Wertz, 2005, p. 168).

Collecting and analyzing information obtained from multiple sources, the researcher in qualitative research is the principal data instrument (Erlandson et al., 1993). "Interviews, observations, documents, and artifacts" are the primary sources of data in qualitative research (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 85). The central data collection method for this study was multiple, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Interviewing is a preferred method of data collection for phenomenological research (Finlay, 1999; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). A semi-structured interview protocol permitted me to not only collect responses to interview questions, but also allowed participants to further delve into their experiences, in order to illuminate interviewees' constructed reality of a situation (Erlandson et al., 1993).

**Sampling Procedures and Criteria**

The initial means of data collection for this study was a participant recruitment screener survey. Participants for qualitative studies are selected using a purposive (also referred to as purposeful) sampling methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Merriam, "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (1998, p. 61). Patton (2015) similarly defines purposive sampling as an intentional process in which the researcher chooses participants who possess key information pertinent to questions that are central the topic of research. This study therefore employed a purposive sampling process that confirmed that study participants had sufficient experience working with an employability skills curriculum.

As the goal of this qualitative research was to study North Carolina community college educator experiences, the priority in selecting a sample was to ensure that participants were able to discuss and describe the specific phenomenon of instructional use of an ES curriculum

(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Patton, 2015). After having received approval in October 2020 from North Carolina State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) which granted permission to conduct the study (#20781), the first step in the research process involved recruiting instructor participants from across the North Carolina Community College System.

In order to reach to qualified candidates for the study, I worked closely with a member of my dissertation committee who connected me via email with community college presidents and administrators. Using this facilitated introduction, I was able to request help in campus distribution of the invite for participation in the study. These community college leaders agreed to share an announcement of the study with staff and forwarded my invitational message to instructors at their campuses. The invitational letter I provided for distribution (Appendix A) included a brief overview of the study, basic criteria for participation, and my contact information in case of questions or concerns.

As a second layer to recruitment efforts, I sent email requests to various statewide organizations asking for assistance in publicizing my need for research participants (Appendix B). These North Carolina groups such as SkillsUSA's NC chapter and the North Carolina Work-Based Learning Association maintain online discussion boards and email distribution lists and were willing to announce my research need. The SkillsUSA NC chapter also featured the invitation for study participation in an October issue of their weekly newsletter.

Embedded in the invitation forwarded to community colleges and state associations was a suggestion that the study announcement be shared with instructor colleagues who may be interested and qualify for participation. In this way, snowball sampling was also a third aspect of the recruitment process. Compensation was used to encourage participation in the research study.

Instructors who completed both the initial in-depth interview and the follow-up transcript review meeting were offered a $100 gift card.

Communication and outreach to possible participants took place from mid-October through late November 2020. Interested instructional staff were required to complete an online Qualtrics-based questionnaire in order to determine eligibility for inclusion (Appendix C). The aim of this online screener survey was to achieve maximum variation, which involves "purposefully seeking variation or diversity in sample selection to allow for a greater range of application of the findings by consumers of the research" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259). To establish a diverse participation base, questions were asked regarding the total number of courses in which the curriculum was used, current or prior teaching status (full or part-time), subject area(s) taught, institution(s) where ES curricula were used in teaching, and total number of years working at the community college level.

As initial screener survey questionnaire results started to accumulate, I ascertained that respondents were NC community college instructors who had taught using an employability skills curriculum. Using this type of "homogeneous sampling" as detailed by Patton (2015) meant that all participants selected would be able to share insights about the phenomenon in question (p. 268). Use of this sampling technique is also intended to enhance the transferability of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2014).

Using maximal variation criteria combined with homogenous sampling ensured a variety of perspectives and responses to questions regarding instructional use of employability skills curricula in North Carolina community colleges. Creswell and Poth recommend a group "in size from three to four individuals to 10 to 15" for a phenomenological study (2018, p. 76). Given this suggestion, combined with the possibility of participant attrition, my goal was to conduct

interviews with a total of between eight and twelve individuals. In the end I was able to close the screener survey in November 2020, after locating 10 qualified participants from nine NCCCS institutions, who had used a variety of ES curricula in their teaching.

All instructors selected for the study were sent electronic consent forms (both informed and broad) which were completed via Qualtrics. The acceptance email message (Appendix D) and the online consent documents (Appendix E and F) assured participants that their identity would be kept strictly anonymous and that all recordings, notes, and transcripts of interviews would be secured online via NCSU's Google Drive. After affirming consent via online forms, participants were then directed to a screen which asked for the selection of a date and time for the initial interview. Once the interview was scheduled, an automated email was sent to each participant, confirming the appointment.

Additional participant information was collected via a second survey that took the form of a background questionnaire (Appendix G) and requested data such as age, education level, and gender. This demographic information survey was completed and collected in advance of the initial interview. According to Sandelowski (2000) "the ultimate goal of purposeful sampling is to obtain cases deemed information-rich for the purposes of study" (p. 338). The supplemental data yielded by the second survey served to further enhance the study's findings and provided information foundational to the composite participant descriptions, located in Chapter four.

In addition to demographic data, the background questionnaire asked participants to provide a pseudonym to be used in place of their name throughout the study. The questionnaire also requested that participants specify a vendor for their participation incentive (the online gift certificate). Following the second meeting, I electronically sent this gift card to each participant

from vendors' websites. All online interviews and meetings were completed by the end of December 2020.

**Method of Interview**

Considered by some to be the most powerful tools available to researchers who wish to understand individuals (Fontana & Frey, 2000) qualitative interviews are also seen as an important means of capturing and describing complex phenomena (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Bishop-Clark and Dietz-Uhler (2012) write that interviews allow researchers a window into the participant perspective. The in-depth conversation that accompanies an interview can also serve as a way to enhance participant engagement (Giorgi, 2005; Hycner, 1985; Wertz, 2005).

The intent of this qualitative research study was to explore community college educator experiences with instructional use of an employability skills curriculum. This necessitated in-depth review of participants' thoughts and feelings, in order to gain meaningful insight into the phenomenon of instructor experiences. Patton indicates that only interviews facilitate an adequate level of exploration (2015), so this means of data collection was central to my research study.

According to Moustakas, "Typically in the phenomenological investigation, the long interview is the method through which data is collected on the topic and question. [This] involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions" (1994, p. 114). As the central means of data collection and inquiry for this study, a carefully executed plan for the interview structure was imperative. The semi-structured qualitative interviews used in this study consisted of a series of open-ended questions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) which focused on participant experiences and insights (Patton, 2002).

The interview questions (Appendix H) were presented in accordance with techniques recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018). These guidelines included an assurance of confidentiality for participants, suggestions for rapport establishment through small talk with the interviewee, and an explanation of interview procedures and benefits to study participation. I took care to participate as a good listener throughout the interview experience, avoided leading questions and interruptions, and was observant of nonverbal responses.

All interviews were conducted online and archived using NC State University's Zoom video conferencing software, which allowed for future review of data (both visual and audio). Interviews were transcribed verbatim using Zoom's automated transcription software. Notes regarding non-verbal body language cues were inserted into each transcript. All electronic files and sources of data (including multimedia, documents, and spreadsheets) were stored on the NC State Google Drive. Hard copies of print documents were kept securely at my home.

While the length of the interview is an important consideration in phenomenological interviewing, Giorgi (2009) advised that a prescribed amount of time was not likely to be effective. In light of this, a 90-minute period of time was set aside for the initial one-on-one interview, as well as a 60-minute window of time for the transcript review follow-up meeting. These time frames were communicated to participants in advance of the meeting, however the sessions ended when the participant had fully shared their experience or when the scope of the conversation moved beyond the phenomenon and no new information was gleaned. As per Groenewald, the rapport and level of candor between the participant and the interviewer also guided the duration of each interaction (2004).

The initial interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes with the average length of time being approximately 60 minutes. Following any necessary corrections to the transcription,

and the redaction of personally identifying details, I shared access to the transcript as a Google document with each participant. Instructors were encouraged to review and annotate the transcript using the Google document's comment feature. During the scheduled follow up meeting, which again was recorded and took place via Zoom, participants were offered the opportunity to discuss any areas of concern that they had identified or annotated in the transcript. I also took this second meeting as an opportunity to ask clarifying questions.

Following each online interaction, I made notes on the experience that included my own personal thoughts on the process. Morgan remarks that because this kind of memoing by default involves some interpretation, it should technically be considered "part of the analysis rather than the data collection" (1997, pp. 57-58). Despite this caution, I did find it helpful to make time to parse and bracket my reflections and thus be sure that I stayed in a presuppositionless state throughout the process. By employing this form of epoché, I was made aware of my inner thoughts with the intention of preventing biases (Maxwell, 2013).

## Explication of the Data

According to Denzin and Lincoln, "the process of reduction of data into a compelling, authentic, and meaningful statement constitutes an end goal of qualitative research design" (2003, p. 61). In a phenomenological study, the researcher focuses on the description and experience of the phenomenon, as opposed to other qualitative methods which seek an explanation of meanings (Finlay, 1999; Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

Giorgi's steps for data explication (1985) are rooted in the Husserlian transcendental approach and were used in conjunction with this study. Note that Giorgi eschews the term analysis, and instead uses "the term 'explication,' which means an investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while always keeping the context of the whole" (1985, p. 300).

The phenomenological data processing described by Giorgi (1985; 2012) includes the following five steps, which I utilized in my research:

1. Collect the data and read through all interviews to get a sense of the whole.

2. Re-read the transcription data in order to identify meaning units.

3. Collect all relevant meaning units into themes.

4. Transform meaning units and themes into statements that express the participants' experiences.

5. Synthesize and summarize the data for purposes of communication.

In advance of and throughout the data explication I was careful to exercise bracketing of my own experiences so as to employ epoché. My researcher subjectivity statement (in the next section) underscores my commitment to holding any preconceived ideas in abeyance throughout the data collection and analysis. Memoing was also done to assure I stayed aware of my thoughts and reflections about the process.

All interviews and follow-up meetings were video and audio-recorded using Zoom. These recordings were transcribed through use of Zoom's inbuilt transcription software. While having the recordings automatically produce a transcription was a welcome feature, numerous edits were still necessary to check that the conversation was recorded accurately. Non-verbal details of these online exchanges were also added into the documents during the editing process. As a result of these steps which were taken to make certain that each transcription matched conversations with the participants verbatim, I listened to each recording at least three times. Accuracy of the transcript from the initial interview was also confirmed with participants during the second meeting. These first steps encompass Giorgi's instructions to collect the data and read through all interviews to get a sense of the whole (1985; 2012).

After all edits to transcripts had been made, the next step was to identify participant statements that captured aspects of the phenomenon. To do so, I first went through each document line by line and highlighted the non-repeating and non-overlapping meaning units uttered by participants. Notes were also made in the margins to designate initial impressions of the significance of specific passages. After reviewing the transcripts in order to identify meaning units per Giorgi (1985; 2012), I then engaged in coding of the interviews which involved identifying and labelling the passages using intuitive and conceptual codes. Once this was complete for each transcript, I was able to recognize the common meaning units that were expressed by multiple participants. After identifying the most prevalent units of meaning, I created a spreadsheet for each participant that allowed me to list specific passages, sorted by initial themes. By collecting all relevant meaning units in this way, and as guided by Giorgi's advice (1985; 2012) major themes and subthemes became visibly apparent.

At this point, I reviewed transcripts yet again in order to draft a composite participant summary for each of the instructors. This allowed me one more opportunity to sift through the transcript data to be sure there were no meaning units left unidentified, and that themes accurately portrayed the most common and relevant passages from exchanges. Using the confirmed list of themes combined with the spreadsheet of quotes from each participant I created a final list of six thematic statements, and 18 subthemes that expressed the invariant experiences of the ten participants. For the last phase of explication, I drew upon the textural and structural descriptive narratives provided by participants, in order to execute the step of transforming meaning units and themes into statements that express the participants' experiences (Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi, 2012). The results of this data have thus been synthesized and summarized as per Giorgi's instructions and form the basis of the findings located in Chapter four.

## Researcher's Role and Subjectivity

There is a tension that exists within the study of phenomenology regarding bracketing and epoché. The founders and early scholars of phenomenology were not in full agreement as to whether a researcher is able to abstain completely from presuppositions during the data explication process (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2005). There is a line of thinking within the phenomenological community which holds that the researcher cannot be fully detached from their own opinions and it is disingenuous to advocate for such a pretense (Hammersley, 2000). Some researchers instead see personal information and insight as an asset and maintain that those conducting phenomenological research should take advantage of their knowledge of the literature to guide them to areas that are understudied (Lopez & Willis, 2004). At the same time, a scholar should be careful to make evident any resultant ideas from one's experiences or literature reviewed and tell the reader how such concepts are being used in a study (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

In the same vein, transcendental phenomenologists such as Hycner acknowledge concerns about researcher bias and prejudgment, and explain that while precautions should be taken, "this in no way means that the phenomenologist is standing in some absolute and totally presuppositionless space" (1985, p. 281). Hycner continues, with a caution against "the fallacy of 'pure objectivity' that natural science has often been prone to" (1985, p. 281). Instead, Hycner pronounces complete and absolute phenomenological reduction unattainable (1985). However, as a nod to these matters, the student researcher is advised to employ epoché by preemptively recognizing any potential biases and using this as a starting point for a dialogue with committee members (Hycner, 1985). I have employed these suggestions to the fullest extent possible.

Relatedly, Berg views the prior experiential knowledge of the researcher as a potentially useful resource rather than a problem, when conducting qualitative interviews (2008). In this phenomenological study, I was quite familiar with the environment in which community college instructional staff work. Having been an adjunct instructor and also an academic dean tasked with overseeing faculty work, my career had allowed me a unique set of experiences to draw upon for this study. This level of personal and firsthand knowledge served to enhance the interview process and helped me build rapport with study participants (Berg, 2008), but I was also ever mindful of the potential for related biases.

**Researcher's Personal History, Professional Experiences, and Worldview**

I was raised in a Caucasian, middle class family by two public school teachers. My parents were the first in their immediate families to attend college. Education was paramount during my childhood. This upbringing, combined with more than 20 years of experience working in Massachusetts public higher education, at various institutions and in different capacities, has informed and solidified my commitment to the mission of the community college: offering all a chance at a better life through accessible high-quality education.

I am particularly interested in the unique challenges rural public two-year postsecondary institutions face, having worked at a small community college in Central Massachusetts for more than 14 years. My tenure at that institution began in 2000 as a professional staff member. Later, I taught classes both face-to-face and online as an adjunct instructor. In my final position at this community college, I served as both dean of a large academic support area and also as an interim academic division dean. Given that my career, like my academic experience, spans both higher education and non-profit institutions, as well as work in the corporate and for-profit sectors, the topic of this dissertation connects especially well with my background and research interests.

*Subjectivity Statement*

My time as an academic dean, during the last three years of my community college work experience, left me disheartened by the degree to which instructors and frontline staff were disenfranchised by administrators. I also empathize greatly with the plight of contingent faculty who are too often underpaid and overlooked by college leadership. I strongly believe that those who spend their days working with students and facilitate learning in the classroom possess unique and invaluable insights and should be included in conversations about curricular change. I am grateful to have had an opportunity to document the experiences of instructors working with employability skills curricula. These educators' willingness to share their knowledge stands to improve future and related initiatives.

*Potential Bias*

I recognize that my background working with community college students, faculty, staff, and administrators colors my thinking about the teaching of employability skills, especially given that I personally have been involved in related curricular initiatives at my former institution. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) argue that the researcher's biases can be mitigated with careful attention to the trustworthiness of the study. Therefore, I have employed the process of epoché (through which the researcher identifies and brackets out preexisting assumptions), in order to explore the phenomenon through the experiences of participants and untainted by any internal biases.

I have also attempted to address trustworthiness by using the second follow-up meeting with study participants as an opportunity to review and discuss the interview transcript, and actively seek feedback. I recognize that my work history stood to influence my interpretation of instructor experiences. However, I believe that in the end, cautious use of this firsthand

knowledge of the community college environment enabled me to more readily connect with participants, and more fully grasp the unique difficulties and institutional dynamics they described.

## Issues of Trustworthiness

A study infused with elements of trustworthiness assures the reader of reliable findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualities of trustworthiness that are used to evaluate rigor in quantitative studies, such as generalizability, internal validity, reliability, and objectivity, are reframed in qualitative research as elements of transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Meadows & Morse, 2001). A description of how each of these criteria was deployed, follows:

*Transferability:* The ability to apply findings to other populations was enhanced through thick and rich description, as well as careful use of quotations in documenting findings. Maximized variation in the population sample also added to transferability and trustworthiness.

*Credibility:* In order to be sure that "credible findings and interpretations will be produced" by the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301), participants were asked to review and provide comments on interview transcripts. Lincoln and Guba suggest spending an extended length of time with participants (1985). Ninety-minute windows of time for initial interviews, plus sixty-minute follow-up transcript review meetings offered ample opportunity to interface with instructors participating in the study.

*Dependability:* Steps were taken so that the findings would be similar if the study were replicated. In-depth interviews with multiple participants allowed for a variety of perspectives.

*Confirmability:* In order to achieve findings that were objective and unbiased, cautious and measured interpretation of data enhanced confirmability.

Lucy Yardley (2000) offers an alternate evaluative model which may also be used to assess the validity of qualitative methods, listing four measures to gauge the trustworthiness of qualitative research. These criteria were applied to this study:

- *Sensitivity to context* was facilitated through North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board approval. This was enhanced by a thoughtful approach to the interview process. I carefully bracketed potential biases and used epoché throughout the process.

- *Commitment and rigor* are evident in my subjectivity statement and overview of personal experience, the intentional selection of participants, and attention to detail in the process. This was aided by thick and rich descriptions in data collection, as well as in-depth engagement with the research topic.

- *Transparency and coherence* were achieved by utilizing transcript review with participants and journaling throughout the research. My work is informed by more than 20 years cumulative experience in higher education, with more than 15 years of employment in community colleges. There was also a good fit between research question, method, and use of theory.

- *Impact and importance:* The study adds to knowledge of the topic. The resulting report is of practical use to community college instructional staff and administrators, and this research is hoped to ultimately benefit student learning.

## Limitations and Delimitations

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of community college educator experiences with instructional use of employability skills curricula. One limitation to this work is that it is based on an assumption that all participants were open and honest. Participant candor was crucial as experiences, perceptions, feelings, and thoughts are foundational sources of

information for phenomenological work. In order to counter any mistrust or hesitation, I did everything possible to put participants' minds at ease. I emphasized the confidentiality of the process in my communications and reacted with sensitivity to any concerns that were expressed. During meeting times, I conveyed my appreciation for participation, as well as the seriousness with which I have undertaken the tasks at hand and reviewed the precautions in place to protect identities and professional reputations.

In addition, while advisable per phenomenologists such as Hycner (1985), use of co-researchers was not possible due to time restrictions and logistical constraints, and data explication was thus limited to my solo efforts. Having more than one person involved in collection and analysis of data would have been welcome, and the additional insights appreciated. However, as Moustakas (1994) reminds researchers, the complete essence of any experience is never possible to capture. Likewise, Husserl indicates that "every physical property draws us on into infinities of experience; and that every multiplicity of experience, however lengthily drawn out, still leaves the way open to closer and novel thing-determinations; and so on, in infinitum" (Husserl, 1913, pp. 54-55). Therefore, the goal of this work was to come as close as possible to capturing the essence of the phenomenon, given that the complete essence of instructor experiences may have been elusive to this novice phenomenological researcher.

There were other limitations introduced by four failed attempts at participant recruitment over the course of as many months. A series of study protocol revisions were required to establish the final group of 10 qualified instructors. In order to successfully gather a sufficient number of participants, I needed to open study participation to include not just current instructors, but also those who had provided ES curricular instruction in the past. Despite not currently teaching an ES curriculum, those qualifying for inclusion in the study with this change

appeared to have no problem recollecting their instructional experiences with historical accuracy, as these prior experiences were only a few years old.

Moreover, as all participants were full-time community college employees, this phenomenological work would have been enhanced by the inclusion of contingent instructor experiences. Also, the final group of 10 instructors were all advocates for use of ES curricula, as would be anticipated due to the self-selected nature of participants. A study that accounted for a greater diversity of perspectives would have been ideal, however was not within the scope of the research, given the problems encountered with participant recruitment.

Finally, as this study was conducted during the time of COVID-19, all interactions with participants were conducted remotely and rapport was no doubt limited by this necessary distancing. Instructors interviewed were likewise working under unusually stressful and unique circumstances at their community colleges as well, which impeded their connections with colleagues and students. Evidence of these disruptions appeared throughout our conversations. Yet for all the difficulties they faced, these educators expressed being hopeful for a return to some kind of normalcy in the near future.

In terms of delimitation, a decision was made early on that this study would focus exclusively on the experiences of North Carolina community college instructors, as a proxy for those of educators providing ES instruction across the United States. Given this geographic restriction, there is a possibility that the experiences of community college instructors in other states or regions would present quite differently. Especially for community colleges operating in states where instructor work is governed by union contract, institutional implementation and use of an ES curriculum could transpire in a very dissimilar manner.

An additional delimitation was to include in the study only those individuals who had provided ES instruction. One participant initially selected was later found through interviews to have worked with an ES curriculum in a non-instructional manner and was therefore omitted from the research data. While the experiences of support staff are helpful to consider when crafting ES curricular policy and practices, for the purposes of this dissertation work, inclusion of this individual did not conform to the homogenous sampling goal.

## Chapter Summary

This qualitative study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach in order to examine the experiences of North Carolina community college instructors who have taught using an employability skills curriculum. Giorgi's techniques informed data collection and explication. In order to infuse trustworthiness and defend against bias, I utilized the phenomenological technique of bracketing known as epoché, in combination with rich, thick descriptions of participant experiences. Collaborative transcript review was conducted with study participants, in order to confirm accuracy.

**CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

This dissertation was guided by the central research question that asks: what are the experiences of North Carolina community college instructors who have taught using an employability skills curriculum? Accompanying research sub-questions are:

- What elements do educators describe as helping their instructional use of an employability skills curriculum?

- What elements do educators describe as hindering their instructional use of an employability skills curriculum?

Six major themes emerged from analysis of the data: (1) Instructors appeared emotionally and personally invested in ES curricular instruction; (2) There was an urgency conveyed in prioritizing ES curricular instruction; (3) Strategic use of prior experiences enhanced ES curricular instruction; (4) Interpersonal connections with colleagues and students were considered crucial elements of ES curricular instruction; (5) There was an expressed need for greater support and resources in order to professionalize ES instruction; and (6) Instructors enjoyed creatively designing lessons and assignments for use with ES curricular instruction. In conjunction with each major theme, subthemes were identified and analyzed through the findings.

This chapter is organized as follows: the first section presents participant demographic data and composite summaries. The second section of the chapter provides a detailed overview of thematic findings that emerged from participant interviews. I used transcript passages and instructor descriptions of the phenomenon to illustrate and bring themes and subthemes to life. Using a transcendental phenomenological methodology, I explicated instructor recollections in order to focus on expressions that revealed experiential commonalities. For each major theme, a

number of subthemes are presented which appeared to resonate across most or all of the participants' experiences. Quotes allow the reader to explore these subthemes through instructor accounts.

## Study Participants

While the intent of phenomenological research is to identify themes that express facets of a shared phenomenon, it is also important to recognize the individual contexts that these experiences take place within. Therefore, I have provided an overview and summary profile for each of the 10 participants. Each individual had a unique background that informed their experience with instructional use of an employability skills curriculum. The table below provides descriptive information for each of the participants. Data collected included the participants' gender identity, position currently held at the community college, number of years teaching at the community college level, National Center for Education Studies (NCES) locale classification for the community college where the individual was currently employed, the primary ES curriculum used in teaching, plus any additional ES curricula the instructor had used.

In the group of interviewees, there were six women and four men. Six of the participants were full-time instructors. Two of the ten participants were currently employed as administrators and were using an ES curriculum in their instructional work. Another two participants moved into full-time administrative positions several years ago, but had previously held faculty positions at their community college, and in this capacity provided ES curricular instruction. The total number of years teaching at the community college level spanned from two to 20 years.

These current and former instructors were employed at nine institutions across the state, the locations of which fell into National Center for Education Statistics geographical locale classifications ranging from rural (distant) to city (large). Participants had used an array of

employability skills curricula in their teaching including those sponsored by the North Carolina

Community College System (ESAP and NC-NET ES Toolkit). Individuals were asked to choose

pseudonyms in order to protect their identity and the confidentiality of their participation. Table

2 provides pseudonyms and descriptive information for the 10 participants.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Information of Participants*

| Pseudonym | Position at community college | Number of years teaching at community college level | NCES community college locale designation | Primary / secondary ES curricula used |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Charlotte | Administrator / instructor | 20 | City | NC-NET ES Resource Toolkit |
| Deacon | Administrator / instructor | 12 | City | SkillsUSA Framework / ESAP |
| Jesse | Instructor | 11 | Rural | SkillsUSA Framework |
| Katie | Instructor | 17 | Town | Self-created curriculum |
| Lawson | Administrator / former instructor | 8 | City | SkillsUSA Framework / ESAP |
| Norman | Instructor | 15 | Rural | Working Smart / WorkKeys Curriculum |
| Ron | Instructor | 4 | Town | ESAP |
| Shirley | Instructor | 2 | Suburb | Working Smart / Self-created curriculum |

**Table 2** (continued).

| Pseudonym | Position at community college | Number of years teaching at community college level | NCES community college locale designation | Primary / secondary ES curricula used |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Tyson | Administrator / former instructor | 11 | Rural | WorkKeys Curriculum / Working Smart / WIN |
| Whit | Instructor | 20 | Suburb | WorkKeys Curriculum / Working Smart / WIN |

**Participant Summaries**

Composite summaries are provided for each of the 10 participants to give the reader an opportunity to more fully appreciate the context of each interviewee's narrative contributions. These overviews are written using information provided by the participants' initial screener surveys, background questionnaires, online interviews, and follow-up meetings. This group of instructors possessed diverse qualifications and experiences with regard to personal life histories, career paths, professional education, and subject area expertise.

*Charlotte*

Charlotte was a community college administrator who taught courses using an ES curriculum as a component of her work. She had been employed for over 30 years at her institution; first as an adjunct instructor and then as a full-time instructor, before transitioning to her current role as an administrator. She was quick to find humor in the situations that she described.

Charlotte appeared to enjoy talking about her experiences with an employability skills curriculum and the challenges that she had faced making ES instruction a priority on her campus.

She shared her insights about how well the NC-NET Employability Skills Resource Toolkit worked for her instruction, despite it being published in 2013. She also had suggestions about how the Toolkit could be improved. She spoke with empathy about the busy lives of the students that she taught in her classes.

Having served on the statewide committee that created ESAP, several times she expressed disappointment that it had not been made available to community college instructors, as she was familiar with the curriculum and thought it would be of practical use to many.

### Deacon

Deacon was a powerful advocate for employability skills on his campus. In his administrator role, he mentioned having access to the president and holding sway over the way courses were taught. Deacon expressed pride in the fact that his academic division was mostly operating in a face-to-face capacity despite the pandemic. He perceived his prior work experience and professional credentials as helpful to his current work and spoke with sensitivity and concern about students whose employability skills were weak. While Deacon held a full-time administrative position at his college, he continued to teach ES-focused courses and said that he "liked having some involvement" with this instruction.

Deacon's community college was very involved with SkillsUSA. The instructors in his division were all heavily invested in using the SkillsUSA Framework with their classes, and Deacon praised these educators for their ingenuity in devising assignments that helped boost student employability skills. Like several other study participants, he had served on the statewide committee that created the ESAP curriculum and was hopeful that this NCCCS-sponsored resource would eventually become more accessible to community college instructors.

*Jesse*

Jesse was a full-time instructor and a fan of the SkillsUSA curriculum. After spending time talking with her, it was hard not to be moved by Jesse's account of how the SkillsUSA Framework helped her and other educators at her community college infuse their subject-area instruction with ES learning. As a former non-traditional student and community college graduate, Jesse exuded optimism and had seen firsthand the life-changing effect of employability skills. She shared stories of the work she had done so that her teaching reinforced the SkillsUSA Framework, as well as her collegial efforts to help others do the same with their classes.

Jesse touted her community college colleagues' embrace of an ES curriculum. She did not mince words however when expressing impatience with instructors who were not convinced of the importance of teaching students about employability skills and the role these skills play in the workplace. She had seen the effects and positive outcomes of her college's ES curriculum in helping students secure work, and in speaking about her experiences made a compelling case for community colleges' use of the SkillsUSA Framework.

*Katie*

Katie had made improving student employability skills a personal cause. Voluntarily and completely on her own, she designed an ES curriculum by strategically embedding ES lessons in her assignments. Instead of using a standardized curriculum to create coursework like other participants in this study, she found that setting clear and specific expectations of student work, and then following through on consequences and grade reductions when expectations were not met has been an effective way to teach her students employability skills, such as communications, workplace etiquette and time management.

Katie was hired initially as a contingent instructor at her community college and had been employed in that capacity until she was offered a full-time faculty position in her department. She had a deep grasp of her subject area due to her work experience and used her prior career to guide lesson planning and teaching priorities. In assessing the employability skills of her students, she saw communication as a serious problem for her students, especially written communications and in particular grammar. She had taken advantage of numerous professional development opportunities offered by her institution and through the North Carolina Community College System office.

### *Lawson*

Lawson was an energetic proponent for SkillsUSA at her institution. She had originally been hired as a full-time career and technical education instructor and later transitioned to an administrative position. Her current work allowed her to campaign for the importance of ES to both students and educators at her community college. She explained seeing employability skills as central to not only the ability of students to find work but also as a key determinant of quality of life.

Lawson was pointed in the concern she expressed regarding instructors who did not view teaching students employability skills as a part of their work. By increasing faculty access to professional development opportunities at her institution, she aimed to elevate educator awareness of the importance of employability skills. Lawson believed that her college's teaching staff would also benefit from time spent outside the institution interfacing with local employers. She envisioned and hoped to someday implement a sabbatical-like experience for instructors that would ensure programs were able to better meet employer needs and graduate work-ready students.

*Norman*

      Norman taught Human Resource Development courses in an off-campus setting. The restrictions of his classroom setting combined with the prescriptive nature of the Working Smart curriculum had required him to teach about ES in a different way from the other instructors in this study. Norman appeared accepting of the difficulties he faced as a result of the location of his classes and had found ways to work around related obstacles such as a lack of instructor and student access to the internet. He had been teaching HRD courses full-time in this fashion for almost a decade. Prior to his current position with the community college, he had served as an adjunct instructor in the same program area.

      Norman had tried in the past to connect with others who taught HRD in similar off-campus locales and said he had found those discussions helpful. It appeared to him however that channels of communication with fellow colleagues had lapsed in recent years. In general, Norman seemed receptive to the idea of professional development on the topic of ES, and in the absence of formal instruction had done his own research on employability skills, sourcing a book series on the topic. During the course of our conversations, he imaginatively portrayed ways the college could help make ES a priority for his teaching colleagues and for students.

*Ron*

      Ron was a full-time non-curriculum instructor, and the only participant in this study who was actively using the NCCCS Employability Skills Alignment Project's online modules. In conjunction with his ESAP utilization, Ron created an online repository for his colleagues to use in sharing ES supplemental teaching resources (such as videos). As a relatively new instructor, he seemed unfazed by the technological hurdles he had cleared in requesting ESAP from the

NCCCS Virtual Learning Center, and in hosting ESAP's online curriculum locally via his college's learning management system.

His involvement with the NCCCS Employability Skills Alignment Project began when he was approached by administrators at his community college and asked to pilot use of ESAP with his classes. He believed this was because one of the classes he taught had a focus on soft skills, and also due to advisory board feedback which indicated the employability skills of graduates from his community college were lacking. Ron viewed the current version of NCCCS' ESAP curriculum as a work in progress, but also a helpful starting point in teaching students about employability skills.

### *Shirley*

Shirley provided customized training for local employers through her community college. Prior to her current position she taught Human Resource Development classes. In both instructional capacities she had used the Working Smart curriculum. Providing instruction for younger students appeared to sometimes be a challenge for Shirley, as she found this group was not always able to fully appreciate the importance of employability skills. She was undeterred however by the attitudes she sometimes encountered in her teaching.

In her current position she taught at multiple community colleges and had seen the way that specialized programs, such as the one she was employed by, can positively influence students' futures. Attuned to the challenging lives of the students that she worked with, Shirley had many anecdotes about how she had been able to make her ES instruction more interactive to better hold students' attention. Based on her work she saw great value in publicly recognizing student ES achievements and spoke glowingly of institutional efforts to celebrate student successes.

*Tyson*

Creativity was a point of pride for Tyson. He had received a number of awards that honored his innovations in teaching employability skills through use of the WorkKeys Curriculum. Prior to his current divisional leadership role at his college, he helped staff the employability lab for his campus, administering the National Career Readiness Certification exam.

Throughout our conversations he was quick with a story to underscore the enjoyment he had experienced during his frontline work with students. Tyson leveraged his network of contacts within the community so that local residents were kept abreast of workforce education opportunities provided by the college. He detailed going to lengths to impress upon students the way that employability skills could enhance their work readiness and open avenues to employment, especially for those in possession of ACT certification.

*Whit*

Whit grew up in the city in which she taught and spoke of cherishing her close ties to various neighborhoods. She provided ES instruction within her community college's employability lab and in this role assisted students who were preparing to take the ACT National Career Readiness Certification exam. Whit described herself as well-versed in both the WorkKeys and Working Smart curricula. Her stories addressed her personal investment in student success. Speaking with Whit, I was struck by how much satisfaction she derived from the work she does, going above and beyond in trying to find ways to be sure the curriculum met students' needs.

Whit explained being frustrated by the restrictions the pandemic had placed upon her work with students. While she had overcome the technological challenges of teaching online, she

indicated missing the personal connections she forged with students in the lab setting. She had been teaching at her community college for more than 20 years and appreciated her relationships with former students and the way that employability skills enabled these individuals to achieve success in life. Whit detailed the many innovative ways in which she tried to help students discover possible career paths. She also spoke with pride about how she vigorously advertised college-sponsored workforce development services to the local community.

## Thematic Findings

Coding was done by hand as suggested by Peoples (2021). All transcripts (for both the initial interview and follow-up meeting) were read closely multiple times so as to identify invariant units of meaning, which were then grouped into clusters (Hycner, 1985). If these clustered groupings appeared to express the same experience for multiple participants, the prevalence of a cluster of meaning units was taken to indicate the essentialness of that expression. Clusters were then examined to determine whether a theme should be established. In phenomenological explication, a theme expresses a facet of the essential experience for study participants (Hycner, 1985). In this study, themes express the essence of what this group of North Carolina community college instructors had experienced through employability skills curricular instruction.

There were six major themes that emerged from the transcripts, and 18 subthemes. The six main themes found across participant experiences were: (1) Instructors appeared emotionally and personally invested in ES curricular instruction; (2) There was an urgency conveyed in prioritizing ES curricular instruction; (3) Strategic use of prior experiences enhanced ES curricular instruction; (4) Interpersonal connections with colleagues and students were considered crucial elements of ES curricular instruction; (5) There was an expressed need for

greater support and resources in order to professionalize ES instruction; and (6) Instructors

enjoyed creatively designing lessons and assignments for use with ES curricular instruction.

**Table 3**

*Major Themes and Subthemes*

| Major Themes – Instructors expressed: | Subthemes – Evidenced by: |
| --- | --- |
| An emotional and personal investment in ES curricular instruction | • Emotive language<br>• Empathetic connections with students<br>• Passion for the curriculum |
| A sense of urgency in ES curricular instruction | • Use of the imperative<br>• An expressed desire to communicate the immediacy of employer needs for workforce readiness<br>• Vision of institutional leaders as ES curricular champions |
| The value of prior experience to ES curricular instruction | • Instructional storytelling about value of ES<br>• Use of firsthand knowledge of employer expectations and the job market |
| The importance of interpersonal connections for ES curricular instruction | • Premium placed on face-to-face instruction<br>• Involvement with extracurricular activities<br>• Ceremonies and celebrations |
| A need for support and resources in professionalizing ES curricular instruction | • An inconsistent ES vocabulary<br>• Teaching tools and resources found lacking<br>• Receptiveness to professional development<br>• Networks of support were helpful |
| Enjoyment in creatively designing ES curricular instruction | • Innovative lessons and assignments<br>• Collegiality-enhanced instruction<br>• A set curriculum was sometimes considered problematic |

**Major Themes and Subthemes**

The goal of a phenomenological study is to identify the essence of a phenomenon for participants. In this study, Giorgi's method of data explication (1985) was utilized to identify meaning units that were relevant to the research questions, to group these units into themes, and then to sort and modify those themes so that they accurately represented the experiences of participants who as North Carolina community college instructors had taught using an employability skills curriculum. A review of scholarly literature on ES instruction in postsecondary settings indicated that researchers have studied employability skills instruction generally with a focus on outcomes, and usually by speaking with either students or employers. In contrast, very little research has been conducted on the process of ES instruction that focuses on educators who have taught using an ES curriculum. Even less is known about the experiences of community college instructors who have used these curricula. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of ES curricular use, as North Carolina community college instructors describe having experienced it.

The following section identifies the six major themes that emerged from participant interviews. Semi-structured interviews with the ten participants elicited personal perspectives on the experience of employability skills curricular instruction. After coding interview transcripts, identifying the meaning units in the exchanges, and grouping these units into clusters, six major themes were identified that resonated with the study's research questions. These main themes were evident in the stories of all participants and represent facets of their experiences with employability skills curricular instruction. The subthemes which were identified across participant experiences are also examined for each major theme. Quoted passages from participants have been chosen that help illuminate these themes.

The interviews generally started with the instructor providing a comprehensive overview of the career trajectory that led them to teaching. Next, participants described their work with various ES curricula and the settings in which they taught these skills. Participants then were asked to provide critical insights on their use of specific employability skills curricula. This preceded a request for a deeper explanation of some of the elements that helped and hindered the teaching of the curriculum, such as the resources and support interviewees experienced from the college, and professional development they had received on employability skills instruction.

The interview questions would then segue into their conversations with colleagues about ES instruction and what suggestions participants might have to increase adoption and instructional use of ES curricula. The exchange would conclude with a request for the interviewee's response to a question regarding the viability of employability skills instruction within the community college setting. Just before terminating the interview, I asked each participant to articulate the one thing they hoped I would take away after hearing about their experiences with employability skills curricula.

Six broad themes emerged through data explication:

1. Instructors appeared to be emotionally and personally invested in ES curricular instruction.

2. There was an urgency conveyed in prioritizing ES curricular instruction.

3. Strategic use of prior experiences enhanced ES curricular instruction.

4. Interpersonal connections with colleagues and students were considered crucial elements of ES curricular instruction.

5. There was an expressed need for greater support and resources in ES curricular instruction.

6. Instructors enjoyed creatively designing lessons and assignments for use with ES curricular instruction.

*Theme 1: An Emotional and Personal Investment in Employability Skills Curricular Instruction*

Words with emotive connotations such as "love," "care," and "fun" were used by participants and made evident the commitment that these instructors had to the subject matter. Empathetic connections with students guided lesson-planning and curricular instruction and were apparent in the exchanges they reported having with their students. Passionate feelings about a curriculum were also obvious in my conversations with participants who explained their enthusiasm about ES curricula in no uncertain terms.

For each participant, instructional use of employability skills curricula was portrayed as a highly personal experience, in which they were emotionally invested. These were educators who wanted their students to benefit from hearing about their life experiences. Interviewees recounted how they peppered their lessons with personal stories and shared anecdotes that underscored the fact that they cared deeply about their students' success.

**Emotive Language**. All participants in the study were transparent about their emotional involvement with use of the curricula, and their word choice reflected the feelings they experienced. Deacon was especially emotive in his word choice throughout our conversation. For example, he expressed his feelings about ES instruction saying, "it's something that's very, very important and close to my heart." While Deacon had enjoyed a robust career in management prior to his employment at the community college, he spoke emphatically of his current work: "I love it. Of all the things I've done this is the most fun and rewarding." Deacon said he and his colleagues "were excited" about the NCCCS ESAP initiative. In describing ongoing ES-related

work at his campus he explained "that's probably the magic. I know that's a corny term, but the reason … SkillsUSA works is because we have really good advisors, and they care. They're not just going through the motions."

Deacon used the word "fun" nine times throughout the interview in explaining his view of the ES instruction currently taking place at his college. Some examples include: "It's a fun way to learn," "a fun way to get students doing it … students don't even realize what they're learning," and "we'll start adding some more fun, creative things to do." Clearly, he saw value in making ES instruction as enjoyable for students as he and his teaching colleagues found their work.

Like Deacon, Whit left no question as to her feelings about teaching students ES, saying she "loved it." "The satisfaction I get is seeing that person say, 'I did it' … makes you feel good." When asked about teaching using the Working Smart curriculum, she was similarly effusive saying "I love it," "I love helping people," and that the teaching "makes you feel good. It boosts you up." Despite her affection for ES instruction, she was honest about the challenges her enthusiasm presented for work-life balance saying, "you can get burned out" and that at least one job-related experience "broke [her] heart."

Tyson believed that with ES instruction "there are ways that we can make it fun" and was responsible for the creation of an event that recognized the efforts of students who had availed themselves of his college's employability lab in studying the WorkKeys Curriculum. To recognize these students' achievements, in preparing for and taking the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate exam, Tyson and his co-workers decided that they would provide a lunch celebration. He acknowledged the fact he and his colleagues were emotionally invested in their students' success. Tyson summed it up, saying "we cared for them."

Charlotte and Shirley each used a sense of humor to both counter and recount the frustration they experienced in their ES instruction. Charlotte sardonically recalled scenarios she had faced on multiple occasions where student advisees fought having to take the college-mandated employability skills course. Shirley told a story of explaining the need for appropriate workplace attire to a student which ended with her explaining that "I don't need to see that much of anybody except my husband." Despite these emotionally charged and challenging exchanges they detailed having with students, both instructors underscored a personal investment in student success throughout our conversations. Shirley described witnessing student growth through use of the Working Smart curriculum by explaining "I mean it was just overwhelming to see and I consider them my babies."

Ardor for the SkillsUSA curriculum was evident in my exchanges with both Lawson and Jesse. Lawson had, in her words "true love for SkillsUSA" while Jesse told me "I love SkillsUSA. It is the most engaging thing." Jesse's colleagues saw her wholehearted embrace of the curriculum as well, and she acknowledged this in our exchange: "I'm more enthusiastic than anybody [her community college's president] knows. Maybe not anybody, but my enthusiasm is high."

While upbeat about teaching the SkillsUSA framework, Jesse expressed a darker emotion when describing the future work outlook for some of her students. Jesse was fearful for her students saying that:

> for some reason they're enjoying not working. I'm scared that COVID has created a
>
> different scenario. And I'm scared of what we're going to be faced with when
>
> this does go away, because a lot of people right now don't want to work.

Charlotte used similarly emotional terms to explain what it would take to make the teaching of

employability skills a priority for community colleges:

> I would have administrators–I would implore them–to talk to the industries first, because
>
> what that does for a president is it helps to create that sense of urgency.

Katie was equally impassioned when expressing concern for her students and their need for

employability skills. "You know, just for the good of society, if not for getting you a job or

keeping your job, you know, down the road. There's bigger reasons, to be kind."

In summary, while participants were generally apt to express positive emotions and

enthusiasm for ES curricula, there were also times when more difficult feelings such as worry for

students became evident in descriptions of the instructional experience. Overall, the experiences

conveyed by interviewees made it clear that study participants were glad for the opportunity to

make personal connections with students that allowed them to express a strong personal belief in

the importance of employability skills to success in life.

**Empathetic Connections with Students.** In the words of Lawson, "students inspire us to

do better and be better." Along these lines Deacon recounted a story he'd recently heard that

resonated with him and underscored his empathy for students' need to feel engaged with the

college. This anecdote that his colleague had relayed made Deacon want "to make sure we do

Skills because a lot of our students hear their friends talk about football or basketball and [these

students] said SkillsUSA can be our extracurricular." Deacon saw this as evidence that the

SkillsUSA Framework helped foster students' sense of belonging.

This kind of sensitivity to students' needs had likewise informed Whit's interactions. She

said that instructors can "create that trust" by ensuring an ability "to have that listening ear." It

was important to Whit that she "be on the same page" as her students. Having grown up in the

same neighborhood as many of her students she indicated a personal understanding of how complicated life may be for these individuals. Whit said empathetically of her students, "they have responsibilities at home, maybe children are not in school, so it's a lot they are enduring."

Whit summarized her attitude towards teaching by explaining that she felt a need to "get that connection going [so] that they'd say - I really like you. I like what you're saying. You know–again–it's about being able to listen effectively and communicate effectively." Whit recognized that in teaching ES-focused HRD classes, "you're dealing with different populations and you have to be able to design a curriculum that will fit everybody." For her, HRD course use of the Working Smart curriculum was invaluable, since it emphasized interactive learning which allowed her to better connect with students.

Like Whit, Tyson's life experiences in his words, "have given [him] empathy with folks that are out of work." Tyson recalled the time just before starting his position at the community college, "when I got laid off and didn't know what was going to happen." He empathized with the students he had worked with in the employability lab, saying "You know, I knew exactly how it felt."

For some study participants, an empathic connection with students took the form of gestures intended to make students' lives easier. Shirley spoke of bringing food to her classes because she recognized that students "always like snacks." Charlotte, like other interviewees, recognized the hectic lives of her students and decided that offering a required class online would make their lives easier. She had also chosen to forego use of a course textbook in order to make the class more financially feasible for students.

To summarize this subtheme, the instructors that I spoke with expressed an appreciation for the complex nature of student lives. Their understanding was often described as informed by

having faced similar life challenges. The personal insights and experiences instructors shared with me had translated into empathetic classroom connections with students. As a result of this intuition, ES instruction was delivered in what was depicted as a sensitive and caring manner.

**Passion for the Curriculum.** For participants, an emotional investment in teaching combined with empathetic concern for students to undergird an expressed strong belief in the power of an employability skills curriculum to change student lives for the better. This certainty was manifest in use of the word "passion" which appeared in numerous transcripts as a personal endorsement of the value of teaching an ES curriculum.

Deacon said, for example, that the college must "have the right people doing [the ES instruction], that care, that are passionate about it." Shirley, like Deacon, evoked the word passion when talking about ES instructors:

> I believe that if you get people that are passionate about the students and them succeeding-you get instructors that are believing in the material that they're teaching and the importance of it and they put those dynamics together—and they do their very best as an instructor to reach each and every student and try to get them to aspire to do better and to be their best and find their passion-I think we could really have a winning combination. I really do.

Charlotte, spoke about her work at the community college in similar terms explaining "It's just really become a passion of mine." Whit channeled her passion for teaching employability skills and student success into doing voluntary recruiting for her classes at the community college: "I used to get in my car and I would go all up and down the street passing out flyers. All up and down the street, but that was my confidence [in the importance of the classes she taught]." Regarding her instruction, she admitted that she "thrives off it, I really do."

For Lawson, a conviction about the significance of employability skills instruction meant ensuring that for students "the classroom remains stimulating and exciting and that's what really makes it great." Undeterred by the difficult logistics that the pandemic had presented, she underscored that for her community college, "we want to continue doing SkillsUSA because it's who we are." Jesse was also undaunted by the difficulties that COVID-19 had presented saying that "My college is all on board with it [ES instruction] so we don't have an issue." Later in the interview, after I thanked her for being involved in this research study, Jesse explained the incentive for her participation. Despite a heavy teaching load, Jesse had over the years developed an almost evangelical attitude and belief in the ability of SkillsUSA to change student lives and hoped to convey this through her involvement in this research effort:

> I wanted to participate because I do want to share my experience with SkillsUSA, but also—I make the time to do that because I want you to know what we're doing, and I want you to know how it works—and it does work.

Katie explained her creation and use of an employability skills curriculum saying "you need that cheerleader. And that encourager to do it." In a slightly more subdued tone than some of the other instructor endorsements, Norman appeared equally resolute in his appreciation for the Working Smart curriculum explaining "the classroom is the perfect environment because [students] can make mistakes. They're not going to get fired."

While these educators may use different curricula to teach ES, all participants conveyed a similarly strong belief in the importance of educating students about these skills. Instructors often expressed their enthusiasm as a "passion." For some, their exuberance had led to a leadership role in driving an ES curricular agenda for their college. This subtheme underscores a

perceived dedication to ES curricular instruction, a common denominator in participant descriptions of their teaching experiences.

### *Theme 2: A Sense of Urgency in Employability Skills Curricular Instruction*

For all study participants there was an undercurrent of urgency as they spoke about the experience of teaching employability skills. Evidence of this was found on several fronts. Very often, the interviewee would describe their instructional experience using imperative verb tenses. "Need to" and "have to" appear throughout the transcripts as instructors stressed the importance of their ES curricular instruction. There was a similar immediacy conveyed when participants spoke about the hiring needs of regional employers and the way the community college should prepare students for work. Also, many participants expressed their vision of campus leaders, especially their community college president, as crucial allies and valuable champions for ES instructional efforts. Ultimately, the unasked questions about the teaching of employability skills for many study participants seemed to be: if not here, where, and if not now, when?

**Use of the Imperative**. The instructors in this study described trying to convey to students the importance that employability skills would play in their lives. In recounting the lessons that they taught students, all were apt to frame ES as a necessity, not a nicety. As a result, here are some of the phrases I heard from participants who recalled explaining to students the pressing need for these skills:

- "you need [ES] for your life, not just a career,"
- "look, I need you to take this class,"
- "you have to listen to me,"
- "we've got to get you into a GED program and help you so that you can move forward,"
- "you're going to have to do it my way so that you will get what you need,"

- "this is what you do, this is what you don't do,"

- "listen to what I say,"

- "we can't give up on it. I just think it's too important,"

- "we have to have respect,"

- "we have a responsibility,"

- "I was very insistent. I said you need to go. You need to go, and I kept telling him. You need to go, you need to go, you need to go," and

- "I do have a big focus on what you need to learn now to help you in your professional career."

Participants in the study were also apt to recount requests for help from fellow instructors using similarly forceful language. For example, Jesse explained her perception of employability skills instruction, and said of her colleagues that "we're going to have to face the challenges and we're going to have to get through those challenges." Later in the interview she gave an especially impassioned plea for fellow instructors to assist with the teaching of employability skills:

What does success mean, right? What does that mean? It means something different to everybody. But if you want your students to be successful, then you're doing them a disservice if you don't train them for the very thing that's going to get them fired. So that's the way I feel about it–and I think [resistant instructors] need to throw the skepticism out. I think they need to get rid of the excuses. And that's what they are. At this point, they're excuses. I am as overworked and as tired as anybody else, but that's not why I chose to be an instructor. So, if that's your choice−if you just want it to be a paycheck−then you are not serving the student and you need to serve the whole student.

Like Jesse, Charlotte underscored the imperative nature of teaching employability skills: "I hear faculty say 'If I have to add one more thing.' But yes, this is the one more thing in your course that you have to add, [and] that you have to teach."

Instructors who participated in this study had strong feelings about the need for students, colleagues, and their institution to prioritize ES curricular instruction. In discussing their experiences, word choice effectively communicated these instructors' perceptions of an urgent need for more employability skills education, so that students would be better prepared for the workplace. Several participants issued an impassioned call to action intended to motivate their teaching colleagues to increase ES instructional efforts.

**An Expressed Desire to Communicate the Immediacy of Employer Needs for Workforce Readiness.** An awareness of advisory board conversations was explained as informing both instructor and administrator thinking about the needs of area employers and their inability to hire work-ready employees. Ron heard about employer needs on a regular basis via his program's advisory board meetings:

> You know, they're pulling their hair out. They're the ones spending their money, their
>
> time, their training and then they've got to hire somebody else. They don't want to do
>
> that, so I think getting them as involved as possible would just benefit everybody.

As a result of these type of experiential insights, Ron was succinct in speaking about the role he and his teaching colleagues should play in meeting employer needs and helping students find work: "Ultimately, that's the goal, right? To get students either knowledge of a job or experience or maybe turn it into a full-time job. It's the only goal of all this."

In his current administrative role Tyson saw employers on a monthly or bi-monthly basis and was glad to have the chance to speak with area businesses about the things his college was

"doing to prove to employers how we're handling [their employment needs]." Tyson believed in the importance of having instructors hear directly from employers: "I think once they hear that from the employers, I think maybe there may be some things that we can incorporate and get some of those other faculty members to start doing more with it."

Lawson also thought the college would benefit from scheduling more conversations with employers:

> We meet with advisory members twice a year, but it should probably be more. Maybe they come to us a few times a year, [or] maybe we go to them a few times a year. Because I think it's about faculty leaving the classroom and really understanding what it's going to be like when the student leaves our college.

Jesse had heard about the disconnect between employers' needs and her community college's students' skills directly from employers who said, "we hire your students for their technical skills, and we … fire students for their soft skills." Jesse wanted her teaching colleagues to heed this message that employers were sending, and explained that students "get hired for technical, but they're going to get fired for the soft. So we're doing a disservice if we are [not] training them to succeed."

Jesse continued making her point, relaying a story about an employer who told her "do you have any students … do you have any that want to work?" As a result of such exchanges Jesse had deep concerns about her students and the college's ability to meet employer needs. "They're begging for students. It's like, do they [students] really want to work anymore?"

Based on her work as both an administrator and instructor, Charlotte had urgent advice for community colleges, in regard to what should transpire so that the institution was meeting industry needs for skilled employers. In her words,

Bring [college representatives and employers] together, bring them together at the table. … Hear it from the employers. They've already completed the surveys, but hear it from the employers. Because what that's going to do is, when a president hears an ABC company, a huge company say "We will hire your students. We want them to have communication skills, we want them to have technical skills, [in addition to] all the human, employability and soft skills, whatever we want to call them. We'll hire 30 of your students," that administrator, that president, will make the investment needed to have this [ES instruction] embedded into the courses, now. So it starts with the administration. It starts with the president. Presidents working with our chief academic officers at the institutional level. How can we then in turn have this in the hands of the deans and into the directors' and the instructors' … how can we embed this into the curriculum?

In summary, this subtheme is intended to illustrate the immediate hiring needs that study participants were aware of in their communities. Employers, interfacing with community college staff such as the participants in this study, spoke of a dearth of work-ready candidates, and those who had recently been hired were often said to not be skilled enough to meet job demands. Instructors told of struggling to impress upon their institutional colleagues how desperate local businesses were to hire individuals with requisite employability skills.

**Vision of Institutional Leaders as ES Curricular Champions.** In order to heed the advice of local employers, many interviewees saw a vital need for college leadership to ally with instructors and become visible champions of the employability skills curricula in use at their colleges. This support was in place for some study participants like Lawson and Jesse whose institutional leaders advocated for the use and teaching of the SkillsUSA Framework. "We're

very lucky in our school because it starts at the very top. Our president truly believes in SkillsUSA" said Lawson of the dynamic at her community college. Katie had likewise seen firsthand the effect of an institutional ES champion: "Our president is 100% behind [SkillsUSA] too, and encourages it as well, you know … participation in it."

For Jesse, the way her institution's leaders had supported SkillsUSA was essential to her and her colleagues' adoption of the SkillsUSA Framework:

> My college is all on board with it. So we don't have an issue. Some colleges are struggling with trying to get the buy in. If you don't have buy in, it doesn't help you as an instructor. I know faculty that want to be part of these things but unless you get the support that you need from the administration, then their [faculty] hands are tied.

Jesse underscored the importance of having visible ES curriculum endorsement explaining "if you're not getting the support from the top, then as a faculty member, it is hard. If you're going on your own to try to be a part of this, it's absolutely hard to do."

Charlotte also saw the way college administrators could increase instructor use of an ES curriculum:

> So, I think the more that this is being talked about–the more that it starts at the top, the more the administration again puts emphasis on the importance−the more interest is starting to peak.

For some participants, college leaders had encouraged them to become an employability skills curriculum champion. This was the case for Ron who "was asked to do a pilot" of ESAP for his community college: "this request was a part of a push to incorporate soft skills throughout the college." According to Ron this was a result of an "employability skills portion of the

strategic plan." Ron understood the reasoning for his college leadership's targeted ES curricular rollout and request for instructor use, and explained:

> You're trying to make a change … If you have management on board and they're really promoting it and making it a big deal and talking about the merits of it, then people will be like, "oh that sounds pretty good. I might do that." But, if it's kind of "here's ESAP and take a look at it when you get a chance and do whatever you want," people aren't going to.

Some institutions had taken the next step and made employability skills an instructional requirement across various schools or divisions. Deacon explained how this had transpired at his community college:

> I, along with the president—we've decided to make it a requirement for every student to graduate from my school. I think we should do that for every student goes through my [community] college. I think everybody needs employability skills because they're not just employability skills, they're life skills.

This subtheme highlights the experiences of study participants and the consequent importance placed on college leadership encouraging teaching staff to use an ES curriculum in their instruction. If institutional enthusiasm for ES was visible and leaders were vocal about the need for ES curricular reform, participants indicated their colleagues would be more apt to work employability skills into their lessons and assignments. Several interviewees said that their college presidents and other institutional leaders were helping mandate instructional adoption of an ES curriculum.

*Theme 3: The Value of Prior Experience to Employability Skills Curricular Instruction*

Participants wove stories of their life and work experiences into their interviews. By drawing upon personal anecdotes these instructors used classroom retelling of actual instances that highlighted the role that employability skills had played in their careers. In this same way, participants spoke about being able to infuse their teaching with a large degree of authenticity that helped convey the importance of employability skills to employers.

**Instructional Storytelling about the Value of ES**. Deacon termed his anecdotes of work experiences "war stories." In his words, use of these tales was essential to his teaching. He drove home the point saying:

> I think that's critical. And I think students respond to that. They don't just want to read out of a textbook or watch a video. They'd like to hear somebody... I mean I've got lots of war stories. Most of them are the real good ones, and there's always a funny part of it. Or a not so funny part that they learn from. Keeps it interesting. I think that's critical. Of course, if you can bring in real life experiences the students are going to react to that.

Like other study participants, Shirley and Whit were engaging raconteurs during their interviews and vividly detailed how they had used the strength of story in their employability skills instruction. Each had deployed numerous and highly personal anecdotes in teaching classes, in order to illustrate life experiences and the role that ES had played in their employment histories. For Whit, ES instruction was enlivened by her use of the narrative. "I had to give them an example," she said. At her institution, Whit and her teaching colleagues "put real life stuff to" their teaching, in order to drive home the message for students about the importance of ES.

Tyson also used storytelling strategically in his instruction. For example, in teaching about interviewing techniques he made sure that students knew that his advice was based on the

personal life lessons he had experienced in the job search process, telling students "I've had it happen to me in my career." For instructors in this study such as Tyson, there was a recognition that students would stand to benefit from understanding the many ways, both small and large, in which a career trajectory benefits from employability skills.

By teaching classes using storytelling, instructors described experiencing the way ES lessons could be brought to life. These were educators who explained wanting to be sure students could relate to and engage with their personal experiences. Holding students' attention this way, instructors indicated believing that they could more effectively present the message of the lesson, than if merely presenting facts and figures. The subtheme of storytelling refers to this pedagogical device used by study participants, and who in this manner gave students the benefit of a new perspective on the crucial role of employability skills.

**Use of Firsthand Knowledge of Employer Expectations and the Job Market**. All study participants spoke at length about their experiences with employability skills curricula by first giving a clear sense of how their prior employment prepared them for their current work teaching ES at the community college. These instructors' descriptions of their career paths emphasized the ways they believed their background helped them impress upon students the importance of employability skills to successful employment. Use of anecdotes about work appeared intended to lend credibility and authenticity to ES lessons.

Katie for example, drew upon her career prior to becoming a community college instructor. She said her previous work experience was helpful in driving home the points she made in class about the value of employability skills. "I've got some really good, real life examples." In speaking about his career before being hired by the community college, Deacon indicated that through this prior work he had accumulated "a lot of good experience" that

allowed him to speak with authority about the role that ES had played for him in employment and life.

A firsthand understanding of the workplace and of employers' need for work-ready employees was also perceived by Deacon to be a necessary asset for instructors in his division at the college. This kind of "business knowledge" and "business experience" was in his words "very important … because we're preparing these guys for the business world, for the most part, so we want [instructors] to have a varied experience." He saw it as problematic "if [faculty were] just in the community college system and had not had other experiences–business experiences, or not-for-profit or whatever" and were lacking "real life experiences." Deacon added: "I think that's critical, in every class that we teach that we bring those real-life experiences, too."

Not only did Tyson use storytelling based on his own encounters with the local job market, but he drew a direct line between those work experiences and his current employment at the community college. Prior to starting his job as a workforce education instructor at his institution, Tyson had done reconnaissance by visiting and using the employability lab where he would be working, in order to ensure he'd have the authenticity that comes with firsthand knowledge of a work setting. During these pre-employment visits to the college, Tyson had used the lab to prepare for and take the National Readiness Career Certification exam. In his words "if I'm teaching this class, the first thing I felt like I should have is the certificate that the students are trying to earn."

Whit used classroom connections with students to explain the role that social capital had played in her finding work, especially prior to her role at the community college. For her, a willingness to share life experiences, both good and bad, appeared a potent element in effective ES instruction: "If I have an experience that I can share with them, I will." Whit summed up her

students' appreciation of her interpersonal skills and the role they played in Whit's career, explaining that students believed she must "know everybody" in the community: "People laugh because they said '[Whit] knows everybody'."

Ron, like other study participants, leaned into his past work experience, and thought it helped him authentically ground his employability skills teaching. For example, he gauged his ES instruction saying he was "comfortable with it, a lot from just my experience." Ron went on, saying that his previous work as "a manager, hiring people to work in a factory, or letting some people go too" informed his community college ES instruction and allowed him to explain hiring and firing decision-making to students using firsthand knowledge. Based on his prior work, he was able to convey to his classes the employer mindset "and what [employers are] looking for."

Shirley made classroom lessons about job searching authentic for her students by drawing upon her own encounters with the world of work. "I share real work experiences with them, of my own, in addition to what's in the material, because that makes it real." Jesse also identified this kind of authenticity in her work, given the fact she'd started her career as a non-traditional student at the community college. "I think maybe my age might have helped me a lot, too, because I have a lot of experience." Jesse continued by explaining her empathetic approach to teaching and the way it allowed her to connect authentically with her students. "I guess me being an older student really made me understand."

For these 10 instructors being genuine and self-reflective in their instruction allowed them to speak from the heart about the importance of strong employability skills. By employing candor in the classroom in discussing personal insights into employer expectations and the hiring process, these instructors introduced an element of authenticity, as conveyed by this subtheme, to

their work with students. By drawing upon life experiences, instructors shared their views of the many ways in which employability skills inform employer decisions to hire and fire employees.

*Theme 4: The Importance of Interpersonal Connections for Employability Skills Curricular Instruction*

Study participants placed a premium on social components of employability skills instruction. For example, face-to-face teaching (as opposed to online learning) was for most instructors deemed a superior way to teach students about employability skills. These educators were also enthused about ES instructional opportunities that socialized students and took place outside the classroom via competitions and work-based learning. Ceremonies that celebrated student employability skills learning and accomplishments were a third aspect of socialization that instructors were apt to use to engage students. Unfortunately, many of these social facets of ES curricular instruction had been curtailed by pandemic safety restrictions.

**Premium Placed On Face-To-Face Instruction**. It was difficult to count the number of times and ways that Deacon indicated that he believed face-to-face instruction was the best modality for ES instruction. His words best summarized his thinking about the importance of teaching employability skills in-person:

> I think you can't learn soft skills [online]. You can get an awareness, but you need face-to-face to teach soft skills. You can get a lot out of an online class, but you really need to be face-to-face. If you're talking about conflict resolution or different things like that, you can get examples, but you really need to walk through it. You really need to have a face-to-face if you're talking about the soft skills. So I'd say [an online or hybrid class] is good for giving you an awareness, but I would say it [ES] needs to be [taught] face-to-face.

He again underscored his commitment to seeing ES taught in person saying:

You know, computer-aided lectures and examples. I think that's good. But I think you

need to have some face-to-face if you're going to be strong in the soft skills area.

As Deacon stated, he was "very proud to say that my school, at our college 75% of my school is

seated." In summary, Deacon indicated that he was not in favor of web-based ES instruction,

telling me, "I don't think 100% online works."

Like Deacon, Whit had a belief in the importance of in-person work with her students: "I

see what that student's needs are," saying her preference was to "be right there to talk with

them." Lawson was also strongly in favor of in-person instruction, explaining "I don't think you

can teach soft skills online, as well as you can teach them face-to-face."

While Shirley accepted that online instruction was necessary during the pandemic, she

expressed struggling with the fact that:

students have the option to shut off their video feed so I can't see them. I don't like that

because as I said, "I don't really have a chance to get to know you as well." But for those

that have their video feed up, it's so much more. They're so much more involved.

She had found that even with in-person instruction, teaching an ES curriculum and "trying to

keep [students] engaged was very, very hard." As a result, Shirley would have to "take them by

the hand" through the lesson. With online instruction she observed that "one of the things that

we're missing is a lot of the group interactions" where her students typically honed their ability

to develop a rapport and teamwork skills with others.

Given the difficulties that online instruction had presented for her ES curricular

instruction, Katie had created and communicated through her syllabus a clear set of discussion

board expectations for her students that included strict communication protocols and mirrored

her face-to-face classroom social behavior expectations. Not only did she expect students to use

APA style citations for any information that was cited in discussion board posts, but she also expected her students to adhere to basic netiquette, which was codified by her institution.

Katie explained to her students that their online behavior would be held to the same standards as classroom-based exchanges. In her words, much of the online communication she saw taking place via social media was "nasty" due to the largely anonymous nature of web-based discussions and posting. Given the current absence of in-person connections with her students, she felt that part of her responsibility as an instructor was to teach students the way employability skills should guide their online presence. Katie's expectations were in line with those communicated by her institution which had established a netiquette overview as a part of new student orientation.

In summarizing this subtheme, most participants expressed valuing and missing in-person connections with their classes. Online teaching was seen by many to not be robust enough to support the full range of interactions necessary for ES curricular instruction. For these educators, face-to-face instruction allowed instructors to use activities that better imparted employability skills lessons such as team building and interpersonal communication.

**Involvement with Extracurricular Activities.** While for most study participants there were plentiful opportunities and ways for instructors to teach students an ES curriculum in the pre-pandemic classroom setting, some indicated that ES lessons could be taught even more effectively outside the classroom. Tyson, for example, talked about using a local park as a venue in which to run instructional activities and teach the importance of clear and effective communication in teamwork. Interviews and job fairs were mentioned by several instructors as valuable locations in which students could practice and showcase their employability skills.

Charlotte and Deacon spoke about the importance of work-based learning and the role that employers could play in helping students learn about ES in an authentic environment.

For study participants whose community college and teaching used the SkillsUSA Framework, regional and national competitions had, in their experience, presented students with an ideal extracurricular location in which to develop and demonstrate employability skills. For Deacon and his college, "The hook for us was getting into SkillsUSA and the competitions." Deacon indicated that, "a big part of Skills is being part of a team" which dovetailed nicely with his goal of helping students become accustomed to team-based work.

Lawson also saw SkillsUSA extracurricular competitions as a fertile teaching venue for ES lessons. Lawson elaborated on the importance of student learning taking place external to the institution, saying:

> It's truly about the opportunity that our college offers our students outside the classroom. Because we know great things go on in the classroom, but sometimes amazing things go on outside the classroom … every student should have some type of job shadowing, internship or work-based learning opportunity.

Jesse framed her students' participation in SkillsUSA extracurricular competitions, saying "these are life changing experiences." Later in the interview, Jesse elaborated upon the importance of regional competitions: "These are things they can take with them. You can't put that in a book. The confidence that they learn, and that kind of stuff."

In summary, the instructional opportunities and connections study participants developed with students in the classroom were described by many as being significantly enhanced by student experiences outside the classroom. Extracurricular activities built upon and brought to life in-class learning and discussions. Work-based learning and SkillsUSA competitions and

events were touted as invaluable settings in which students could practice and sharpen the aptitudes learned via the ES curriculum.

**Ceremonies and Celebrations**. In addition to in-person and extracurricular ES learning opportunities, many instructors saw celebrating student ES accomplishments as an important component to the skill development process that took place for students at the community college. Events that heralded learning achievements and milestones were cited by most participants as valuable student success supports, and ways in which an institution could emphasize the importance of student employability skills.

In his work with the employability lab at his college, Tyson and his colleagues held an event to recognize the students who had studied the ACT WorkKeys Curriculum and taken the NCRC exam. According to Tyson, the gathering "would make a celebration of just earning this credential because it is a national credential, something helping you get back to work." Shirley also spoke about her involvement with an institutional ceremony for HRD students who completed the WorkKeys Curriculum and had taken the NCRC exam, explaining "it's like a big celebration and it really makes the students feel like a million bucks." According to Shirley, the community college president would be there at the event, along with the dean responsible for the program.

Deacon's community college found opportunities to highlight students' SkillsUSA accomplishments. "We kind of celebrate those things" he said of student's achievements. Students who won awards at competitions had their photograph taken, and the photos and list of accolades would appear in the newspaper. As Deacon indicated, "you know, everybody likes their picture in the paper."

Jesse spoke in enthusiastic terms about how her college recognizes students' participation in SkillsUSA activities. She said that in addition to receiving an award indicating their SkillsUSA achievement, those students who had advanced to participate in state or regional competitions often gained life-changing confidence through the experience. Some students had even left these events with job offers in hand. As Jesse explained "There's nothing that can compare to that. So once you go [to a SkillsUSA event], it's like you feel it and you see it and you want to be part of that."

Curiously, for one CTE instructor participant (Ron), his community college's use of the SkillsUSA Framework was not something he'd actively considered incorporating into his teaching. While he was aware of SkillsUSA competitions at his college, Ron didn't think he could muster enough student participation in order to field a team. Instead, he had hopes of being able to recognize student accomplishments via ESAP, saying he "vaguely" recalled a "push or try to get a certificate or something from completing these [ESAP modules] … And if a student could add that to their resume, it would be quite nice."

In summary, this subtheme conveys for study participants the positive experience of participation in ceremonies and celebrations of student ES achievements. When institutions recognized milestones in student success, instructor efforts to teach ES curricula were perceived as validated and affirmed by their community college. By holding events that recognized ES learning and accomplishments, organizations such as SkillsUSA helped instructors impress upon students the value of ES to their lives and careers. Such support mechanisms were clearly appreciated by study participants.

*Theme 5: A Need for Support and Resources in Employability Skills Curricular Instruction*

The fifth major theme to emerge from data analysis, centered on an expressed need for additional resources in ES curricular instruction. Based on listening to instructors describe their experiences, these tools could be as simple as a consistent use of terminology across a campus or the community college system, to better enable educator discussions of employability skills curricula. Other things that were framed by participants as improving their ability to provide ES curricular instruction included access to a textbook or assessments to gauge student learning. Especially in the absence of a consistent vocabulary, and when lacking basic teaching and curricular tools, instructor-focused networks of support were also deemed valuable but found insufficient by several study participants.

**An Inconsistent ES Vocabulary.** Throughout the study's interviews, there was very little consistency in participants' use of phrases related to employability skills. Sometimes the skills associated with employability were interpreted as those directly related to the job search process (resume-writing, interviewing, etc.). For other participants, the skills in question were referred to as soft, and soft skills was then the preferred nomenclature throughout the interview. It became evident that despite the common denominator of employability skills curricular use, there would be very little consensus about the definition of these skills.

Of the eight skill areas presented on the participant screener questionnaire (Appendix C), there were only two specific employability skills that all 10 participants had checked off as having used. These were: problem solving and decision making, and reliability and dependability. Yet all 10 participants communicated to me a very similar understanding of where students fell short in terms of the skills that were highly sought after by employers.

I have excerpted passages (listed below) from interview transcripts that call attention to the need for a more consistent vocabulary across the community college system:

- People hear the term employability. They don't–you probably have to say soft skills, to put with it–as soon as you start talking. Of course, it makes sense, but employability, they say, "ok well it's just job interviewing and resume writing," which is–that's important in itself to get that job, but it's all the other skills that help you be successful.

- …which is soft skills - employability skills - I mean soft skills, probably even makes it even better. Some people think employability, "Well, I'm not going to do whatever you think that is." But soft skills, it's the same thing, just different term.

- I don't know if they [employers] would recognize some of the [employability skill] terminology, per se. When we have our advisory committee meetings it's always "soft skills." Nobody said employability skills, even though employability is probably much more accurate if you're being technical. But it's always the soft skills.

- Soft skills is such a broad concept. It changes depending on the environment. It changes day to day.

- The difficult part of it [ES]–you can't really define it, you know.

- I still call them soft. I know there's a lot of debate about that.

With so much variety in the way these instructors referred to the skills in question, it appears that all participants would appreciate and benefit from clarity on this matter. In calling attention to inconsistencies in phrasings, this subtheme highlights instructor experiences with difficulty in defining and referring to the skills that they addressed in their teaching.

**Teaching Tools and Resources Found Lacking**. Per interview protocol, each instructor was asked to name at least one teaching tool that they thought would improve their ability to provide ES curricular instruction. Participants named a wide variety of items they identified as necessary but lacking. Many hoped for supports that would help with their instruction, such as more assessment instruments, a textbook, or updates to their ES curriculum so that it would better reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) concerns.

Deacon was one of several participants who had been involved in statewide efforts to create the ESAP curriculum and who expressed disappointment that ESAP had not become more accessible. "I would like to be using it. We would like to be using it. Because I saw a lot of value to it." According to Deacon, ESAP held much promise for the community college system. "A lot of effort went in there … it would have been good for us," he explained. Also speaking about ESAP, Ron understood that it was "supposed to have state-supplied assessments" but he "never saw those."

In the absence of a textbook, Whit augmented her Working Smart and ACT WorkKeys curricular instruction by compiling a "resource book of everything that is available" in terms of student academic supports. For one participant (Tyson), deficiencies in vendor-supplied recordkeeping made use of the ACT WorkKeys Curriculum in the lab setting a source of frustration that had resulted in his college considering use of another ES curriculum. Shirley hoped to someday have access to diagnostic instruments and tests that help would help her students determine what field of work they were best suited for.

Lawson had a hard time identifying tools or resources that were missing for ES instruction at her campus since in her estimation, SkillsUSA supplied all requisite elements such as a curriculum, assessments, rubrics, and videos. Jesse also counted herself lucky for having

access to the SkillsUSA suite of tools, and recognized that for some community colleges, money

to pay for SkillsUSA was a problem. "It's kind of hard when you're up against those obstacles"

she said of colleagues teaching at campuses that lacked financial resources. In speaking about

SkillsUSA resources for instructors, Jesse admitted that "It's very, very helpful as far as teaching

that framework."

In his off-campus instructional setting Norman had run into multiple issues with teaching

the HRD curriculum and the Working Smart lessons, including a lack of internet access. At one

point he had tried to use the WorkKeys Curriculum and the NCRC exam in his classes but since

the college "had to pay for the paper test and it came down to money," he had "transitioned away

from that." Norman's pronouncement on the lack of support for ES instruction he experienced

over the years: "I think the bottom line was money."

Katie's efforts to teach her own ES curriculum were sometimes cut short by a lack of

resources. When asked about the changes she might like to see in the way she provides ES

instruction, she admitted she "never really thought about it because money's so tight at a

community college. It's hard to dream sometimes." Not only were finances a challenge in her

estimation, she also had to contend with the fact that as an instructor, "you don't have much

time. You have the urge to get busy with the content." Despite her heavy teaching load, she was

taking online professional development classes and as a result, designing formative ES

assessments that she hoped to use in her classes the following semester.

When asked what resources would help improve the experience of community college

instructors who were teaching employability skills, Charlotte had this advice for administrators:

> Give faculty what they need in order to create curriculum or design their curriculum in a
>
> way that they can embed this into their courses. Do they need release time? Do they need

stipends to design an innovative project or innovative course in order to be able to share with others?

While sometimes lacking the resources identified by this subtheme, participant instructors had found many ways in which to improvise and work around missing elements. These study participants recognized that additional tools would help to professionalize and enhance the ES curricular instruction they provided students, but generally indicated accepting that this was not a top priority for their institutions. The experiences described by instructors whose campuses had purchased and encouraged broad use of the SkillsUSA's Framework offered a sharp contrast with other educator experiences and suggested how a full-featured and teacher-supportive ES curriculum could help amplify instructional ES efforts.

**Receptiveness to Professional Development**. When asked about their experience with professional development, and what had assisted their ES lesson development and teaching, a number of study participants had difficulty identifying specific resources. Several mentioned appreciating the certification that was required of educators who use the Working Smart curriculum. Ron's involvement with implementing ESAP at his campus was cited as helpful to his knowledge of employability skills. "I don't think I've gone to anything [ES professional development-related] at the college" said Ron, "but I think part of the purpose of making that instructor-based resource course was so that [this repository] could then provide professional development to others."

Those using the SkillsUSA Framework at their colleges mentioned the opportunities that were afforded to instructors per institutional membership. Lawson praised the wide range of ways instructors could learn about the SkillsUSA Framework and thought "it would be great to have a SkillsUSA representative come to our college and train every new instructor that is hired

as a part of our onboarding." While she acknowledged adjunct instructors may not be able to partake in this kind of preparation, she mentioned contingent faculty could avail themselves of various online professional development content within SkillsUSA's website.

In addition to the educator resources made accessible via SkillsUSA, Lawson also believed that instructors should keep current with the employability skills expectations of employers, possibly via a sabbatical-like experience that would help instructors "learn what industries require." Lawson held that instructors "have a responsibility to know what has changed so that we offer that to the students in the classroom and [this is possible] if we talk to employers." According to Lawson, instructors "can't keep doing things the way [they're] always done."

When Jesse initially became aware of SkillsUSA at her college, some years ago, she recognized it as a resource that could help her learn more about teaching students employability skills:

> I knew how to teach my students the technical skills they needed. But, like you're saying, the soft skills. So that was what I needed to learn. How to teach them because I knew how important that was.

Jesse credited the *Ignite* book (2015) published by SkillsUSA as her "favorite tool" and an important resource when she considered how to infuse her classroom instruction with opportunities for her students to learn about employability skills:

> If you don't know what questions to ask, it has them. So, I don't have to be a professional at teaching soft skills. I'm a professional at my other things, but these soft skills and employability skills–it helps me. It gives me the prompts. So, I just follow along,

literally, and it's going to give me the prompts. It helps me to understand how these

relate, so it makes it meaningful.

Like Jesse, Norman found a series of books published by Pace Learning Systems helped

him think about employability skills pedagogy. "It [ES] was a new concept to me and so I have

done a little bit of homework on it." Other than the Pace books he discovered and used for

personal professional development and for learning more about employability skills instruction,

he said "I don't know of any specific source."

When asked about professional development opportunities available to instructors at her

community college, Charlotte acknowledged the challenges inherent in ES instruction, and

reflected back to me the questions that my inquiry raised in her mind:

> How do we get the curriculum, the idea, the thought of adding employability skills into
>
> the hands, the thoughts of, most faculty–all faculty–across the community college
>
> system? How do we make it a priority? How can–how can we make it a priority, as such
>
> that–all of our students are leaving the institution, whether they're continuing education,
>
> or they're in a credit program or non-credit, whether they are university transfer, in a
>
> health tech program or career tech program. How can we make sure that everybody
>
> knows that this needs to be spread all throughout the institutions?

Most participants were interested in professional development opportunities that could

help them learn more about best practices with ES instruction. In describing their teaching, many

had over the years discovered supports on their own, but welcomed the idea of connecting with

colleagues through formal professional development opportunities. This subtheme captures

instructor interest in learning more about ways to impart ES lessons through coursework.

**Networks of Support Were Helpful**. While adequate resources and tools were not always available to ES educators, and professional development sometimes lacking, communication with colleagues who were also involved with employability skills curricular instruction was perceived as a lifeline for many participants.

Whit, for example, mentioned the importance of being able to count on help from colleagues when she ran into difficulty with use of an ES curriculum, especially if the problem was computer related. Tyson had developed a network of support through his use of the WorkKeys Curriculum. He had attended national conferences in the past and indicated their usefulness in making personal connections with other educators. He had also attended state-sponsored WorkKeys events but pronounced those gatherings as more geared to K-12 educators.

Ron implemented local hosting of ESAP at his community college and served as a resource, helping others use the curriculum's online resources. Like Ron, Jesse was an ES pacesetter and served as a point of contact for her campus, teaching fellow instructors how to deploy SkillsUSA tools in their classes. According to Jesse, in demonstrating how other instructors could use the SkillsUSA Framework, "I showed them, I help them, and I share with them."

While Lawson also appreciated the collegiality that her college's institutional membership with SkillsUSA encouraged, she espoused a belief that "We need to network more. We need to collaborate more" and "We need to be talking and sharing ideas." In Lawson's opinion, "I think that helps us grow in our own professional development, when we collaborate with other organizations and other community colleges." Charlotte echoed this sentiment in speaking of instructors at her campus, and explained "We're very siloed, in the way we're

structured and siloed in resources we use and a lot of times once we get something that works for us, we tend to stick with that."

Norman described feeling a need for more connection with his teaching colleagues: "There's no distinction really between a curriculum instructor and a continuing education instructor. You know we're all faculty. We don't have to separate these folks over here." In countering the isolation he had experienced teaching off campus, and with the changes introduced by the pandemic, Norman said that he "started reaching out to other HRD instructors to say 'hey, what the heck are y'all doing?'" Through his spontaneous outreach, he:

> found out the state was having [meetings] once a month where you could all get together and [say] "What are you doing? What are you doing? Here's what's working." … but it seems to have gone away and nobody ever really asked about it or said why.

Norman summarized his findings based on this experience saying, "I got some feedback from a lot of folks by reaching out and the short answer for most of them was we don't know what we're doing." Norman was blunt in his observation that instruction had suffered since the beginning of the pandemic saying "There definitely seems to be no consistency and you know I'm not arguing that there should or shouldn't be. But we definitely seem to be kind of at a loss about what to do."

While Katie felt connected with instructional colleagues in her program area and believed that they all shared a similar dedication to their teaching, she also mentioned being aware that for other departments at her college "you have some adjuncts who are just there for the money and they you know, float through it." Despite the potential for disconnect between full and part-time instructors, Katie believed that "most people are on board with just not letting people [students] slide by."

Networks of support as a subtheme expresses the value participants placed upon their connections with fellow instructors. Whether through formal or informal connections, these channels of communication were seen as conducive for discussion about best practices in ES curricular instruction. Many study participants expressed an appreciation for collegial networks which they experienced as an important resource for inspiration and ideas about ES instruction. The pandemic had regrettably reduced the viability of such forums for many, and interrupted fruitful pedagogical conversations.

### Theme 6: Enjoyment in Creatively Designing Employability Skills Curricular Instruction

For all educators interviewed, ES curricular instruction was a creative endeavor and a source of pride. Participants expressed the enjoyment they experienced in devising lessons that allowed them to share their personal experiences and firsthand knowledge of the importance of employability skills. These instructors indicated that they would welcome the opportunity to discuss their ES curricular practices and innovations with colleagues and believed that their teaching would benefit from conversations with fellow instructors. While all participants expressed a belief that student learning benefitted from their inventive use of an employability skills curriculum, several said they found their prescribed curricular instruction somewhat restrictive.

**Innovative Lessons and Assignments.** Whit, like many of the instructors interviewed, put a great deal of personal time and effort into ensuring that her teaching would help students be successful in cultivating a career. "I do a lot of research" she said of her lesson planning. "When I'm getting ready to create a class, I research. I think about things" and "everywhere I go I take my laptop, my tablet, so I can write stuff down if I see something." Given the amount of effort she invested and the number of years she had been teaching ES-related courses, Whit did not

appreciate those who questioned her teaching methods. She recounted wanting to tell her critics, "you're not out here in the classroom. You don't know what the students need and want."

After observing that students struggled to prepare for math questions using the ACT WorkKeys Curriculum, Tyson decided to create and offer his own math review for students. As a result of these type of efforts, he had been recognized on several occasions for his teaching innovations. From my conversation with him, I learned that despite his shift into an administrator role at his college, he found ways to continue to promote creative ES instruction for students taking workforce education classes.

Most instructors perceived and enjoyed a good deal of flexibility with the way they used ES curricula in their classes. Ron for example indicated that he could "choose the textbook and curriculum." While Ron had embraced the opportunity to use the ESAP curriculum with his classes, he also expressed a hope to see "some sort of proof I guess that [ESAP was] effective. Like, it's worthwhile." Deacon said he liked to afford instructors within his division at the college the option to be creative in their teaching and that he encouraged them to "bring in their own things. Again, I like that. To be able to customize it for the class."

Charlotte praised the content and structure of the NC-NET ES Toolkit curriculum which was made available online to educators by the NCCCS office at no cost. She also said that it would benefit from the inclusion of more video content. Undeterred by this, she had sourced her own supplemental materials, saying "that's when you have to be innovative."

While Shirley used the relatively scripted curriculum provided by Working Smart, she also enjoyed a good deal of latitude in her teaching and had been forced on multiple occasions to improvise and adjust her instruction with some of the younger students after behavioral issues had arisen. Shirley seemed to take these difficulties in stride though and recalled being pleased

with the results of her revised instructional methods and the way they impressed upon students the importance of employability skills.

Norman, who also used the Working Smart materials, chafed a bit at the requirements of the curriculum such as "instructor manuals, even tips on feedback" saying "it's very scripted" and "I'm too creative for all that." He admitted that he "questioned the order" of the curriculum and explained, "I do skip around but only in the lesson."

These 10 North Carolina community college educators all described making their own mark on an ES curriculum. Many had creatively infused their teaching with active learning strategies. Their experience of ES curricular instruction was enhanced by opportunities to craft lessons that allowed these educators to highlight aspects of the curriculum that they felt warranted additional class time, or student engagement. These individuals found ways to personalize use of an ES curriculum, often using innovative approaches to classroom instruction.

**Collegiality-Enhanced Instruction**. While all participating instructors spoke of enjoying the experience of embellishing their ES teaching efforts with creative touches of their own invention, most also actively looked to work with their colleagues as a source of new ideas on how to improve their curricular instruction. According to Deacon, "it's always good to collaborate. We learned a lot from the other community colleges, what they're doing."

Deacon had worked with other educators on the statewide ESAP curriculum creation. "Bringing 58 schools together, you're going to get a better product than you do, if you're doing it by yourself. We're really good, but I think we can benefit from other people." He summarized the effect of working with colleagues on this NCCCS sponsored initiative saying "Again, working with other community colleges through ESAP was very helpful to get a feel for what they do. I mean, that's a big benefit−talking to others, at the state level."

Deacon also saw how collegial conversations improved the quality of instruction at his community college, and explained that:

My colleagues feel the same way. So, we use questions or situations from each other … You know, somebody's told me [something, and] I said, "hey, that's a great thing. I need to use that in my class." And that's how you learn.

Collegiality was a key component to instructors' professional development in Deacon's estimation, who said "If they've got good relationships and your colleagues work together, your chances of success are much greater than would be otherwise."

For Whit, co-teaching the Working Smart curriculum was an ideal dynamic. "Me and my counterpart, we get along great. We know and feed off each other with Working Smart and it works." While she saw her endeavors with other instructors as benefitting her ES teaching at the community college ("when you have someone that's working with you, you can feed off of each other. It's wonderful"), she also saw the downside to some of her work relationships. Specifically, she expressed disappointment with a colleague she didn't perceive as supportive: "It can be very discouraging when you don't have that [colleague] that has your back."

In general though, Whit emphasized the ability of her teaching colleagues to improve her instructional work, saying of those relationships, "When you make good connections and you have a good reputation, the sky's the limit." She also missed a time when there were more instructors in her department to share the workload and run ideas by: "Back in the day–when we had more than just one full-time person, and there were several others–we were able to help each other, we weren't going to let this one out of the loop." The bottom line for Whit was an acknowledgement that "you have to be able to know who you can call and say, 'Hey, what can we do here?'"

Tyson was quick to credit fellow teachers with a number of the active learning lessons he used in his teaching, saying for example that he had borrowed team building exercises from another instructor. Jesse likewise credited her awareness and adoption of the SkillsUSA curriculum to her departmental colleagues:

So how I got started was, my colleagues, basically, they were participating in SkillsUSA. … I kept seeing it and seeing it. They would go to the competitions and I was very interested in that. I asked what I needed to do, to become a part of that. So that was all I needed to do. Just ask, and they made me a part.

For Charlotte, an absence of formal professional development opportunities at her campus had spurred her to want to help her colleagues: "I had not seen a whole lot of professional development, nor received a lot of professional development. A lot of it, it's just kind of been what I learned on my own." Charlotte was motivated by this deficit to help other instructors learn more about teaching employability skills: "It has forced me to want to design or want to offer professional development to colleagues … collaborating with others." In light of this revelation, here is how she envisioned helping educators at her college learn about ES:

maybe come up with a team of faculty that can have release time or the resources or the compensation in order to create a college-wide curriculum that focuses on employability skills.

One issue that was not addressed by study participants, was the best way to be sure contingent instructors had access to professional development and collegial conversations that concern the teaching of ES curricula. When asked directly about involving adjunct instructors in professional development Lawson acknowledged that her campus did not have anything in place, other than online curricular resources posted by SkillsUSA. She indicated that she would like to

see her college develop requirements so that adjunct instructors would participate in professional development and become more familiar with the SkillsUSA Framework. But Lawson also recognized that "I think it comes down to their time. A lot of them [contingent instructors] work full-time and they have other jobs and responsibilities. It would require us to pay."

Study participants all spoke highly of the collegial support they had experienced. As summarized in this subtheme, this type of collegiality enhanced instructional efforts, and was an important source of fresh ideas. These 10 instructors had not only benefitted from access to their teaching colleagues but mentioned having sought opportunities share their personal instructional ideas as well.

**A Set Curriculum was Sometimes Considered Problematic.** As previously alluded to, curricular structure and content was for some instructors a double-edged sword. In particular, the study participants using Working Smart were apt to both praise the curriculum for its interactivity and structure, and also express frustration at the order and highly scripted nature of the lessons. Consequently, instructors like Shirley who taught HRD classes using the Working Smart lessons, admitted that:

> some of the activities in there are a little bit repetitive. And so some of those I skip when we start repeating because I feel like you can lose people if you do too much of that repeating. It's like, "yeah, we already did that, we already talked about that." So, I'll hit the highlights of it the second or third time around, and I'll move on.

Generally however, Shirley said she liked and adhered to Working Smart's lesson plans and materials, recognizing that per the college's agreement with Charlotte Works, creator of the curriculum, "I have to use those materials. Have to."

Norman was apt to think creatively about his approach to teaching employability skills, and described feeling similarly restricted by Working Smart:

We had to sign an agreement to kind of follow, pretty much–letter for letter–and not do a whole lot of addition, you know, [but] I can find videos that I think are relevant to the topic, to show and little changes like that.

As a longtime HRD instructor, Norman said that when it was first introduced, merging the Working Smart curriculum into his course was "hard because I had sort of developed a system." Since then though, Norman had come to appreciate the way Working Smart improved the structure and flow of the class saying, "that helps in the sense of–it gives me a goal … yeah we can do it."

Using the NC-NET Employability Skills Resource Toolkit curriculum with her classes worked well for Charlotte who praised the topics it covered as still current despite its release in 2012. But she also found its lessons lacking in terms of DEI content and cultural sensitivity and would like to see the curriculum updated to reflect the current reality for her students.

Most participants indicated that course curricula that included employability skills were standardized at their institution, but also said individual instructors were encouraged to add their own personal experiences to their teaching, in order to bring a curriculum to life for students. In Deacon's words:

Yes, everyone's using the same curriculum. We've standardized. That doesn't

mean … [that we don't] want them to bring in their personal experiences.

This final subtheme is intended to convey that for some instructors, their experience with ES curricular instruction was perceived as restrictive. Whether due to an inflexible order of topics covered by an instructional module, a lack of supplemental video content, or a desire to

update an ES curriculum, a number of study participants detailed a variety of ways in which they had attempted to customize the curriculum they used to suit their needs and improve their ES teaching.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the findings gleaned from interviews with study participants, conducted over the course of two online meetings with each individual. These North Carolina community college instructors were asked a series of semi-structured questions through which they recalled their teaching experiences with an ES curriculum. The findings of the study revealed six major themes. Each theme expresses a facet of the instructor experience. Study participants spoke of having experienced:

- An emotional and personal investment in ES curricular instruction.

- A sense of urgency in ES curricular instruction.

- The value of prior experience to ES curricular instruction.

- The importance of interpersonal connections for ES curricular instruction.

- A need for support and resources in ES curricular instruction.

- Enjoyment in creatively designing ES curricular instruction.

There were three key findings from this study that add to the body of knowledge regarding employability skills curricular instruction taking place within community colleges:

1. Educators were personally invested in ES curricular instruction.

2. ES curricular instruction was described as a highly social endeavor.

3. A lack of access to resources and supports hindered ES curricular instruction.

For study participants, the experience of teaching community college classes using an employability skills curriculum was a highly personal and creative endeavor. Employability

skills curricular instruction benefitted from connections to other educators, via informal relationships and also through more formal networks such as those offered by statewide initiatives. Finally, many instructors believed that improved access to collegial networks of communication, as well as use of teaching resources such as textbooks and assessment tools would help professionalize ES curricular instruction and improve student learning.

**CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of North Carolina community college instructors who have taught using an employability skills curriculum. Employability skills instruction was considered from the educator's perspective, rather than from the community college student, administrator, or employer's viewpoint as has typically been the focus of previous and related studies. By analyzing study data pertaining to instructor experiences with an employability skills curriculum, six major themes emerged.

Study participants communicated having experienced:

- An emotional and personal investment in ES curricular instruction.

- A sense of urgency in ES curricular instruction.

- The value of prior experience to ES curricular instruction.

- The importance of interpersonal connections for ES curricular instruction.

- A need for support and resources in ES curricular instruction.

- Enjoyment in creatively designing ES curricular instruction.

Implications for these findings in terms of related research and theory are presented, followed by a section that details implications of findings in light of policy and practice for employability skills workforce education initiatives. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research and closing thoughts.

**Discussion of Findings**

This study utilized a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach to answer the following research question: what are the experiences of North Carolina community college

instructors who have taught using an employability skills curriculum? Accompanying research sub-questions are:

- What elements do educators describe as helping their instructional use of an employability skills curriculum?

- What elements do educators describe as hindering their instructional use of an employability skills curriculum?

There were 10 study participants employed at nine institutions across the North Carolina Community College System. These current and former instructors had used a variety of employability skills curricula in their teaching. In-depth conversations with participants about their experiences provided rich qualitative data that shed light on the study's research questions.

The literature review portion of this dissertation contained two primary areas of focus: existing academic studies that examined employability skills instruction in higher education, and scholarly researchers' use of Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory (2000) as a framework through which to review postsecondary instructor motivation. The purpose of the following section is to outline and connect this study's key findings with these two areas of research, in order to facilitate a discussion of implications for research and theory, as well as for policy and practice.

**Overview of Key Findings**

This study used a transcendental phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of 10 current and former community college instructors. Study participants had taught courses using a number of employability skills curricula. These individuals participated in both an in-depth initial interview and also a follow-up meeting that was used to review the interview

transcript. This second meeting offered an opportunity for instructors to embellish or provide additional context for statements made during the initial interview.

Three key findings surfaced through explication of the transcript data that express the essence of the experience for participants: educators were personally invested in ES curricular instruction, ES curricular instruction was a highly social endeavor, and a lack of access to resources and supports hindered ES curricular instruction.

### *Instructors were Personally Invested in the Teaching of Employability Skills Curricula*

The findings of this study indicate that participating instructors were deeply invested in the ES curricular instruction they provided. These were individuals who described their ES teaching as enhancing not only student success but also their communities. According to participant accounts, by helping students find employment and meeting local employer needs for work-ready employees, instructors were addressing their region's economic well-being. Word choices throughout the interviews were emotionally evocative and conveyed a sense of urgency in the need for improvement of student employability skills. Instructors were apt to strategically draw upon personal work and life experiences in an anecdotal manner that helped imbue their teaching with the authenticity of firsthand knowledge of the job market. In doing so, study participants enriched their teaching with storytelling intended to engage students in curricular lessons.

This first key finding resonates with Austin and Gamson's 1983 study which determined that instructor motivation was elevated by personally meaningful teaching. This finding also parallels Nghia's recognition that instructor belief in the importance of employability skills translated into effective teaching behaviors (2017). Nghia's work identified both personal

motivation and institutional leadership as highly influential in the implementation of an ES curriculum (2017).

Crafting lessons and teaching employability skills appeared to be a creative outlet and source of personal pride for participants. As a result, use of a set or prescriptive ES curriculum (such as that of Working Smart which mandates interactive learning activities) was seen as a counterweight to the enthusiasm of some of the study participants (Norman, Shirley) who indicated having enjoyed the more inventive and freeform aspects of their work with students. Previous studies of curricular reform have found that a greater margin of flexibility in lesson planning and classroom activity resulted in less instructor resistance (Butt & Townsend, 1990). Emo's 2015 study found likewise that instructor teaching satisfaction is improved by the option to implement changes to a curriculum. The positive effect of individual latitude in curriculum instruction, such as that which was described by study participants, echoes these earlier research findings.

### *Teaching Use of Employability Skills Curricula was a Highly Social Endeavor*

Despite the highly personal and individualistic nature of participants' teaching, there was also evidence of many social elements at work in ES curricular instruction. For example, a number of participants (Deacon, Lawson, Shirley, Whit) expressed a strong preference for face-to-face work with students, as opposed to online instruction. These instructors believed that the best way to teach students about employability skills was in a traditional classroom setting. Active learning and group activities that emphasize teamwork were deemed difficult or impossible to implement in an online setting and sorely missing in the web-based teaching currently made necessary by the pandemic.

Many participants verbalized their lack of enthusiasm for the online teaching environment, with one participant (Shirley) citing students' ability to shut off their video camera feed as hindering an instructor's ability to get to know or connect with students in any meaningful capacity. Study participants using SkillsUSA (Deacon, Jesse, Lawson) were particularly concerned that providing ES instruction in an online environment diminished their ability to effectively teach students and took away opportunities for non-cognitive lessons imparted by extracurricular activities such as competitions and campus events. Activities such as group games and contests that required teamwork and communication were commended as especially useful in teaching employability skills (Deacon, Shirley, Tyson). Discussion of prior events and active learning strategies induced wistful recollections of pre-pandemic times and visible expressions of frustration in many participants.

Class-based interactions with students are cited by a number of studies as particularly important for instructor satisfaction (Ali et al., 2017; Eckert & Stecklein, 1961; Lechuga & Lechuga, 2012). While in-person instruction was preferred by the majority of study participants, one study instructor (Charlotte) saw teaching ES in an online environment as a necessity even prior to COVID-19, given the busy and complicated lives of her students. This instructor viewed web-based instruction as saving students the time involved in commuting to campus and therefore believed an online teaching modality stood to improve the quality of her work with students and did not diminish her ability to teach employability skills. This instructor's use of online instruction in her classes is supported by a number of studies set in higher education institutions that found online classes to be not only a viable modality for ES instruction (Moore & Pearson 2017; Olson, 2016) but one that could also enhance in-class learning in a hybrid setting (Griffey, 2017).

For study participants, in addition to enjoying interactions with students there was much praise for social elements of their work with teaching colleagues. Instructors expressed appreciation for the exchanges and connections they enjoyed with fellow instructors and college administrators. Interviewees spoke to the way in which these relationships boosted their ES curriculum teaching. One study participant (Ron) had extended these communications with colleagues into the creation of a shared online repository of ES teaching tools. Another study participant (Norman) described the value of reaching out to instructors beyond his institution for guidance in teaching a curriculum and commended statewide efforts and resources that were created to enable these type of inter-college communications. This second key finding parallels numerous prior scholarly studies which have documented evidence of the importance of social and collegial connections for teaching staff (Austin & Baldwin, 1991; Durksen, 2017).

A number of study participants spoke about encountering a silo effect between departments at their campuses, and how this divisive element hindered instructors' ability to share teaching ideas with other educators and staff (Charlotte, Norman). In fact, despite the publicized adoption of a "one college" model by numerous institutions across the North Carolina Community College System, there was ample evidence that operational barriers impeded communications and connections between curriculum and CTE instructors, and their continuing education instructional colleagues. Perin's 2001 article on academic-occupational learning communities documented effects of a similarly problematic dynamic. The merged courses of Perin's study brought together instructors from two distinctly different divisional cultures and resulted in a rocky implementation of curricular reform at the community college level.

Most interviewees believed that a number of communication-related efforts could help encourage the adoption of ES curricula including strategic work with program advisory boards.

Instructors indicated that amplifying and making accessible the conversations taking place between employers and the college could help rally academic program staff around ES curricular initiatives and ensure that the skills being taught addressed local employer needs. There is evidence in the literature however that this idea should be approached with caution since a number of researchers have found that instructional staff do not necessarily view "the involvement of employers in course and curriculum design as desirable or appropriate" (Lowden et al., 2011, p. 22).

College presidents and other campus leaders were generally seen by study participants as well positioned to assist with ES curricular efforts. In this role institutional leadership could serve as visible and vocal champions for the curriculum and set ES instruction as a strategic priority for a community college. Study participants also indicated that a need for urgency in responding to employer requests for work-ready graduates could be effectively conveyed by the concerted efforts of college leaders and advisory board members. This suggestion echoes numerous studies that show the importance of college leadership in implementation of curricular change and reform efforts (Davis, 2009; Kezar, 2018; Kezar & Lester, 2011; Perin, 2001)

***A Lack of Resources and Support Hindered the Teaching of Employability Skills Curricula***

Despite the availability of numerous ES curricula, including those provided at no cost by the state, related efforts at many community colleges appear to be stymied by a lack of resources and support. Key instructional tools such as textbooks and standardized assessment instruments were cited as deficient or missing by participants. These components are elements that would help professionalize the ES curricular instruction currently being provided throughout the community college system. Many participants welcomed the idea of more professional development to advance use of an ES curriculum (Charlotte, Katie, Norman, Ron) and a number

expressed uncertainty on where to find information on the pedagogy of employability skills instruction.

Even discussing these skills with participants could be challenging due to lack of common vocabulary. Some instructors called these abilities soft skills, while others equated soft skills with employability skills, and for some, employability skills were more about the steps involved with a job search (primarily resume writing and interviewing). According to ES scholars, a lack of coherence and understanding of what constitutes employability skills hinders broader instructor adoption and use of ES curricula (Gregory, 2020; Knight & Page, 2007).

Most participants cited networking with teaching colleagues as a positive support for ES instructional practices. National or statewide associations that brought together educators using the same curriculum, and encouraged discussion of teaching practices, were accessible to some, however the majority of study participants found these types of exchanges lacking. For many of these community college instructors, the few opportunities for conversations with teaching colleagues that existed pre-pandemic had disappeared. The fact that collegiality was recognized as an important and yet missing element for many participants, bolsters research that found interpersonal networking opportunities can be very beneficial for educators and provide a welcome element of professional development (Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992).

The complex and multidimensional nature of employability skills as a concept has led to cautions against simplistic implementation and use of ES curricula (de la Harpe & David, 2012; Harvey, 2005; Holmes, 2006; Rae, 2007). Based on the experience of employability skills instruction as detailed by study participants, most curricula appear in want of professionalization. While all study participants deserve recognition for the ingenuity and dedication they described in their ES curricular teaching, the successes detailed by the instructors using the SkillsUSA

Framework were credited in large part to the multitude of components and layers of support made available to SkillsUSA subscribers. Access to a similarly professional curriculum that provides teaching tools and guides, along with a statewide network of communications and events would no doubt benefit all ES instructors.

## Implications for Research

**Research on Employability Skills Instruction in Postsecondary Educational Settings**

The broad questions raised within the literature review that pertain to postsecondary ES curricular instruction, guide the interweaving of existing research with the findings of this current study.

### *Can and Should Employability Skills be Taught in the Classroom?*

In contrast with prior research (Bennett et al., 1999; de la Harpe et al, 2000; Deil-Amen, 2006; Ho et al., 2014; Pitman & Broomhall, 2009) which found that many higher education instructors consider ES "outside the scope of course instruction," (Ng & Rosenbaum, 2018, p. 358) all participants in this study were proponents of the teaching of employability skills. Participating instructors indicated that they believed that the community college classroom was an appropriate setting in which students could learn about employability skills, without fear of making mistakes that could lead to job loss. There was ample evidence that study participants were personally invested in the teaching of an employability skills curriculum through their use of emotive language, and the imperative turns of phrase that punctuated descriptions of ES instruction.

As was found in earlier research (Bhaerman & Spill, 1988; Feffer, 2016), study participants acknowledged the challenges inherent in teaching students about ES in the classroom. These community college instructors indicated their teaching could help students

"unlearn poor work habits, attitudes and behavior patterns" (Bhaerman & Spill, 1988) and communicated a confidence in their ability to do so. Despite the difficulties encountered, participants conveyed their enthusiasm for ES curricular use with positive and emphatic word choices. These were individuals who said they "loved" this work with students in the classroom and felt "passionate" about ES curricular instruction.

A number of participants in the study alluded to their experience with the "tyranny of content" (Jenkins & Pepper, 1988) that has been documented in studies of curricular reform and innovations (Boys & Kirkland, 1988). This pressure was portrayed by interviewees as an unfortunate byproduct of a heavy teaching load, in addition to other duties such as the marketing of a program area and the supervision of adjunct instructors. However, participants also indicated accepting that employability skills instruction was simply one more aspect to their teaching, and something that they absorbed out of a sense of duty to graduate work-ready students from their program area.

Unlike Hanapi et al.'s 2015 findings, most study instructors expressed a desire to learn more about how to teach employability skills. And, contrary to earlier findings that indicated community college instructor resistance to professional development opportunities and curricular change (Barr & Rossett, 1994; Blackburn et al., 1980; Maxwell & Kazlauskas, 1992), study participants had actively sought information on the subject of ES pedagogy. Whether through use of reference books on employability skills, or via statewide or national conferences hosted by employability skills curriculum vendors and users, participants detailed attempts to improve their instruction and assessment of ES.

Previous studies have found that many aspects of educators' instructional efforts stand to benefit greatly from professional development on the teaching of ES. According to one

researcher, the "reasons that faculty find it difficult to assess non-content outcomes are the same as the reasons they find it difficult to consider using new teaching approaches. Faculty are experts in their field of study. … Their training and focus has been on content, and few have been supervised or mentored in teaching and evaluating students" (Sutherland, 1996, p. 91). In addition to formal learning opportunities, study participants appeared to also be interested in connecting with colleagues in order to find out more about best practices in ES instruction.

In contrast to Dougherty and Bakia's 1999 findings, educators who participated in this study spoke of seeing ES instruction as not only an essential component of workforce education, but one that should be responsive to the needs of local employers (Holzer, 2015). Instructors indicated believing that the urgent need to align instruction with in-demand employability skills could be communicated by connecting employers with community college programs and fellow educators through advisory board work. The study's instructors also recognized, like various ES scholars (Dougherty & Bakia, 1999; Radloff et al., 2008), that institutional leadership has the power to influence the success or failure of an ES curriculum. With this realization came participants' identification of community college presidents as ideally situated to champion employability skills instruction for their institutions.

### *What Ethical Concerns Exist Regarding Employability Skills Instruction?*

Like scholars Bhaerman and Spill (1988) and Deil-Amen (2006), participants viewed ES curricular instruction as part of their college's efforts to address equity concerns. Several instructors described their close connections with the community, and the manner in which employability skills could improve future work prospects for disadvantaged students. For study participants, employability skills instruction allowed learners a chance at full employment, in a

manner such as that detailed by numerous higher education scholars (Deil-Amen, 2006; Hora et al., 2019; Karp, 2011; Myran & Ivery, 2013; Rosove, 1982).

Surprisingly absent from conversations was any mention of external elements of employability such as regional economic and labor market issues (Harvey, 2003; Taylor, 1998; Yorke, 2006). At no point did I hear intimation of employer responsibility for keeping employee skills current and relevant. One instructor indicated that when a local employer was known to be closing operations, the company simply publicized community college services for unemployed workers and the college would also step in and advertise these provisions to the soon-to-be unemployed population. It would appear that for the instructors in this study, their view is that responsibility for employability skills improvement rests upon the individual student and on the community, which runs contrary to some of the literature reviewed which suggested that employers and the marketplace should bear some responsibility as well (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Garsten & Jacobsson, 2003).

In participants' focus on the importance of face-to-face instruction of students, there was an echo of Deil-Amen's connection of social and cultural capital with non-academic skill instruction at the community college level (2006). Through ample use of personal anecdotes in teaching students about employability skills, study participants appear to have shared the kind of "crucial cultural-based knowledge" that Deil-Amen saw as an educational component that enhanced the "upward mobility of students" (2006, p. 416). By fostering close and empathetic connections with students, instructors also seemed to be showing students "how to enact upper-middle class expectations in the classroom" such as those Karp believed could "greatly enhance student outcomes" (2011, p. 2).

But at least one instructor saw, like Karp, that these expectations must be taught cautiously and with sensitivity to the everyday realities of student lives. This instructor (Charlotte) who praised the NCCCS NC-NET Employability Skills Resource Toolkit for the breadth and relevance of its lessons also found some of the scenarios posed in the NC-NET curriculum could be viewed as "insensitive" by students in her classes. The interviewee believed that the NC-NET ES Toolkit should be revised using the kind of diversity, equity, and inclusion issues that have become a priority for higher education.

This lone observation was evocative of the problematic role that race, gender or class may play in defining employability skills, as highlighted in the literature (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Burton, 1987; Morley, 2001). Interesting to note, "cultural sensitivity" is specifically designated as a skill by the NCCCS Employability Skills Alignment Project. Given that ESAP evolved from NC-NET's ES Resource Toolkit, there is evidence that DEI matters are being addressed by more recently created ES curricula. Charlotte's comment also calls attention to the fact that North Carolina community college instructors have invaluable insight into how these curricula are perceived by both educators and students in the classroom. Without an intentional feedback loop and meaningful input from users, an ES resource like the NC-NET Toolkit stands to age over time and may slowly lose relevance to classroom instruction.

### How Should Higher Education Teach and Assess Employability Skills?

Like earlier studies (Barrie, 2004; Hanapi et al., 2015; Merrifield, 2013), a clear and consistent definition of employability skills eluded participants. Many appeared to equate employability skills with aspects of a search for employment such as resume writing and interviewing. Others referred to soft skills throughout the conversation and actively eschewed used of the word employability. As a result, it would appear community college employability

skills curricular efforts would benefit from use of a more consistent vocabulary so that all were comfortable and confident in discussing their knowledge of the subject and are working in concert with other instructors and statewide efforts (Atkins, 1999; Gregory, 2020; Knight & Page, 2007).

The fact that a study participant (Ron) requested proof that their use of an employability skills curriculum improved student post-graduation employment outcomes, seems to give merit from the instructor's standpoint to Cranmer's 2006 assertion that there is still a need for more evidence that classroom-based ES efforts produce results. In general, throughout the interviews there was a tendency for participants to reference anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of teaching an ES curriculum. Clearly these instructors believed in the importance of their teaching, but when questioned about assessment measures there appeared to be a lack of empirical evidence being gathered by community colleges.

Another takeaway from interview conversations was that study participants agree with Cranmer (2006) and others who believe that work-based learning (WBL) is an ideal setting in which to develop student employability skills (Tymon, 2013). Many interviewees were in favor of work-based learning opportunities for students, especially when used in conjunction with classroom ES instruction. I was surprised however that no one expressed any possible downsides to, or reservations regarding WBL, such as those raised in the literature review. Specifically, Tymon faults employers for not taking care to be certain that student employability skills are improved through apprenticeships and internships (2013). This researcher specifically has concern with work-based learning opportunities as a form of ES instruction explaining that "first and second year students may require more help" than some employers are willing to give (Tymon, 2013, p. 853).

WBL is also cited as problematic for women and students of color (Hanks et al., 2018; Toglia, 2017), who have been historically excluded from participation in higher wage work infused learning opportunities such as apprenticeships. As the United States is becoming increasingly diverse, insufficient inclusion that results in work-based learning that skews white and male must be acknowledged and countered in future WBL initiatives and funding. Promotion of work-based learning to underrepresented groups, in combination with program supports such as childcare, would be beneficial in advancing options such as apprenticeships and internships which can lead to better pay and job opportunities in both trade and non-trade sectors.

Several participants espoused a belief that teaching ES did not necessarily require additional work on the part of instructors if students were held accountable for classwork and behavior. ES curricular instruction could instead, and in this way, be built into course expectations, much like Stubbs and Keeping's 2002 article which suggested teaching ES using a "deeply embedded approach" (p. 219). This instructional method, as described by study participants, included mandates that students show up to class on time, work on team-based class assignments, and complete coherent and grammatically correct written and verbal assignments.

The idea of embedded ES instruction mirrors Gregory's 2020 dissertation study which found that "Addressing employability does not require significant changes to curriculum or teaching practices… It can include adding skills or intended outcomes to assignments or labs or discussing with students how a skill might help them in future work" (p. 98). This view also aligns with de la Harpe, Radloff and Wyber's advisement that "the transfer of knowledge and skills from the classroom to the workplace is most likely to occur when the classroom situation closely resembles the work situation" (2000, p. 5).

In general, while instructors such as those in this study clearly don't need a "sense of purpose" in order to feel compelled to improve their teaching of ES (Riebe & Jackson, 2014) it would appear that all would welcome more options in terms of assessment tools, especially measurements of a formative nature. Most study participants expressed opinions contrary to the findings of Knight and Page's 2007 survey which found the majority of university staff thought employability skills (such as group work, self-management, listening and oral communications) were not difficult to assess. Instead, participants would likely have concurred with Light and Cox (2006) who viewed student learning assessment as one of the most difficult and emotional tasks instructors face.

When describing their experiences with ES assessment tools, many instructors in the study indicated lacking formal ES testing options (such as those that were promised by ESAP) and instead relied on either their personal intuition about students' abilities, or on the outcomes of competitions (like those run by SkillsUSA) in order to make pronouncements about students' employability skills. Part of the reason that measurement of employability skills learning can be fraught, is due to the fact that "the task of designing and implementing assessment activities related to [ES] is often the point at which issues about embedding graduate attributes [ES] come to the fore, that is, the task of assessing attributes is the litmus test of academic staff beliefs about learning and teaching and what they value as the outcomes of their teaching" (Radloff et al., 2008, p. 2).

Despite the difficulties facing study instructors, one participant (Katie) had designed and implemented assignment rubrics to ensure student work aligned with employability skills expectations, much like that detailed by ES scholars Riebe and Jackson (2014). Another study instructor (Deacon) was especially enthused about the potential for student portfolios to allow

formative assessment of employability skills attainment. Use of these assessments brought to mind the writings of Knight and Yorke (2003) who believed that ES improvements are best measured in a non-summative fashion.

**Research on Instructor Motivation Using Self-Determination Theory**

One way to explore postsecondary educator experiences and engagement with ES curricular instruction is using the lens of motivational theory. Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory (2000) focuses on "how social contexts can promote autonomous motivation" (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006, p. 19). Motivation according to Ryan and Deci exists on a continuum between intrinsic and extrinsic (2000). Austin and Gamson (1983) found that higher education instructional staff tend to engage in activities found personally meaningful and rewarding and due to intrinsic factors (internal and intangible motivators) rather than because of extrinsic elements (such as monetary or external awards).

Intrinsically rewarding socio-environmental factors that have been associated with instructor psychological well-being include community contribution, affiliation, and personal growth (Deci et al., 1997). On the other hand, aspects of work that are extrinsically rewarding, and that are related to the acquisition of external signs of status or worth, have been found unlikely to satisfy instructor psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 1997). Autonomously oriented and intrinsic motivation is supported when these three psychological needs are met and is considered important to work that necessitates innovative thinking or knowledge processing (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Community college employability skills instruction would appear to involve all three socio-environmental elements. To further extrapolate, "Teachers who have strong senses of relatedness, competence, and autonomy can then set for themselves challenging goals with high

expectations—including introducing innovations" (Emo, 2015) such as that introduced by

curricular reform. The next section investigates the key findings of this study, in light of social

and environmental elements that have been found to address the psychological needs and job

satisfaction of postsecondary instructors.

*Autonomy*

In viewing the first key finding (*"Educators were personally invested in ES curricular*

*instruction"*) through the lens of SDT there are indications that this finding aligns with the socio-

environmental element of autonomy. Participating instructors generally described having

enjoyed and exercised significant latitude in their presentation and teaching of the subject matter.

Even those instructors who found their particular curriculum restrictive were still able to create

adjustments, such as changing the order of content within a lesson. Making autonomous

decisions in their lesson planning and instruction, all participants detailed the satisfaction they

experienced in finding creative ways to teach students and leaned heavily into their own career

histories and carefully chosen anecdotes to personalize their teaching.

Evidence of the importance of curricular autonomy aligns with the seminal work of

French, Tupper, and Mueller (1965) who found that academic instructors rated "freedom and

independence" as the greatest satisfactions of their jobs. "In the literature on faculty work life,

autonomy is most frequently interchanged with the term freedom" and is found to be an

important aspect for educators' enjoyment of work (Lechuga & Lechuga, 2012, p. 73). Other

studies have indicated that autonomy in the form of individual agency is an important

motivational element and is at work in the scholarly and creative efforts of faculty (Blackburn &

Lawrence, 1995; Campbell & O'Meara, 2014; Ford, 1992; O'Meara et al., 2008). Agency,

defined as "what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or

she regards as important" (Sen, 1985, p. 203) is valued by instructors such as study participants who enjoyed being able to infuse their ES teaching with innovative and personally meaningful lessons and assignments.

Emo found that "Teachers' job satisfaction is connected with a reasonable level of complexity and the ability to make professional decisions, which certainly reflects control-value and self-determination motivation theory" (2015, p. 176). As a result of experiencing freedom in their work, instructors have been found to be less resistant to reforms imposed by outside entities if the change efforts allow for adaptations (Butt & Townsend, 1990). Therefore, academic leadership should take care to create "an environment in which lecturers feel that they have control over their teaching, that teaching is valued and that they have room to take chances" (Knight & Trowler, 2000, p. 79), given that this kind of environment has been found to help instructional staff adopt and employ a student-centric approach to the teaching of skill development (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999).

Antipodean research documents and provides warnings that should caution U.S. policymakers against overriding faculty autonomy and mandating use of governmentally created and dictated ES curricular initiatives in higher education (Hampson & Junor, 2009; Marston & Dee, 2015; McDonald & Grant-Smith, 2020) Railing against externally-led employability skills curricular policy is a group of Australian faculty researchers who have been vociferous in their disagreement with their government's ES-focused postsecondary agenda. For example, Osborne and Grant-Smith's 2017 article "Resisting the 'Employability' Doctrine Through Anarchist Pedagogies and Prefiguration" attempts to discredit ES initiatives taking place within Australian academic institutions and pronounces that a "preoccupation with employability above all other educational outcomes presents an existential threat" to higher education (p. 60).

A growing number of postsecondary instructors and scholars are concerned with losing authority and control over curricula which are increasingly informed by employer needs, as well as with the ascendency of "academic capitalism" (Brown, 2011; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Taylor, 2017). From this standpoint, heavy-handed governmental ES curricular interventions are leading some "faculty to regard any reference to 'skills translation' or 'career readiness' as a euphemism for feeding the kids into a nameless corporate chipper" (Brown, 2015, p. 50). These externally driven curricular initiatives are perceived as meeting employer needs at the expense of student learning.

In reflecting on this study's data with these higher education researchers' findings in mind, there is clear evidence of the possibility of friction between a need to adhere to a prescribed curriculum and the desire of instructors to have control over their teaching. While all interviewees found reason and ways to praise the curriculum they used, there was also a clear articulation of the value placed on the ability to craft and dictate classroom instructional delivery. As the skills agenda grows increasingly prominent in discussions about the future of higher education, community college administrators would be wise to make ES curricular implementation more palatable for instructors by involving them in all phases, and allowing for modifications and options for classroom use. Allowing frontline educators to both help create and lead these initiatives will allow for earlier buy-in on ES efforts and encourage a sense of autonomy.

### *Relatedness*

In examining the second key finding of the study (*"ES curricular instruction was described as a highly social endeavor"*) through the lens of SDT there is evidence of the importance of relatedness in instructors' work with an employability skills curriculum. Social

interactions were held by most participants to be important for ES classroom instruction and sometimes lacking with fellow ES instructors. Several participants in the study portrayed teaching an ES curriculum as a solitary endeavor and the effects of this isolation from their teaching colleagues were further compounded by pandemic-mandated working from home. Notably in contrast, instructors using the SkillsUSA Framework enjoyed regular opportunities to connect with teaching colleagues via statewide meetings and events which had transitioned to a virtual modality. SkillsUSA's NC chapter also published a weekly online newsletter, which along with statewide activities, helped foster collegial connections that were cited by participants as positive and encouraging.

Participant statements that underscore the importance of relatedness and collegial communications are similar to Durksen, Klassen, and Daniels' 2017 article "Motivation and Collaboration: The Keys to a Developmental Framework for Teachers' Professional Learning" which recommended "social job resources such as building support and relationships through collaboration" (p. 63). Given that in past surveys academic instructors rated "interpersonal relations" as a highly important element of job satisfaction (French et al., 1965; Trotman & Brown, 2005; Trower & Gallagher 2008) curricular initiatives that are enhanced by collegial interactions stand to be appreciated by community college educators, such as those participating in this study.

Early research on faculty by Gustad (1960), and Eckert and Stecklein (1961) found that instructors' need for pedagogically oriented conversation is met not only through discussions with colleagues but also through work with students and in teaching classes (Lewis & Becker, 1979; Klassen et al, 2012; Stupnisky et al., 2018). Problematically, in light of these pronouncements about the importance of social interactions and collegiality, some scholars have

indicated that higher education instructors are apt to experience detrimental feelings of isolation in their work (Massey et al., 1994). The findings of this study and others (Austin & Baldwin, 1991) lend credence to this suggestion, and calls for more scholarly community-building and collaboration within the North Carolina Community College System.

Especially in the work of career and technical education instructors, face-to-face interaction with learners is vital as students are often learning trades that involve hands-on work. For these areas of study, additional consideration has been warranted during the pandemic that may be useful to consider in post-COVID-19 times. For CTE instructors and students, new options such as remote or virtual reality (VR) based instruction bolstered by coaching and regular check-ins may take the place of some of the in-person lessons and allow for greater participation, especially in the case of students at more rural institutions. Asynchronous video hosted learning may also allow more students who are working during the day to participate in programs at community colleges. Ultimately a hybrid model of CTE instruction may prevail that incorporates the best of both in-person and remote learning, and also allows for greater participation.

### Competence

The third key finding (*"A lack of access to resources and supports hindered ES curricular instruction"*) when viewed through an SDT lens reveals the premium that instructors placed on a feeling of competence in teaching the ES curriculum. According to Deci, Kasser, and Ryan (1997) a tendency to engage in behaviors to meet optimal challenges, despite the absence of prodding or pressures is indicative of humans' needs for competence. There is evidence in this study that in order to feel competent, instructors needed to feel supported and confident in their ability to professionally and effectively teach and assess employability skills. For example, the

importance of instructional tools and professional development was a repeating theme in many study participant's discussions of teaching needs. Most had independently found free or low-cost instructional resources, such as online videos that helped teach employability skills, or had devised their own means of assessing student ES, such as through grading rubrics. However, in the absence of a consistent terminology, and lacking access to teaching implements such as a textbook or learning measurement tools, instructors may be uncertain if they are following best practices. Many study participants desired elements that could be considered aspects of a more professional ES curriculum.

According to one study, instructors "are required to consistently demonstrate their competence, particularly in their scholarly work. … However, demonstrating competence and feeling competent are different and independent from one another" (Lechuga & Lechuga, 2012, p. 72). The benefits of feeling confident in the knowledge and teaching of a subject are innumerous, as ''teachers who feel competent and valued for that competence are apt to try even harder to improve their performance'' (Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1990, p. 254). Therefore, it is advisable for institutions to invest in resources that help boost instructors' confidence in their teaching of an ES curriculum, whether it be classroom materials or time away from teaching to interface with industry and employers and be certain that the skills that are taught are those needed in the workplace. De la Harpe and David's 2012 study addressed increased access to such resources for faculty learning, suggesting that "policies and strategies that formalise professional development activities for academic staff to gain and/or maintain relevant industry experience are critical" (p. 504).
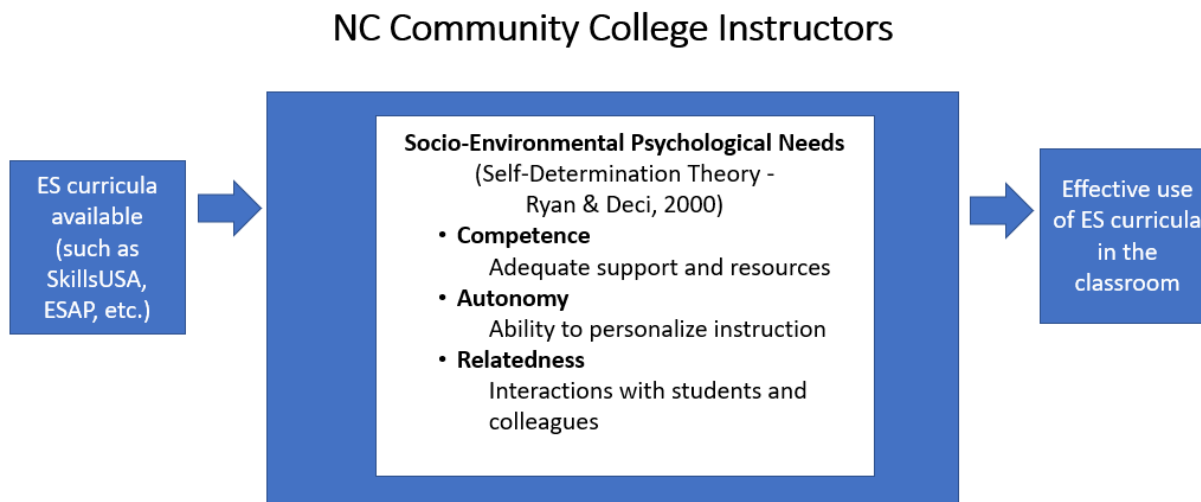
In summary, more needs to be learned about community college instructor experiences and engagement with ES curricula, so that these educational efforts inform future employability

skills initiatives. By exploring and incorporating the perceptions and feedback of educators, policymakers and institutional leaders will be better able to create and improve ES curricular reforms. Scholarly research on the use of ES curricula within community colleges has generally ignored questions that concern the *process* of classroom instruction and has instead favored quantitative research or studied the *outcome* of ES curricula according to community college students, alumni, and administrators, as well as employers.

However, as identified in the scant research on the topic by Deil-Amen (2006) and Davis (2009), community college efforts that introduce ES-related curricular change would benefit from greater consideration of the experiences of instructors. Given that previous studies of employability skills-focused curricular implementation within higher education have indicated that instructional staff consider "changing their teaching and assessment practices difficult and were not easily convinced of the need for change even when change would be beneficial to the institution, to themselves, and to their students" (de la Harpe et al., 2000, p. 12) teaching staff such as those who participated in this study should feel supported and their efforts adequately recognized (de la Harpe et al., 2000). By infusing the instructional setting with socio-environmental elements, as identified by Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory, which enhance competence, relatedness and autonomy, community college leaders can help meet educator psychological needs and increase job satisfaction levels. Figure 4 illustrates the conceptual framework for the study, updated per key findings.

**Figure 4**

*Updated Conceptual Framework: Viewing Instructor Experiences with Employability Skills*

*Curricula Through an SDT Lens*

## NC Community College Instructors

ES curricula available (such as SkillsUSA, ESAP, etc.) →

**Socio-Environmental Psychological Needs**
(Self-Determination Theory - Ryan & Deci, 2000)
- **Competence**
  Adequate support and resources
- **Autonomy**
  Ability to personalize instruction
- **Relatedness**
  Interactions with students and colleagues

→ Effective use of ES curricula in the classroom

**Implications for Theory**

In addition to motivational theory, this study's findings can also be framed by theories that address organizational change. Whether due to an instructor's decision to teach an ES-focused class, or as a result of an institution's adoption of a particular ES curriculum, shifting efforts to improving student employability skills requires a cascade of revisions to current existing teaching practices. Academic instructors have been documented as resistant to this kind of change (Barr & Rossett, 1994; Caruth, 2013, Griffey, 2017). A number of reasons are cited for discomfort with curricular change among higher education teaching staff (Caruth, 2013). For instance, instructors may feel that the suggestion of a need for change is an intimation that a currently used method of instruction is deficient. Or some instructors may perceive curricular change as a threat to personal instructional traditions. Still others may fear personal failures or shortcomings as usage outcomes of a new curriculum (Caruth, 2013). However, as de la Harpe

and Radloff indicate, the success of ES curricular initiatives relies "heavily on the willingness of academic staff to engage in this work and where necessary to change the way they design, teach and assess within their discipline" (2008, p. 137).

With this recognition, theories and models of change that acknowledge the pivotal role of frontline instructional staff in preparing students for the workforce, may yield suggestions for the successful implementation of postsecondary initiatives, such as expanded use of ES curricula by NC community college educators. In addition, and worth bearing in mind is that "Because faculty members' average tenure with a university far outlasts that of most presidents and administrators, faculty are often the gatekeepers of culture and traditions on the campus" (Keup et al., 2001, p. 4). Therefore, the role and potential resistance of instructors must be acknowledged in any model of change considered for the implementation of a new curriculum.

Despite the disruption that educator resistance may introduce, not only should it be anticipated, but it should also be harnessed by those invoking curricular change since this pushback can act as "a driver of innovation. In this sense resistance is a contributor to innovation rather than a resistor of innovation" (Emo, 2015, p. 174). A study such as this one affords those creating change, like that introduced by the adoption of an ES curriculum, a chance to better anticipate and understand the headwinds of resistance. Adopting a model of change that acknowledges the potential for friction should improve the ability of community colleges to successfully implement future ES curricular initiatives.

Adrianna Kezar's work in studying grassroots leaders within higher education institutions (Kezar, 2018; Kezar & Lester, 2011) builds upon Meyerson and Scully's theory of "tempered radicals" (1995) and acknowledges the important role of frontline change agents such as instructors. This research also offers clues as to how institutions can utilize a model of shared

leadership to successfully implement change (Kezar, 2018). Kezar and Lester's 2011 study found that "bottom-up" leaders in non-authoritative roles could leverage nine strategies in creating change and exerting agency:

- intellectual opportunities

- professional development

- hiring like-minded people

- garnering resources

- working with students

- leveraging curricula and using classrooms as forums

- gathering data

- joining and utilizing existing networks

- partnering with influential external stakeholders

These elements all serve to reinforce "the academic values, student learning, and the education mission of the institution" (Kezar, 2018, p. 139) which thereby lends credibility to the grassroots leader's efforts.

In this study, there is evidence that participant instructors, acting as grassroots leaders, have used many of these strategies to encourage their institutions to promote use of ES curricula. For example, several individuals talked about the ES *professional development* they created and hosted for the benefit of their colleagues. Not only did these events raise consciousness about ES educational efforts and advance the instructor's vision of the importance of an ES curriculum, but the venue also served as an *intellectual opportunity* to foster dialogue on the topic among teaching staff. These types of activities, according to Kezar's work, "allow people to come together and form loose networks and meet allies" (2018, p. 160).

A number of study participants also highlighted the ways in which their position allowed them to *garner resources* and apply for grant and foundation monies that supported their work with an ES curriculum. Several individuals also were in positions that were charged with the recruitment of instructors. This role would have permitted these educators to be involved with the *hiring of like-minded individuals* who similarly valued use of an ES curriculum. Additionally, participants in the study served in capacities that would allow them to *gather data* (both formal and informal) that could be employed to make a case for greater institutional use of an ES curriculum.

All interviewees were actively promoting and supporting ES instruction through their *work with students* both inside and outside the classroom. Likewise, all instructors described *leveraging curricula and using classrooms as forums* in which they could impress upon students the importance of employability skills. Many also cited the value of *existing statewide networks* such as NCCCS in promoting use of ES curricula, and in sponsoring ES initiatives such as ESAP. Finally, partnerships with *external stakeholders* such as local employers and statewide industry associations were cited by all participants as a crucial way to find support for and validate the importance of teaching employability skills at the community college.

In using these tactics to advocate for a focus on employability skills and ES curricular instruction at their community colleges, study participants leveraged the strength of "allies, coalition-building, agenda-setting, and negotiation of interests" (Kezar, 2018, p. 160) with those in formal leadership roles at their institutions. Unlike traditional leaders who are in authoritative positions of power, bottom-up leadership such as that exhibited by these instructors can be understood through political theories of change (Kezar, 2018). In these theories of change,

processes are a core component of human-run systems (such as academic institutions) and a main concern is the ways in which people are interconnected (Pearce & Conger, 2003).

A number of participants spoke about the importance of working with leaders at their college in order to promote prioritization of an ES-focused curriculum. Grassroots leaders' work with those in positions of authority (such as a college president) is a form of shared leadership (Kezar, 2018). In order for a shared leadership initiative to be successful, there should first be emphasis on the empowerment of all individuals involved in a change effort. This empowerment takes the form of not only authority but also adequate resources. The second core element of shared leadership involves ensuring all involved have access to knowledge to make sound decisions. The third key component is an accountability system so that a plan for reporting is in place that documents progress (Kezar, 2018).

While shared leadership can benefit both top-down and bottom-up leaders, grassroots leaders may find their efforts stifled by the agenda of those in positions of formal power (Kezar & Lester, 2011). In order to avoid this dynamic, leaders who strive to affect change from the bottom up, should take care to assess the timing of their efforts and watch for strategic opportunities, be willing to translate their initiative to those in power while sensitizing others to the importance of their vision, hone negotiating and coalition-building skills, and strategically time efforts so as to capitalize on situations in which to promote the change initiative (Kezar & Lester, 2011).

## Implications for Policy

There are a number of implications for the study's findings that could be addressed at the state and federal policy level.

**Initiatives That are Designated as "Skills-Focused" Should Delineate the Exact Type of Skills That are Being Addressed**

Too often, broad federal or state workforce education efforts such as MyFutureNC appear to use the word skills as shorthand for technical skills. Specific mention of employability skills is generally missing from public discussion of state or federal workforce-related initiatives. Pandemic unemployment levels have induced a crop of new upskilling and reskilling initiatives, however most either avoid naming specific skills or focus instead on technical skill efforts and outcomes. Policymakers therefore seem to be ignoring employer feedback that persistently names employability skills as a leading workforce deficiency. Language use matters, and governmental agencies should use consistent and specific vocabulary in creating policies that address a well-documented need for employability skills improvement.

New workforce development initiatives should not support a singular focus on technical skills in light of employer pleas for better prepared employees. Furthermore, with the rise of automation in the workplace, elements such as artificial intelligence and robotics spotlight a need for the U.S. educational system to develop the kind of "human skills" (Merisotis, 2020) or "durable skills" (Fisher, 2019) such as those enhanced by ES curricula. Policymakers should consider postsecondary education's role in preparing the workforce for a "100-year work life" (Weise, 2021). Higher education, as well as federal and state funding should prioritize and encourage curricular employability skills efforts.

**Initiatives That Focus on Work-Based Learning Such as Apprenticeships Should be Structured to Intentionally Include Employability Skills Learning and Assessment**

In considering "long-life learning" (Weise, 2021) scholars and policymakers should acknowledge that workers will need periodic realignment of both hard and soft skills in order to

keep up with workforce demands and employer needs. As numerous federal and state postsecondary efforts consider work-based learning a cornerstone of pandemic reskilling efforts, WBL participant experiences should be focused on the employability skills deemed necessary by employers, as well as requisite technical skills.

In addition, safeguards are required to avoid the scenarios detailed in Allen's 2016 *Another Great Training Robbery or a Real Alternative for Young People? Apprenticeships at the Start of the 21st Century*. According to Allen and others, investigations of the United Kingdom's apprenticeship program indicated that there was very little evidence of skills improvement. Instead, upon scrutiny it was revealed that:

> As well as stifling the career opportunities of these apprentices, this low-quality provision
> undermines the status of apprenticeships and devalues the brand. Employers and
> providers involved in poor quality, low-level apprenticeships are wasting public funds
> and abusing the trust placed in them by government and the apprentices. (Office for
> Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2015)

Industry Recognized Apprenticeship Programs (IRAPs) such as those championed by the Trump administration have become symbolic of the problems inherent in unregulated work-based learning. IRAPs have been found to lack enforcement of standards that guarantee appropriate skill development is part of the WBL experience (Schwartz, 2021). Early efforts by the Biden administration to advocate for work-based learning indicate intentions to revoke use of IRAPs and speak to the need for apprenticeships which incorporate learning objectives and oversight by experienced industry representatives (Schwartz, 2021).

**A Rebalance of Employer and Employee Responsibilities for Skills**

In the last 50 years, there has been an increased focus on employee responsibility for keeping skills up to date (Holmes, 2013). However, as scholars have indicated, this emphasis places a tremendous burden on individuals to continually upskill and reskill throughout a lifetime (Escobari et al., 2019). Federal and state policy should consider this dynamic, and in order to take pressure off employees, shift some portion of responsibility for employability skills development back to employers. As acknowledged by scholars, neoliberal thinking about workforce preparation has resulted in a supply-side informed view of responsibility for ensuring employees' ES are adequate (Noonan & Coral, 2015). According to Boahin and Hofman (2013) for example, the boundary between employee and citizen has, due to employers' successful demands and ability to dictate educational agendas, become virtually indiscernible. Academic capitalism as described by Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) is considered by many in the academy a rampant and destructive aspect of higher education today (Brown, 2015; Kezar & Bernstein-Sierra, 2016).

As the Biden administration's Secretary of Education (Cardona) and Secretary of Labor (Walsh) have advocated for higher education's continued support for workforce development and the community college's role in assuring that the future workers are prepared for an ever-evolving job market (Bauer-Wolf, 2021; Dembicki, 2021) a reconsideration of the role of postsecondary education in developing employability skills is warranted to be sure students are work ready not just for today's jobs but also future employment. This idea is one endorsed by numerous pundits who also see a need to revisit the concept of skills instruction in higher education and focus not just on what will help students get a job, but also those skills that will help individuals stay and advance in a career (Stephens, 2017).

**Policymakers Should Learn and Benefit from Prior U.K. and Australian Efforts**

There is a significant quantity of research focused on employability skills that has been produced by higher education scholars in these two countries. These studies and findings should be reviewed and used to inform current and future state and federal policy initiatives. While acknowledging that the political and economic forces at work in these countries undoubtedly differ from that in the United States, U.S. policymakers and scholarly researchers should find review of these Anglophone countries' prior and existing ES efforts beneficial.

In searching reports produced by international scholars, a researcher must be ever mindful of the fact that other countries use different nomenclature for employability skills. Thus, a search for related scholarly research needs to employ thoughtful and creative database vocabulary and syntax. To avoid accidental omission of international literature on the topic of employability skills, I suggest policymakers work with professional librarians at state and federal libraries, who are well versed in database search strategies.

## Implications for Practice

**State and Federal Level**

*Choose a Phrasing and Definition for these Skills and Use It Consistently*

If high profile federal and state initiatives such as TAACCCT and ESAP are created to implement postsecondary employability skills instruction, then all related documents should use and promote a common vocabulary and definition for these skills. Professional development sponsored by offices like that of NCCCS should employ and solidify a common language across ES-focused efforts as well.

In addition, a reference book of ES classroom exercises (similar to the *Ignite* book produced by SkillsUSA) may be a welcome way to cement verbiage and help instructors feel

confident in their ability to teach students and speak with colleagues about employability skills. It would appear that there are many ways and opportunities for federal and state agencies to unify employability skills efforts, and rein in an increasingly confusing and ever-expanding list of related expressions and phrasings.

### Benchmark Against SkillsUSA's Best Practices

SkillsUSA has created an impressive and comprehensive suite of products that promote ES curricular instruction and aim to ensure students are workforce ready. By offering instructors and administrators a wide variety of instructional tools that hinge on use of the SkillsUSA Framework, this vendor has a formidable presence in the ES curriculum marketplace. The subset of instructors that I spoke with for this study, who participated in SkillsUSA activities and events, were ardent supporters of this curriculum, as evidenced in our conversations.

However, given that there is a cost to the SkillsUSA use, alternative ES curricula such as those offered at no cost to NC community colleges (like ESAP and the NC-NET ES Toolkit) should benchmark against this industry leader and consider emulating some of its best practices. For example, SkillsUSA offers program-specific curricula and assessment tools for CTE areas of study. If North Carolina Community College System staff were to develop similarly discipline-grouped resources via ESAP, this effort could make ES curricular instruction easier for educators to adopt and coordinate across programs and institutions. SkillsUSA professional development resources available both online and in print were also held by study participants to be a crucial way for instructors to learn how to implement the curriculum.

The SkillsUSA competitions were likewise cited as important instructor "hooks" and offer both educators and students a celebratory social event in which to showcase employability skills. Given the enthusiasm I heard for the SkillsUSA product, in albeit a small but vocal subset

of the study participant group, the state should continue developing the NCCCS ESAP

curriculum and also revise the 2012 NC-NET Employability Skills Resource Toolkit, paying

close attention to best practices as modeled by other ES curricula currently in use at community

colleges across the state.

**Institutional Level**

ES-related curricular instruction has been taking place within North Carolina for more

than 50 years, generally in community colleges' non-credit or continuing education divisions,

and specifically within each college's HRD classes. However, given that a number of instructors

participating in the study indicated that their colleges were trying to mandate institutional or

division-wide use of an ES curriculum, the introduction of a required curriculum will necessitate

modifications for many NCCCS instructors. This kind of organizational change has been found

challenging for institutions to successfully implement and sustain (Fullan, 2016). In light of

potential resistance, NC community college leadership may benefit from use of a change

management framework such as Bolman and Deal's "four frames" model (1991). This analytical

tool is rooted in a number of schools of organizational theory (Vuori, 2018), and involves use of

a structural frame, a human resource frame, a political frame, and a symbolic frame which help

organizational leaders influence and invoke change.

To start with, the *structural frame* provides an overview of how change takes place for

participants. Bolman and Deal indicated that this is dictated by the goals of the organization and

is governed by "policies, rules, and chains of command" (1991, p. 511). In the case of ES

curricular implementation, institutional leaders should consider putting in place visible goals

such as possible through a community college's QEP or strategic plan.  In order to be sure

instructional staff are aware of how to implement use of the curriculum, policy changes must be

adequately communicated to all staff (both full and part-time). Increasing educator awareness of instructional policy and practice aligns with the findings of de la Harpe and David who "suggest that understanding the discrepancy between emphasis in practice and academic staff willingness and confidence … is the key to the successful implementation of graduate attribute [ES] strategies" (2012, p. 504).

It is also crucial with the structural frame that instructors know how to access the resources needed to teach the ES curriculum, as these shape how the change takes place for community college staff. If there is a center for instructional teaching and learning at the college, this office may play a crucial role in communicating curricular policy and encouraging instructor participation. Close study of how other ES curricula have been implemented by similar institutions may also yield ideas for structural supports.

The next frame involves *human resources* and addresses individuals and their needs. Bolman and Deal indicate that organizations that address interpersonal relationships tend to thrive more than those that ignore these employee concerns (1991). For many study participants, there was a documented desire for connections with colleagues that would foster opportunities to learn more about how other educators operationalized ES instruction. Cross-institutional and interdepartmental networks may therefore facilitate institutional implementation of ES curricular tools.  This would also be a way to encourage community building among like-minded instructors and could help raise the profile of ES curricular activities happening on campus.

In addition, if campuses were to create extracurricular activities and competitions modeled on those offered through SkillsUSA, that brought together instructors from across the college, this appears be an enjoyable and rewarding manner in which to build internal networks of collegiality in support of employability instruction. Advisory board work that creates

connections with employers and program alumni could also offer instructors a chance to create external social networks that confirm that the ES curriculum meets local workforce needs (Jenkins & Lane, 2019).

The third frame involves *organizational politics* and is intended to address conflicts between groups or individuals (Bolman & Deal, 1991). In the case of a community college's ES curriculum adoption, I would suggest that institutions should examine current "one college" efforts and continue to work on breaking down silos between continuing education, career and technical education, and curriculum divisions. Differing access to professional development opportunities between full and part-time teaching staff, also may inhibit instructor adoption of ES curricula.

Community college leaders need to continue to work on bridge building among divisions and between programs and avoiding the kind of tribalism inherent in much of academia (Trowler, 2001). One way to do this would be for leadership to underscore the importance of frequent and meaningful advisory board work across all programs and to unite the campus in a single goal: that of improved student post-graduation employment outcomes. This aligns with Radloff et al.'s assertion that only when "academic leaders engage at the local level with staff in the context of their discipline and collaborate with those in roles that support this work, is there any hope for real and lasting change" (2008, p. 6).

The fourth frame involves *symbolic gestures* intended to align individuals with the organization and to instill a sense of purpose in work. Bolman and Deal indicate that with this frame, "cultural symbols shape human behavior unobtrusively and provide a shared sense of mission and identity" (1991, p. 512). As mentioned by multiple participants in the study, presidents have the ability to publicize and prioritize a community college's employability skills

curricular efforts. ES curricula need champions at all levels who can help focus the collective efforts of the institution and broadly engage staff in a college-wide implementation.

Milestones of student ES achievements should also be celebrated through recurring events that recognize individual and collective efforts. Symbolic and visible recognitions of successes such as those described by study participants remind the campus of a shared goal. Radloff et al. (2009) underscore this in their assertion that "recognition and reward mechanisms need to be in place to encourage [employability skill] teaching" (p. 4).

While Bolman and Deal's four frames model of change provides clues on how community college leaders can implement and operationalize an ES curriculum at an institution, pervasive organizational issues regarding ES instruction may still remain such as those tied to shared governance. Shared governance according to the American Association of University Professors is a collective decision-making process that involves faculty, administrators, and trustees (1966). This form of shared leadership, unique to higher education, has shown signs of weakening as institutions have drifted away from the practice (Kezar & Lester, 2011). As a result, instructor control over the curriculum has eroded.

Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) propose that with the waning role of shared governance, and the diminished power of the professoriate, higher education administrators have been able to prioritize a divergent institutional agenda. As a result of this shift, many institutions increasingly adhere to a more corporate model of decision making that favors hierarchy over collegiality (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Educators' ability to exert control over instructional choices and curricular matters has weakened as college administrators have become ever more attuned to the "clatter of the market" (Zemsky, 1997). Pandemic-induced financial exigencies only stand to worsen this dynamic within higher education.

Consequently, "many faculty, whether they like it or not, have been told to justify their practices by a set of criteria and a language that seems to them foreign, and even hostile to the values and professional purposes they profess" (Bennett et al., 1999, p. 73). And, too often, the origin of such conflict can be found in organizational policymaking that takes place devoid of instructor consultation or insight (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1999). This tendency stands to threaten the viability of curricular innovations, such as the introduction and use of an ES curriculum. The four frames model, as well as Kezar and Lester's shared leadership offer possible antidotes to this trend. Both suggest ways for faculty and administrators to negotiate implementation of an ES curriculum, while also allowing for classroom and programmatic modifications.

Having considered study findings as well as implications for practice and theory, areas for future research are outlined below. This section ends with some closing thoughts on the state of employability skills curricular instruction.

## Recommendations for Future Research

Future research on community college instructor experiences with ES curricula would benefit from work with educators who have either chosen not to use the curricula in their teaching or who are required to use an ES curriculum but disagree with its inclusion. As this research effort did not include non-adopters or individuals opposed to ES curricular instruction, the perspective of these educators is missing. In focusing on a self-selected group of participants, the study's findings were generated by interviews with community college instructors who were advocates for employability skills curricula. There was, however, ample evidence in my review of scholarly literature on postsecondary ES instruction of a body of instructors less than enthused about curricular efforts being guided by employer needs and workforce-focused initiatives. A

cross-section of an institution or department would allow for study of alternative and dissenting opinions about ES curricular instruction.

An additional suggestion for further research involves another set of voices missing from this study: that of contingent instructors. While some participants in this study taught part time, these were administrators, whose interests were likely not representative of adjunct instructors. Contingent instructors may be more attuned to employer concerns, due to recent or concurrent work experience, so could bring a different perspective to a conversation about the need for ES instruction and use of an ES curriculum. Part-time instructors may also be less aware of state or institution level employability skills initiatives, or unaware of workforce education priorities that shape a community college's courses offerings. Future ES curricular initiatives and related research would benefit from an exploration of part-time instructors' experiences.

Finally, ES curricular innovation and reforms would profit from an examination of how employability skills instruction could be developed along the K-16 continuum. Research that investigates connections between postsecondary ES education and K-12 social and emotional learning initiatives would be beneficial to a holistic examination of employee skills and weaknesses in the workforce. Community colleges may be able to leverage work with area school districts to ensure students are taught skills that support success both in the educational system, as well as in the workplace.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe through a qualitative phenomenological research method the experience of North Carolina community college instructors who have taught using an employability skills curriculum. The main themes uncovered through data explication include finding that instructors experienced and expressed:

1) An emotional and personal investment in ES curricular instruction; 2) A sense of urgency in ES curricular instruction; 3) The value of prior experience to ES curricular instruction; 4) The importance of interpersonal connections for ES curricular instruction; 5) A need for support and resources in ES curricular instruction; and 6) Enjoyment in creatively designing ES curricular instruction.

In reviewing these themes and the corresponding subthemes, three key findings emerged: 1) Educators were personally invested in ES curricular instruction; 2) ES curricular instruction was described as a highly social endeavor; and 3) A lack of access to resources and supports hindered ES curricular instruction.

This research project is unique in that there are no phenomenological studies of community college instructor experiences with employability skills curricula. It therefore fills a gap in knowledge and serves as a guide for current and future employability skills curricular reform efforts. This research may also act as a starting point for other scholars and practitioners who plan to conduct their own instructor-focused study of employability skills curricular innovation.

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# APPENDICES

**Appendix A: Request for Administrator Help with Instructor Participation**

XXXX XX, 2020

Dear [Name of community college administrator]:

As a doctoral student in the Adult, Workforce, and Continuing Professional Education program at North Carolina State University, I am in the data gathering stage of my dissertation research. My study is focused on the experience of North Carolina community college faculty who have utilized an employability skills curriculum in their teaching. Faculty are qualified to participate if they have used a curriculum such as SkillsUSA, ACT WorkKeys, WIN, Working Smart, Necessary Skills Now, NC-NET toolkit or ESAP.

I am wondering if you'd be willing to share the attached invitation with faculty at your institution? The research activities would involve two online surveys and two recorded interviews done via a web conferencing platform. Participants will be provided a transcript of the initial interview, which they are asked to review and comment on in preparation for the second online interview. I will ask participants to complete all research activities during non-work hours.

Please feel free to contact me or my faculty advisor about this research. My phone number is XXX-XXX-XXXX and my email at hnmccann@ncsu.edu. My faculty advisor for the protocol is Dr. Diane Chapman (XXX-XXX-XXXX or ddchapma@ncsu.edu).

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Heidi Noelle McCann
Doctoral student
North Carolina State University

## Appendix B: Invitation for Instructor Participation

Dear North Carolina community college faculty member,

You have received this message because an administrator at your college believes that you may qualify for participation in my dissertation study.

Specifically, I am conducting research intended to gather feedback about the employability skill curricular efforts taking place across the North Carolina Community College System. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of community college faculty who have utilized an employability skill curriculum in their teaching, such as SkillsUSA, ACT WorkKeys, WIN, Working Smart, or ESAP.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research if you used an employability skills curriculum while teaching at a North Carolina community college. If you decide and qualify to participate, you will complete two online surveys and two recorded interviews on a web conferencing platform (the first interview will be 90 minutes and the other will be 60 minutes). You will also be asked to review and provide comments on the transcription of the initial interview, a process which should take no more than 30 minutes. I estimate that the total amount of time that you'll be spending on the research activities will be about 3 hours. If you complete all research activities, you will receive a $100 electronic gift card.

There is minimal risk and no benefit for you to participate in this research. Participating is not a requirement nor expectation of your job. I will not share with your employer whether you participated in this study or not. Everything that you share with me will be kept confidential and only shared with others in the way that I describe to you in the consent form. In order to maintain confidentiality, all research activities will occur outside of your work hours. I also encourage you to take the online surveys in a private location outside of work with your browser in private/incognito mode and close your browser when finished.

If you are interested in participating in this research, please access the screening survey after work hours by **datexxx, 2020** through the below link in order to be considered for participation in the study:

**Qualtrics survey URL**

Also, I appreciate your help in forwarding this invitation to other NCCCS faculty you feel fit the eligibility requirements of this study.

Please feel free to contact me or my faculty advisor if you have questions about this research. My phone number is XXX-XXX-XXXX and my email at hnmccann@ncsu.edu. My faculty advisor for the protocol is Dr. Diane Chapman (XXX-XXX-XXXX or ddchapma@ncsu.edu).

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Heidi McCann
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Leadership, Policy, & Human Development Department
Adult, Workforce, and Continuing Professional Education Program
North Carolina State University

**Appendix C: Participant Screener Survey**

Eligibility Screener Survey - Employability Skills Curriculum Study

You are being screened for possible participation in a research study about NCCCS employability skills curricular efforts. This research is being conducted by a doctoral candidate at North Carolina State University in order to learn more about the experience of North Carolina Community College System faculty who have used an employability skills curriculum in their teaching, such as SkillsUSA, ACT WorkKeys, WIN, Working Smart, Necessary Skills Now, NC-NET Employability Skills Toolkit, or ESAP.

The following questionnaire will be used to determine your eligibility for this study. If you qualify to participate, the researcher will contact you via email with more information about the study. Participation requires completing this initial screener survey plus an online demographic questionnaire, taking part in a 90 minute interview, spending about 30 minutes reviewing and providing comments on the interview transcript through a private Google Drive folder, and a 60 minute follow-up meeting. Both the interview and follow-up meeting will occur outside of your work hours, be recorded, and take place online through video conference software, in a one-on-one format with the researcher. Review of the interview transcript will likewise take place outside your work hours. You will be able to choose meeting times that work with your schedule.

Participation in this study is not a requirement nor expectation of your job, nor will your participation be shared with your colleagues or supervisor. In order to maintain confidentiality of your answers, please take this online survey outside of work hours in a private location with your browser in private/incognito mode and close your browser when finished. Note: This screener survey closes on **date.**

**If you qualify and complete all study activities, you will receive a $100 electronic gift card.**

Q2 Have you used an employability skills curriculum such as SkillsUSA, ACT WorkKeys, WIN, Working Smart, or ESAP in your teaching?

○ **Yes**, I've used an employability skills curriculum in my teaching

○ **No**, I've not used an employability skills curriculum in my teaching

Q3 Which employability skills curriculum did you use with your classes? (choose all that apply)

☐ SkillsUSA
☐ ACT WorkKeys
☐ Working Smart
☐ WIN (Worldwide Interactive Network)
☐ ESAP (Employability Skills Alignment Project)
☐ NC-NET Employability Skills Resource Toolkit
☐ Necessary Skills Now

☐ Other _____

Q4 At which NC community college(s) were you teaching when you used an employability skills curriculum?

_____

Q5 When did you use an employability skill curriculum in your teaching? [Please indicate the semester(s) and/or specific year(s)]

_____

Q6 Are you interested in participating in both the online interview (90 minutes) and online follow-up meeting (60 minutes) to discuss your experience with an employability skills curriculum?

Note that participants will need to attend these two online meetings via video conferencing software (Zoom). Participants will also be asked to complete a brief online demographic questionnaire and spend about 30 minutes reviewing and providing comments on the transcript of the initial interview. The cumulative amount of time involved will not exceed three total hours.

◯ Yes

◯ No

Q7 Please classify your employment within the NC community college system (select all that apply):

☐ Full-time faculty
☐ Part-time faculty
☐ Professional staff (academic or student support staff such as librarian, advisor, etc.)
☐ College administrator
☐ Other _____

Q8 In what subject area(s) were you teaching when you used an employability skills curriculum?
_____

Q9 What is the total number of years you've taught at the **community college level**:
_____

Q10 What is the total number of years you've taught in **higher education**:
_____

**Please note: The identity of all participants will be kept confidential, through use of pseudonyms.**

Q12 Your name:(Note: please only provide your name if interested in participating in this study)

_____

Q13 Please provide a non-work email address that you will be checking regularly, and where you prefer to receive correspondence regarding your participation in this study:

_____

Q14 Please provide a non-work phone number that we can reach you at, in case of difficulty with email communications:

_____

**Appendix D: Participant Selection Message**

Greetings,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my dissertation research study of faculty experiences with an employability skills curriculum.

**Your responses to the participant screener survey have identified you as being a faculty member who is <u>eligible for involvement in this study</u>. Study participants who complete all research activities will receive a $100 electronic gift card for their time.**

Upon agreeing to participate in this study, you will be sent a brief background questionnaire in which you will choose a pseudonym and provide basic demographic information. You will also be asked about which employability skills you focused on, in your teaching.

Next you will meet online with the researcher for approximately 90 minutes, in order to respond to interview questions about your experience and use of an employability skills curriculum. The interview will be recorded and take place online using Zoom meeting software. The questions asked will address your experiences regarding use of an employability skills curriculum in teaching courses.

Following our initial online meeting, you will be provided access and asked to review and provide comments on the transcript of the interview. This process should take no more than 30 minutes.

There will be a final follow-up online meeting of no more than 60 minutes in order to go over and address any comments you made, or wish to make about the interview transcription. The follow-up meeting will, like the interview, be recorded and take place via Zoom.

If this research still sounds like something you'd like to participate in, please access and complete the online consent form here: <insert Qualtrics link> **by MM/DD/YY**. The form will also ask you to choose the date and time of the initial online interview, so you may wish to have your schedule handy.

Please feel free to contact me or my faculty advisor if you have questions about this research. My phone number is XXX-XXX-XXXX and my email address is hnmccann@ncsu.edu. My faculty advisor for the protocol is Dr. Diane Chapman (XXX-XXX-XXXX or ddchapma@ncsu.edu).

Again, thank you for your consideration of this study.

Sincerely,

Heidi McCann
Doctoral student
North Carolina State University
Adult, Workforce, and Continuing Professional Education Program

**Appendix E: Informed Consent Agreement**

Adult Informed Consent Form

**Title of Study:** Community College Faculty Experiences with an Employability Skills Curriculum (**eIRB** #20781)
**Principal Investigator:** Heidi McCann, hnmccann@ncsu.edu, XXX-XXX-XXXX
**Funding Source:** None
**Faculty Point of Contact:** Dr. Diane Chapman, ddchapma@ncsu.edu, XXX-XXX-XXXX

## What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are invited to take part in a research study.  Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, and to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of North Carolina community college faculty who have used an employability skills curriculum in their teaching. We will do this through two online meetings: an interview (up to 90 minutes in length) plus a follow-up with each participant to review interview transcripts.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies also may pose risks to those who participate. You may want to participate in this research because you are interested in helping improve faculty use of employability skills curricula. You may not want to participate in this research if you do not wish to share any information about your experiences with an employability skills curriculum.

Specific details about the research in which you are invited to participate are contained below. If you do not understand something in this form, please ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If, at any time, you have questions about your participation in this research, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office. The IRB office's contact information is listed in the *What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?* section of this form.

## What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of the study, which is a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the Ph.D. program at NC State in the Adult, Workforce, and Continuing Education program, is to investigate the experiences of community college faculty who have worked with an employability skills curriculum.

## Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?
There will be approximately 8-12 participants in this study.

In order to be a participant in this study, you must agree to be in the study and have been employed as a faculty member at a North Carolina community college, and have used an employability skills curriculum in teaching least one NC community college course. You cannot participate in this study if you do not meet the inclusion criteria or you do not agree to be recorded.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do all of the following:

1. Complete a brief background questionnaire in which you will choose a pseudonym and provide basic demographic information. You will also be asked about which employability skills you focused on in your teaching.

2. Take part in a one-on-one online interview with the researcher, in which you will be asked questions about your experience using an employability skills curriculum in teaching classes. The interview will take no more than 90 minutes total and will be both video and audio recorded in order to produce a transcript for later use.

3. Read and review the transcript of the interview that is emailed to you, in order provide the researcher any clarification, edits or additional information via comments, if needed. You may also indicate any details such as names that you would like redacted and removed from the transcript. This should take no more than 30 minutes time.

4. Take part in an online, one-on-one follow-up to the interview, in which a recap of the interview will be discussed, with opportunity for participants to add additional details. This follow-up meeting will take no more than 60 minutes time and be video recorded.

The total amount of time that you will be participating in this study is a maximum of 3 hours.

**Recording and images**
If you want to participate in this research, you must agree to be video and audio recorded during both of your interviews. If you do not agree to be video and audio recorded, you cannot participate in this research.

**Risks and benefits**
There are minimal risks associated with participation in this research. You may feel uncomfortable with some of the questions I may ask, but you can always skip or refuse to answer any question I ask. Some of the answers you provide in the interviews might be recognizable to others. I will take care to report the data in such a way that your name is not published with the data; however due to the manner in which I'm conducting the research, there is a slight risk of individuals knowing that you participated in this research.

There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. Indirect benefits are helping inform recommendations and future research for community colleges.

**Right to withdraw your participation**
You can stop participating in this study at any time for any reason. In order to stop your participation, please tell me that you are no longer interested in participating or contact the faculty advisor for this protocol, Dr. Diane Chapman, at ddchapma@ncsu.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX. If you choose to withdraw your consent and to stop participating in this research, I will redact your data from my data set, securely destroy your data, and prevent the future uses of your data for research purposes wherever possible. This is possible in most, but not all, cases.

**Confidentiality, personal privacy, and data management**
Trust is the foundation of the participant/researcher relationship. Much of that principle of trust is tied to keeping your information private and in the manner that I have described to you in this form. The information that you share with me will be held in confidence to the fullest extent allowed by law.

Protecting your privacy as related to this research is of utmost importance to me. There are very rare circumstances related to confidentiality where I may have to share information about you. Your information collected in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies (for example, the FDA) for purposes such as quality control or safety. In other cases, I must report instances in which imminent harm could come to you or others.

The recorded data will be transcribed by a third party that is not affiliated with the community college or the university. I will provide you with a copy of the transcription for your review and comments.

How I manage, protect, and share your data are the principal ways that I protect your personal privacy. Data that will be shared with others about you will be re-identifiable.

**Re-identifiable.** Re-identifiable data is information that I can identify you with indirectly because of my access to information, role, skills, combination of information, and/or use of technology. This may also mean that in published reports others could identify you from what is reported, for example, if a story you tell us is very specific. If your data is re-identifiable, I will report it in such a way that you are not directly identified in reports. Based on how we need to share the data, I cannot remove details from the report that would protect your identity from ever being figured out. This means that others may be able to re-identify from the information reported from this research.

**Compensation**
For your participation in this study, you will receive a $100 electronic gift card for an online retail outlet of your choosing. You may also choose instead to have the $100 donated anonymously to a North Carolina community college emergency fund of your choice.

If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will receive nothing.

**What if you have questions about this study?**
If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Heidi McCann, via email hnmccann@ncsu.edu, or by phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX. You may also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Diane Chapman, ddchapma@ncsu.edu, XXX-XXX-XXXX.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB (Institutional Review Board) Office. An IRB office helps participants if they have

any issues regarding research activities. You can contact the NC State IRB Office via email at irb-director@ncsu.edu or via phone at (919) 515-8754.

## Consent To Participate

By electronically signing this consent form, I am affirming that I have read and understand the above information. All of the questions that I had about this research have been answered. I have chosen to participate in this study with the understanding that I may stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I am aware that I may revoke my consent at any time.

**Please access a copy of this consent form here [link to form] – participants should download and keep a copy of this document for future reference.**

**Participant Name:**

**Date:**

☐ **"Yes, I consent to research"**

☐ **"No, I do not consent to research"**

**[If Yes is selected, participant will be taken to the Broad Consent form page in Qualtrics]**

**Appendix F: Broad Consent Agreement**

BROAD CONSENT ADDENDUM

**Title of Study where Broad Consent is Initially Sought:** Community College Faculty Experiences with an Employability Skills Curriculum **(eIRB#** 20781**)**
**Principal Investigator(s):** Heidi McCann, hnmccann@ncsu.edu, XXX-XXX-XXXX
**Funding Source:** None
**Faculty Point of Contact:** Dr. Diane Chapman, ddchapma@ncsu.edu, XXX-XXX-XXXX

This form asks you to make an important choice about the use of your re-identifiable information. It asks you to decide if you are willing to give your consent to the use of your re-identifiable information for future research.

If you agree, researchers in the future may use your re-identifiable information in many different research studies over an indefinite period of time without asking your permission again for any specific research study. This could possibly help other people or contribute to science. If you do not agree to allow your re-identifiable information to be used for future research, your information will not be kept for future use by anyone.

This form explains in more detail what saying "yes" or "no" to this use of your information will mean to you.

**If you say "Yes" on this form**
The researcher(s) will store, use and share your re-identifiable information, and may do so for the purpose of medical, scientific, and other research, now and into the future, for as long as they are needed. This may include sharing your re-identifiable information with other research, academic, and medical institutions, as well as other researchers, drug and device companies, biotechnology companies, and others.

If you say "yes", there are no plans to tell you about any of the specific research that will be done with your re-identifiable information.

By saying "yes," your re-identifiable information may be used to create products or to deliver services, including some that may be sold and/or make money for others. If this happens, there are no plans to tell you, pay you, or give any compensation to you or your family.

The main risk in saying "yes" is that your confidentiality could be breached. Through managing who has access to your re-identifiable information and through regularly updated data security plans, I will do my best to protect your re-identifiable information from going to people who should not have it.

Another risk is that if you say "yes," your re-identifiable information could be used in a research project to which you might not agree to if you were asked specifically about it.

You will not personally benefit from saying "yes" in this form. Saying "yes" in this form is not a condition of participating in the Community College Faculty Experiences with an Employability Skills Curriculum study, nor of your enrollment or employment at your institution.

**If you say "no" or do not complete this form**
The researcher(s) and institution(s) identified above will not store, use, or share your re-identifiable information beyond the purposes stated in the previous consent form that you agreed to and signed for study the Community College Faculty Experiences with an Employability Skills Curriculum study.

**If you want to withdraw your consent**
You can stop participating at any time for any reason. Please contact Heidi McCann, via email hnmccann@ncsu.edu, or by phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX. You may also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Diane Chapman, ddchapma@ncsu.edu, XXX-XXX-XXXX.

You can expect that the researcher(s) will redact your re-identifiable information from their data set, securely destroy your data, and prevent future uses of your re-identifiable information for research purposes wherever possible. This is possible in some, but not all, cases.

**If you have questions**
Please ask the researcher to explain anything in this form that you do not clearly understand. Please think about this broad consent and/or discuss it with family or friends before making the decision to say "Yes" or "No."

If you have any questions about this broad consent, please contact Heidi McCann, via email hnmccann@ncsu.edu, or by phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX. You may also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Diane Chapman, ddchapma@ncsu.edu, XXX-XXX-XXXX.

If you want to discuss your rights as a person who has agreed to, refused, or declined to respond to an offer of broad consent or believe that your rights were violated as a result of your agreeing to this broad consent, please contact the NC State IRB Director, at irb-director@ncsu.edu or via phone at (919) 515-8754.

**Please access a copy of this consent form here [link to form] – participants should download and keep a copy of this document for future reference.**

**Please choose one statement**

**Statement of agreement**

I say yes. The future use of my data and consent has been explained to me, and I agree to give my consent to the future research uses of my information. My participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw my consent at any time without any penalty or loss of benefits to which I am entitled.

**Participant Name:**

**Date:**

☐ **"I say yes."**

**Statement of refusal**

I say no. The consent has been explained to me, and I do not agree to this consent.

**Participant Name:**

**Date:**

☐ **"I say no."**

## Appendix G: Participant Background Questionnaire

Participant Background Questionnaire - Employability Skills Curriculum Study

Q2 Please provide your name (first and last)

_____

Q3 Please choose a pseudonym that we will use for our interactions, moving forward. (Please make note of this in your records, and for your future reference)

_____

Q4  In using an employability skill curriculum through your teaching, which subject areas have you focused on? (select all that apply)

☐ Critical and analytical thinking
☐ Problem solving and decision making
☐ Cultural sensitivity
☐ Interpersonal skills
☐ Communications
☐ Reliability and dependability
☐ Teamwork
☐ Time and resource management
☐ None of the above / Other  _____

Q5 What is the highest degree level you've attained?

◯ High School

◯ College

◯ Graduate - Master's

◯ Graduate - Doctorate

◯ Professional degree / certification

◯ Other  _____

Q6 What is your birth year?

_____

Q7 What is your gender identity?

_____

Q8 What is your race/ethnicity?

_____

Q9 As a thank you for your participation in both the interview and follow-up meeting, I will provide each participant a $100 electronic gift card for a retail outlet of their choosing. The $100 may also be donated to a college emergency fund of your designation. Please indicate how you would like to receive your incentive:

○ Amazon.com gift card

○ Target.com gift card

○ Other  _____

**Appendix H: Interview Protocol**

Interview Protocol


**Start Time:**
**Finish Time:**
**Date:**
**Interviewer: Heidi McCann**
**Participant pseudonym:**

Hello, my name is Heidi McCann and I am a doctoral student in the Adult, Workforce, and Continuing Professional Education program at North Carolina State University. I am trying to learn about North Carolina Community College System faculty experiences with employability skills curricula.

Please confirm the pseudonym/"nickname" that you've provided and that I will use to protect your identity in the questionnaire and interview.

Additional information about the interview and study includes:
• Your participation in this interview and study is voluntary with the option to stop participating at any time.
• The interview will be video and audio recorded to ensure accuracy. The recordings will be confidential and your real name will not be associated with the study findings and results.
• This interview will last approximately 90 minutes.
• You can ask me to repeat questions.
• Please take care to speak from your own experiences and avoid mentioning the names of other people. If any come up, please know that those names will be redacted in the transcript.

**1) Establish rapport**
Let's begin by introducing ourselves. I will begin by sharing some details about my background and research interests.

Now, please tell me a bit about yourself.
[Possible prompts:]

a) What is your program area?

b) What classes do you typically teach?

c) Are you a full or part time faculty member?

d) How long have you been in your present position?

**2) Establish baseline knowledge of the employability skill curriculum**

Which employability skill curriculum did you choose to for use in your classes?

Please tell me about your experience using [the employability skill curriculum(s) you've named].

[Possible prompts:]
a) Tell me about how you came to be involved with employability skill efforts.

b) How did you choose to use this curriculum?

c) Which subject areas or modules did you focus on in your use of the employability skills curriculum? (for example: communications, teamwork, time management, etc.) Why did you use those curricular modules?

c) Tell me about how you use the employability skills curriculum in your courses?

d) If you could change one thing about the employability skill curriculum you used, what would it be?

**3) Competence**

a) Have you participated in any professional development concerning the teaching of employability skills? (This could be formal or informal – workshop days, conferences, articles you've read, classes you've taken, etc.) If so, tell me about the experience.

b) Considering your current knowledge of employability skills, how would you describe your comfort level and experience with teaching students employability skills?

**4) Autonomy**

a) If you were asked by or encouraged by an administrator or supervisor to use an employability skills curriculum in your teaching, what would your response be, or tell me about your experience.

b) Tell me about why you would or did respond this way?

**5) Relatedness**

a) Tell me about experiences and conversations that you've had with your teaching colleagues (fellow faculty members and without naming any names) that concern the teaching of employability skills or use of an employability skills curriculum.

b) If you could make recommendations to administrators (at this college or the system office) about how to increase faculty use of and participation in teaching employability skills, what would they be?

c) Have you ever participated in a college-wide or departmental initiative, in order to work with a colleague? How important is collegiality to your work? How does the mix of people who are working together on an initiative influence the likelihood of your participation?

## 6) Bottom line

Do you believe employability skills can be successful taught through community college courses? Why or why not?

## 7) Wrap up

What do you think is the single most important thing that I should know about what we discussed today?

We've completed our list of questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Conclusion:
*Thank you so much for your time today.*

Next steps:
I will have the interviews transcribed by a reputable third party service over the next few weeks. The transcription, once received will be uploaded to a private folder on the NCSU Google drive.

Once this has happened, I will contact you via email to let you know, and you will be given access to your interview transcription, as a Google document online. Only you will have access to this file. I encourage you to use the comment option as you review the transcript.

In this same email that alerts you to the availability of the transcript for review, I will list a number of dates and times that have been set aside for our follow-up meeting, in which we'll discuss the interview transcript. When you receive this message, please take a moment to select a date and time that works for your schedule, for our next online meeting.

Do you have any questions before we wrap up our online meeting today?