POST-SECONDARY PREPARATION EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN A TECHNICAL COLLEGE

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The impetus for this research was the countless hours I have spent with high school students. My passion as a school counselor is in assisting young people in discovering, preparing for, and achieving their career goals. It was through this work that I recognized the shortcomings in our education system to equitably prepare all students for their post-secondary plans. I am grateful to the many innovative and inspiring educators with whom I have worked over the years. Together we will continue to improve and create a more relevant education for our students.

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Abstract

Post-secondary preparation and planning is an integral component of secondary education. Despite goals of preparing high school students to be college and career ready, very little research has focused on the perspectives of students experiencing the post-secondary preparation curriculum of high schools. This interpretative phenomenological analysis investigated the post-secondary preparation experiences of graduates of the local school district who enrolled in a technical post-secondary training program. Results show that these students found little purpose in their high school education and perceived bias by their schools in favor of traditional university going students. Further evidence indicated that the students experienced minimal career exploration activities within their high school education. However, these students placed great value on career center courses during high school and were confident and purposeful in their pursuit of a technical degree. This study reveals the importance of a complete and comprehensive career development program integrated into the general curriculum that equally supports a range of career fields. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) provides the framework from which to understand the development of career interests and how intervention strategies may be implemented to strengthen students’ career development.

Keywords: post-secondary preparation, career development, career exploration, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)
Table of Contents

Chapter I: Introduction ............................................................................................................. 7
  Statement of the Problem ...................................................................................................... 7
    The topic ........................................................................................................................... 7
    Research problem .............................................................................................................. 7
    Justification for the research problem .............................................................................. 8
    Deficiencies in the evidence ............................................................................................. 9
    Audience ........................................................................................................................... 9
  Significance of the Research Problem ................................................................................. 10
    Implications for Post-Secondary Planning ...................................................................... 10
    Alaska Economy and Education ....................................................................................... 12
    Summation ....................................................................................................................... 13
  Positionality Statement ........................................................................................................ 13
  Research Question ............................................................................................................... 18
  Theoretical Framework ........................................................................................................ 18
    History and trajectory ...................................................................................................... 19
    Tenets of SCCT ................................................................................................................ 20
    Contemporary scholars and applications ........................................................................ 22
    Counter-argument to SCCT ............................................................................................. 24
    SCCT invoking critical change ........................................................................................ 25
    Application of SCCT ........................................................................................................ 25

Chapter II: Literature Review ................................................................................................. 26
  College and Career Readiness ............................................................................................. 28
    Determining readiness ...................................................................................................... 29
    Barriers to college and career readiness ......................................................................... 31
    Early engagement in college and career readiness .......................................................... 33
    Correlation to Social Cognitive Career Theory ............................................................... 35
    Summation ....................................................................................................................... 36
  College and Career Development Programs ..................................................................... 36
    Vocational identity ........................................................................................................... 37
    Career academies ............................................................................................................. 39
    Transitional programs ..................................................................................................... 40
    Summation ....................................................................................................................... 44
  Argument for Further Study .............................................................................................. 45
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 47

Chapter III: Methodology ........................................................................................................ 50
  Qualitative Research Approach .......................................................................................... 50
  Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis ......................................................................... 51
    Phenomenology ............................................................................................................... 52
    Hermeneutics .................................................................................................................... 53
Chapter IV: Results

Recruitment and Access ........................................................................... 54
Participants ............................................................................................... 56
Data Collection ......................................................................................... 57
Data Storage .............................................................................................. 58
Data Analysis ............................................................................................ 58
  Step 1: Reading and re-reading .............................................................. 59
  Step 2: Initial noting .............................................................................. 59
  Step 3: Developing emergent themes .................................................... 60
  Step 4: Searching for connections amongst emergent themes ............... 60
  Step 5: Moving to the next case ........................................................... 61
  Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases ............................................ 61
Ethical Considerations ............................................................................. 61
Trustworthiness ......................................................................................... 62
  Sensitivity to context ........................................................................... 63
  Commitment and rigor ......................................................................... 63
  Transparency and coherence ............................................................... 63
  Impact and importance ....................................................................... 64
  Credibility .......................................................................................... 64
  Transferability ..................................................................................... 64
  Dependability ...................................................................................... 65
  Confirmability ..................................................................................... 65
Potential Researcher Bias ......................................................................... 65
Limitations ................................................................................................. 67
Conclusion ............................................................................................... 68

Chapter IV: Results

Traditional High School Education is Irrelevant ...................................... 70
  Not connected to goals and interests .................................................... 72
  Hands-on learning preferred ............................................................... 75
  Lacked meaning .................................................................................. 80
  Biased message .................................................................................. 84
  Conclusion ......................................................................................... 90

Route to Technical Program .................................................................... 90
  Professional guidance. ....................................................................... 92
  Career exploration .............................................................................. 96
  Conclusion. ......................................................................................... 101

Technical Degree Career Plan ................................................................. 102
  Clear purpose. .................................................................................... 103
  Connected to short and long- term goals .......................................... 107
  Conclusion. ......................................................................................... 110
Summary........................................................................................................................................111

Chapter V: Discussion and Implications ..................................................................................112
Finding 1. High Schools Do Not Equally Support a Diverse Range of Career Fields ... 113
  Connecting secondary curriculum to career ready skills ......................................................114
  Barriers to post-secondary preparation ..................................................................................117
  Connections to the theoretical framework ..........................................................................118
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................119
Finding 2. High School Career Development Programs Are Incomplete.........................120
  Career exploration activities .................................................................................................121
  Incorporation of college and career readiness skills ..............................................................123
  Connections to the theoretical framework ..........................................................................126
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................127
Finding 3. Technical Education Programs Facilitate a Purposeful Career Path ............127
  Connections to the theoretical framework ..........................................................................130
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................131
Implications for Practice ........................................................................................................132
  Implement comprehensive career development programming ............................................133
  Assess student barriers to career development ..................................................................135
  Broaden the scope of post-secondary planning and preparation activities .....................136
Implications for Further Research .........................................................................................138
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................139
References ..................................................................................................................................142

Appendix A: Unsigned Consent Document ...........................................................................155
Appendix B: IRB Application and Approval .........................................................................157
Appendix C: Sample Recruitment Materials ..........................................................................169
Appendix D: Interview Protocol .............................................................................................171
Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The topic. The purpose of this research project was to understand the experiences of local high school graduates attending post-secondary education in a technical institution. This research investigated how their high school education in the local school district influenced and prepared them for their post-secondary plans. The vision of the local school district is to prepare students for post-secondary education, training, and careers (http://www.asdk12.org/school_board/vision/) and to achieve 90% graduation rate (http://www.asdk12.org/destination2020/). However, the district is ten percentage points behind in this graduation target (https://education.alaska.gov/stats/GradAttendRates/) and is located in a state with one of the lowest post-secondary completion rates amongst adults in the country.

This study aimed to answer the question: What were the post-secondary planning and preparation experiences during high school of graduates of the local school district who are attending post-secondary education at a technical institution?

Research problem. The problem of practice this study investigated is the favoritism of the education system for students bound for the traditional four-year university while disregarding the academic needs of students pursuing other post-secondary options. This inequity cycles through generations as it propagates the message that the needs of those in the typical positions of power come before the needs of all others. Social reproduction in education
occurs in the many practices that favor those in power (Giroux, 1983). The current system demonstrates social reproduction by perpetuating the power of those for whom the system works, specifically the public education consumer who will attend a four-year university.

This research examined the experiences of high school graduates currently enrolled in a technical post-secondary training or education program. Participants were interviewed regarding their perceptions of how their high school curriculum prepared them for their post-secondary training. Participants were prompted to reflect upon the strengths, supports, gaps, and weaknesses of the career development and post-secondary preparation programs in which they experienced in secondary school. The outcome of this study provided insight into the biases in the school system for students planning and preparing for the traditional four-year university.

Justification for the research problem. Public education aims to educate and prepare all students for life long success and productivity. However, to achieve this schools must understand how to support the professional goals of all students; schools must be seen as relevant to the needs and ambitions of all students. Secondary schools must be able to connect their curricula to realistic and available professional opportunities. Schools that incorporate career and post-secondary training and planning also find more success in preventing student drop out (Bottoms, 2004).

Alaska offers a range of post-secondary education and training options including trade organization apprenticeships, colleges and universities, and vocational schools. However, the local school district’s high school curriculum does not offer equal opportunities for students to be
introduced to and prepared for all post-secondary options. Expanding the high school curriculum to foster skills and interests in a variety of different post-secondary goals has the simultaneous effect of engaging students as well as skill development and preparation for further education (Packard, Leach, Ruiz, Nelson, & DiCocco, 2012). This study aimed to provide the perspective of the student in creating more engaging and appropriate career development opportunities towards non-traditional four-year university post-secondary options.

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** A review of the literature offers very little research on the experiences of students in non-traditional university post-secondary training programs. Rather the primary focus in the literature is on various career preparation and academic programs. Research on the link between graduation rates and career and technical education (CTE) suggests that often the CTE programs are treated as a “dead end” track rather than a viable career option (Jørgensen, 2015). The literature also includes research focused on the experiences of specific demographic groups in their preparation and attendance in secondary education such as students in poverty (Cilesiz & Drotos, 2016) and the pursuit of science and math by African American ninth grade males (Lamb, Aceneaux, Cox-Moses, Sweat, & Owens, 2013). This research looked to discover deficiencies in the high school curriculum in sufficiently preparing students for post-secondary education at an institution other than the traditional university setting.

**Audience.** This study aims to inform leaders, policy makers, and providers of public education who share the vision of preparing high school graduates for their career goals. This study offers these stakeholders the unique and vital perspective of the students who are in pursuit
of their post-secondary goals that are outside that of the traditional four year university. Implications of this study offer leaders and policy makers in education insight for better achievement of the goal of preparing all high school graduates for post-secondary plans.

**Significance of the Research Problem**

This research problem addresses the local school district’s goals of increasing school attendance through creating a more relevant school curriculum and developing post-secondary planning and preparation for high school graduates. While this particular study focused on the experiences of graduates of a school district in South Central Alaska, the concerns of this research problem are generalizable to those of public education across the country. The implications of this study aim to improve secondary education’s relevance for stakeholders by connecting individual’s and community’s professional and economic needs to the skills offered in public education. The following is a discussion of the implications of this study for the general improvement of post-secondary planning during high school followed by a description of Alaska’s specific educational and economic situation.

**Implications for Post-Secondary Planning.** Students will engage in their secondary education when they believe it is relevant to their lives and interests. Schools that honor and prepare students for a range of career options create an atmosphere of inclusiveness for all students. Research shows that schools featuring vocational skills create a sense of academic belonging which is correlated to school engagement (Elffers, Oort, &Karsten, 2012). Leaders in education must understand how the high school experience can be improved to meet the needs of
all students to increase attendance, performance, and completion of high school. High school graduates who are ready for success in their post-secondary pursuits will be more likely to experience success in these efforts. Adults with post-secondary training and employable skills will experience higher job and financial stability (Grundman, 2013). Families supported by adults confident in their ability to obtain and maintain gainful and fulfilling employment as a result of their secondary preparation and post-secondary education will be stable and productive members of the community.

Secondary education transitions students to post-secondary education and training by offering opportunities to explore career interests, discover aptitudes, and develop skills necessary in continuing one’s education or training to achieve career goals. The current system does well to meet the needs of students planning to attend the traditional four-year university, but fails to offer rigorous courses and support that develop skills preparing students for career fields outside of those requiring the traditional four-year university degree. This antiquated practice reflects social reproduction that occurs in the education system that preserves the power and status quo of those in control (Anyon, 1981). Leaders in education concerned with creating more equitable systems that serve the needs of all students must be informed of the experiences of non-college attending graduates of their experiences in preparation for their post-secondary education. Leaders in education must have insight into the needs and goals of education’s stakeholders to offer an appropriate and relevant post-secondary planning and preparation curriculum in the local school district.
Alaska Economy and Education. Districts and schools must be aware of the cultures, values, and livelihoods of the population in which it serves. School systems that are inclusive and foster needs and interests of the families within their communities will experience greater support from the community (Haines, Gross, Blue-Banning, Francis, & Turnbull, 2015). Alaska’s post-secondary training opportunities include universities, technical college, unions, apprenticeships, and vocational training centers to meet the variety of interests and needs represented in its population. Graduates of the local school district who attend a two-year technical post-secondary education program can offer insight for the strengths and shortcomings of the district’s post-secondary planning curriculum in preparing them for their technical training program. With this awareness, the school system can better honor the diverse career interests of its students and meet the labor demands within the community by aligning its curriculum with those demands.

Alaska’s economy and workforce is dependent on its ability to educate and prepare its citizens for viable careers within the state. Alaska has a unique economy with the majority of revenue from oil, gas, seafood and other natural resources, however, the majority of jobs are in trades and services (Knapp, 2012). The Alaskan public education system must recognize how it can more appropriately prepare its future workforce for further training and education in such career fields. This research looks to provide evidence for improvements in public education that would promote post-secondary education preparation matching Alaska’s job market.
Producing college and career ready high school graduates is a common goal amongst school districts across the United States and specifically in Alaska’s school districts. Alaska values post-secondary education to the extent that the Alaska Commission on Post-Secondary Education created the Alaska Post-secondary Access and Completion Network which targets adults who have not obtained post-secondary training and supports them in enrolling and completing post-secondary education (http://acpe.alaska.gov/Access). The Alaskan Post-secondary Access and Completion Network follows guidelines established by the National College Access Network which promotes the increase of post-secondary education by Americans based on job projections. Adults may be prepared to make career decisions if they receive a comprehensive career development and post-secondary planning curriculum in secondary school.

**Summation.** This study examined the inclusiveness of all post-secondary options promoted in the career development programs implemented in the local school district according to the educational and workforce needs and trends of the state economy. This research is significant for its consideration of the experiences of recent high school graduates enrolled in a technical institution. With their perspective, leaders and policy makers in education may be better informed of the unmet needs of the current post-secondary preparation practices.

**Positionality Statement**

My authority as the researcher in this project required that I carefully consider how my personal and professional experiences and background interacted with and manipulated the study. In this positionality statement, I first describe my background in the context of my
research interest including my personal and professional perspectives. Next, I discuss my positionality as it relates to my educational experiences. Last, I will reflect on biases that potentially influenced this research and measures taken to control for them.

I grew up in a military family, moving every three years across the country and, at times, the world. My family’s socioeconomic position in each new community shifted slightly depending on the proximity of our new home to the military base. When living on a military base, our family of four solidly existed in middle class. However, my parents frequently found housing in civilian neighborhoods zoned for the best schools in our new town, putting us in classrooms with the wealthier, more affluent students of the community.

The transient military life style, while stressful at times, instilled in me an acceptance and respect for the diversity of cultures and lifestyles we encountered both within and outside of the military system. By the time I reached high school, I had many career field interests, yet no one particular professional passion. My school counselor during my junior and senior years took particular interest in assisting me in career exploration and development. His dedication and obvious enjoyment in empowering and enabling his students to plan for and pursue their life’s goals sparked my passion to follow in his professional footsteps.

I now work as a school counselor in a large high school in Alaska. I am passionate about my work in connecting with students to assist them in their completion of high school and preparation for post-secondary education and careers. However, my position makes me aware of the limitations of public education in introducing and preparing students for the variety of post-
secondary education and career options. The system favors students pursuing the traditional four-year university by sending a hidden message to students that this educational pursuit is the most worthwhile. This hidden curriculum in secondary education perpetuates the dominance of those for whom the current system works (Kentli, 2009). My students have shared with me their frustration for the systemic lack of support and options that would prepare them for a post-secondary pursuit outside of the traditional four-year university.

I am a white American female born into a diversely educated family. While neither of my parents earned a college degree, both are highly skilled and trained in their respective careers. My extended family includes professors, teachers, medical professionals, lawyers, artists, and scientists. I was raised with the expectation that I would pay for and attend college and earn a degree. I had the support of a parents who knew how to negotiate a system of applying for colleges, scholarships, and loans. During my childhood, society amply provided me evidence that a college education was within my grasp, as more and more women who looked and acted like me filled up college campuses and secured positions across many career fields.

In most respects, such as race and socioeconomic status, I am situated in a position of power within the education system. Being a member of the majority, I have not been forced to navigate and understand the workings of this system in order to survive it, for me it is the norm (Lorde, 1980). However, the layout of the public education system is not a familiar, comfortable scheme for many of my students. I am ethically obligated to regularly confront my assumptions about the support, privilege, and resources available to each of my students. While my cultural,
historical, and contemporary experiences empowered me, those of my students may have caused for much different relationships with educational experiences and expectations (Carlton-Parsons, 2008). Vigilant introspection for my positionality and its influences on my interactions with students is a continuous effort towards my professional development and ability to promote educational equity.

Constant attentiveness to the influence of biases on my research was fundamental to the integrity of the work. Potential biases that impacted the outcomes of this research included the message conveyed by my personal interest in this problem of practice, my professional prejudices of the public education system, and the impact I had on the study’s participants based on my assumptions for other’s experiences in education derived from my own personal and professional experiences. The following is a discussion of these biases followed by the precautions taken in order to mitigate their impact on the research.

My first concern is for the perception of this research to promote academic tracking in primary and secondary education. The research on the effectiveness of school systems that give students the option of an academic or vocational focus in high school links vocational education with lower education standards. These studies evaluate school systems that incorporate vocational and technical education as the educational dumping ground for students deemed unmotivated or disengaged by the standards of a system that focuses its resources on college preparatory courses (Duffy & Elwood, 2013; Jørgensen, 2015; Whitlock, 2013). This is especially concerning for those who are typically marginalized in education and often assumed
lower in ability. This study aims to support the value for educational choice held by the marginalized consumers of education (Cooper, 2005) rather than to deny or limit opportunities. My intention for this research is to promote equity in post-secondary planning and facilitate students’ choice in the process, rather than track students into higher or lower performing educational tracks.

Another potential bias for this research was in my professional perception of the post-secondary preparation opportunities in the education system. The impetus for this project came from my work with students who shared their disappointment in the lack of opportunities in high school that prepare them for the post-secondary plans. I held the perception that the school system provides college preparation courses in all subject area while failing to offer students courses of equivalent rigor that would build skills for post-secondary options such as apprenticeships, vocational or technical training. The risk of displaying my personal bias was in the potential for influencing participants’ responses based on what they believed I may or may not expect to hear.

Finally, I was vigilant of the influences I had on the participants and the analyzation of the data as a result of my positionality. The study’s participants were from varying ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic statuses. These factors along with my role as a doctoral student may have interrelated to construct barriers to communication and trust between me and the participants. Not only could these differences have inhibited rapport building with the participants, but they may also have skewed my ability to accurately understand and interpret their responses.
I worked to minimize the influence of the above biases through deliberate planning and execution of the study. An integral component of controlling biases throughout the duration of the research included consideration for the ethical guidelines in the study’s design, data gathering, and interpretation of the data (Kvale, 2007). The research performed was a qualitative study of the participants’ experiences in their high school education. I made a thorough effort to clearly communicate to potential participants the purpose and intentions of this research during the recruitment process. The study’s purpose is supported by a comprehensive literature review and the theoretical framework described in the following sections. The interview process was practiced in advance to develop open, unbiased listening skills. Careful methodology planning and wording of the interview questions helped minimize the impact of my own bias on participants’ responses.

Research Question

What were the post-secondary planning and preparation experiences during high school of graduates of the local school district who are attending post-secondary education at a technical institution?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study was Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). Derived from Bandura’s social cognitive theory, SCCT is a model from which to explain the development of career and academic interests, how career relevant choices are crafted, and the accomplishment of performance outcomes (Brown, Hackett, & Lent, 1994).
Originally, SCCT was comprised of three overlapping models illustrating the progression of an individual’s interest development, career choice, and professional performance. Later, a career and education satisfaction model was added to the theory (Brown & Lent, 2013). The basic structure of the theory is that career development is a process of one’s self-efficacy and outcome expectations forming interests leading to goal setting, action choice (career choices), and eventually performance achievements.

The following sections will discuss SCCT’s history and trajectory, tenets of the theory, contemporary authors and uses of the theory, a counterargument to the theory, and how this theory supports critical change. In conclusion, the theory’s application and relevance to this particular study is described.

History and trajectory. Derived from Bandura’s social cognitive theory, SCCT is a model from which to explain the development of career and academic interests, how career relevant choices are crafted, the accomplishment of performance outcomes, and career and education satisfaction (Brown, Hackett, & Lent, 1994; Brown & Lent, 2013). The original authors of the theory, Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2000), developed this framework as a unity of several previous perspectives on career interest and development.

In the initial literature introducing SCCT, the authors recognized where their theory could grow. The original framework consisted of three models: interest development, career choice making, and performance. Acknowledging the absence of a model explaining factors influencing occupational well-being, a fourth model depicting education and career satisfaction
was later incorporated into the theory (Brown & Lent, 2013). Also, in the initial literature introducing SCCT, the authors suggest where the theory must be tested and updated to reflect career development factors that impact women, minorities, and people of varying socio-economic status. The authors continued developing the theory by testing the influences of perceived and actual barriers in the environment on career choice attainment (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). The next sections will describe the tenets of the SCCT followed by a discussion of the recent scholars and research.

**Tenets of SCCT.** SCCT is comprised of four overlapping models that depict the interplay of three variables on career interest development. These three variables are self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. Career development is mapped out in the four models of interest development, career choice, performance, and career and academic satisfaction.

According to this framework, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals are key determinants in one’s career interests, choices, performance, and satisfaction. The degree to which each variable influences a person’s career behaviors fluctuates between individuals and situations (Brown & Lent, 2013). Self-efficacy beliefs are built from performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and physiological reactions related to educational/occupational activities (Brown & Lent, 2013). Outcome expectations are generated through direct and vicarious experiences with educationally/occupationally relevant activities, and are partly determined by self-efficacy beliefs. This variable represents the consequences one
perceives for a given activity. Personal goals are the degree to which one intends to pursue an activity. An individual’s career development behaviors are arranged around their personal goals. These three variables interrelate along with other mediating factors to shape the four models that construct SCCT.

The interest development model is comprised of the beliefs that self-efficacy and outcome expectations relate directly to occupational and education interests and that these interests are influenced by relevant abilities. The career choice model is built on the premise that self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations affect choice goals and actions, that people want to enter career fields consistent with their primary interests and that they will try to enter occupational fields that are consistent with their choice goals provided that they are committed to the goal, the goal is clear, and proximal to the point of actual entry, and that interests affect entry behaviors indirectly through their influence on choice goals. The performance model is supported by the beliefs that self-efficacy and outcome expectations influence performance and that ability affects performance through its influence on self-efficacy beliefs. Finally, the career/education satisfaction model illustrates the variables influencing one’s happiness with work or education. These variables include perceived self-efficacy to perform required tasks, perform valued tasks, and advancement toward personal goals (Brown & Lent, 2013).

SCCT is a multifaceted framework from which to understand the complexity of career development. While the four overlapping models create an intricate map depicting various connections amongst the models constructs, the relationships between each construct of the
framework are not necessary to support the research problem. However, understanding the existence and development of the theory’s constructs including self-efficacy, outcome expectations, vocational interests, career choice, and goal setting support the premise of the research problem that post-secondary preparation in high school must not be limited to preparing students for a particular set of potential careers. Rather, career development is an intricate system composed of many factors offering many points of program implementation by schools. SCCT provides a framework from which schools can build career development programs that foster students’ growth in one or several of the constructs.

SCCT is supported by recent researchers as well as applied in studies to describe and understand the career development process for a variety of specific populations. The following section highlights contemporary scholars and applications of the theory.

**Contemporary scholars and applications.** In contemporary applications of SCCT specific variables impacting career decision making and achievement are investigated. The theory’s suitability to represent the experiences of a diverse population is found in the recent literature. Researchers use the career development process illustrated by SCCT to examine the multitude of factors and forces at work in career decision making and attainment. Also, current researchers apply SCCT as a framework to develop or improve career counseling programs for students.

SCCT is a useful framework from which to study the interplay of several variables’ impact on career decision making. The SCCT models are used to show how socio-economic
status shapes students’ self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career interests (Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Thompson & Dahling, 2012). The framework has also been tested and shown to be a fit from which to consider the influence of gender on career development constructs such as interests, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations (Inda, Rodríguez, & Peña, 2013; Rojewski & Kim, 2003). Similarly, SCCT is applied to specific minority and under-served populations to consider the interaction of self-efficacy, perception of barriers, and vocational identity on career exploration behaviors (Gushue, Clarke, Pantzer, & Scanlan, 2006; Gushue, Scanlan, Pantzer, & Clarke, 2006).

The original authors along with several contemporary researchers have expanded SCCT. Career choice barriers are investigated in a study by Lent et al. (2002), further cultivating the theory to include the concepts of barriers and coping strategies and their interplay on career achievement. In a more recent study, SCCT is expanded to apply to career process activities that encompass career building, advancements, and transition behaviors to develop the framework’s capacity to include career development constructs beyond adolescence and early adulthood (Lent & Brown, 2013). Not only have the foundational tenets of the model linking variables such as self-efficacy and goals to career planning and exploration activities been supported by recent research, but the theory’s models have been updated to match findings in contemporary research that show where conscientiousness is linked to the work performance construct (Brown, Lent, Telander, & Tramayne, 2011; Rogers & Creed, 2011).
These studies use SCCT to explain phenomenon being studied as well as to create space for the implementation of interventions in the career development process. SCCT is a fitting framework for this particular study not only for its use in understanding the phenomenon of career development, but also in its support for practical implications for educators to enhance career exploration and development activities in the school setting.

**Counter-argument to SCCT.** Several theories in career development propose alternatives to SCCT framework. The career development process originally illustrated by Brown, Hackett, and Lent (1994) is complex in its many direct and indirect links between constructs such as self-efficacy, interests, and goal choice. This complexity is compounded by the dimensions of the four overlapping models previously described. Critiques of the theory propose alternate links between the constructs of the models. Bandura (as cited in Sheu et al, 2010) suggested slightly different roles of the impact of environmental factors on self-efficacy. Sheu et al. (2010) support Bandura’s hypothesis and suggest updating the model.

These arguments underscore the degree of detail from which the framework is comprised. In addition to being difficult to understand, SCCT’s complexity has the potential to complicate the implications of a study beyond practicalities. However, Lent and Brown (1996) proposed SCCT as a living framework and encouraged future growth and contributions by others. SCCT’s complexity is valuable for research purposes in its inclusion of a range of variables (role models, education opportunities, race, gender) impacting an individual’s career choices; it may be best
applied practically for its representation of career development as a process with key constructs that can be cultivated through intervention activities in an education setting.

**SCCT invoking critical change.** This study aimed to explore gaps that exist in preparing students for post-secondary plans in the vocational and technical fields. SCCT provided a framework from which to consider means to more equitably fulfill college and career readiness goals for public education graduates. The demand for post-secondary ready high school graduates implies a need for change within the educational system. Studies show that career development interventions in the high school setting that build self-efficacy and career choice preparedness will enhance students’ attitudes toward career planning (Koivisto, Vinokur, & Vuori, 2011). SCCT maps out specific locales in the career development process where improvements and additions can be made to career guidance activities within public education.

**Application of SCCT.** SCCT supported this study for its consideration of numerous variables impacting the career development and choice process. Data collected in this research included the participants’ experiences with post-secondary preparation that included activities in career and interest development and skill building. While the research problem did not assume a specific component of the participants’ experiences in career development to be lacking, SCCT provided a range of possibilities from which to understand the data. The intended audience of this research project includes educational leaders and policy makers. The implications of the study when considered in context of the theoretical framework suggest where post-secondary preparation practices can be improved in the local school district’s secondary schools.
Chapter II: Literature Review

The primary goal of public education is to generate productive and contributing members of the community by providing an education that prepares students for post-secondary education or work. However, the typical secondary curriculum favors students who choose the college preparation path while failing to provide adequate preparation for students with post-secondary plans other than the traditional four-year university. The hidden message in this curriculum is that college is the preferred post-secondary option while others such as vocational training or apprenticeships are less respected options. This belief limits the scope of career exploration and development opportunities for students.

College and career readiness is a priority for the majority of public education systems. This goal implies an equitable preparation in high school for the range of career options requiring various levels of post-secondary training and education. However, the public education system prioritizes a curriculum that prepares students for college through the offering of sequential courses that build upon skill level with each successive course. This sequential skill building is typically not available for other post-secondary endeavors, therefore, omitting the academic needs of a portion of students. This research aims to investigate the post-secondary preparing and planning experiences of students of the local school district who do not plan to attend a traditional four-year university after high school.

The premise of this research project is founded in this researcher’s observation of the inequity of preparation during secondary school for the variety of post-secondary options. The
focus of the study is on the experiences of high school graduates who attend a vocational or technical training program after high school. The study’s aim is to understand participants’ perspectives on the support received to prepare for this pursuit. Disparities in the skills these students acquired for their post-secondary education in comparison to college going students are considered and explored. Secondary education’s purpose is to explore career interests, discover aptitudes, and develop skills necessary in continuing one’s education or training to achieve career goals. However, given the system’s bias for college preparation, leaders in education must be made aware of the gaps in education in preparing students interested in non-university options. To promote a more equitable education system, these gaps must be explored from the perspective of the students pursuing such post-secondary education.

The purpose of this study is to understand the perception of high school graduates attending a post-secondary education in a non-four year university institution and how their high school education and experiences prepared them for their post-secondary plans. This literature review supports this research problem by exploring the findings in the meaning of college and career readiness including how it is defined, determined, and achieved as well as the gaps and areas requiring further study. The research explored also includes barriers faced by students in achieving readiness for careers and colleges and how early engagement in college and career readiness supports or prevents these barriers. The correlation between these factors in college and career development with this research project’s theoretical framework, SCCT, is also examined.
The current research in college and career readiness, preparation, and development offers insight for the degree to which these factors prepare students for post-secondary plans. This literature review examines and analyzes the findings in the research in these themes. The expectations for the achievement of college and career readiness in secondary education is evaluated including establishing expectations for college and career readiness, considering barriers faced by students in the career decision making process, and advocacy for early engagement in career development programs. Next, the research on career development programs in high school is reviewed with emphasis on vocational identity, career academies, and secondary to post-secondary transitional programs. Finally, the gaps in the literature and the suggestions for further study concerning career development and preparation in secondary education are addressed.

College and Career Readiness

The concept of college and career readiness as a vision for secondary education graduates stems from the objective of making the United States the most educated country in the world (Grundman, 2013). The goal of producing graduates prepared for success in post-secondary education, training, or the workforce is common amongst districts across the country. College and career readiness is assessed in three general contexts in the literature. First, the standards and measurements for readiness found in the literature are discussed. Next, the research evaluating students’ barriers to pursuing college and career aspirations is analyzed followed by the examination of potential mitigating factors to those barriers that support exposure to career
readiness and development starting in the elementary years. Last, the correlation of this literature to the study’s theoretical framework is evaluated.

**Determining readiness.** What does it mean for a high school graduate to be college and career ready? The diversity of post-secondary education, training, and workforce options indicates a range of potential skills qualifying students for readiness. Balfanz (2009) states that though the education system as a whole is capable of successfully preparing all students for college and career readiness, in its current state the system fails to do so with the majority of its students. Though accurate measurements of college and career readiness are disputable, investigations of the adequacy in which students are educated in career development and work ready skills indicates much room for improvement. A study of high schools’ employment preparation found that most secondary schools should offer more courses teaching work-based competencies, distribute employability preparation skills lessons across all subject areas, and include technical as well as general work skills in courses (Guy, Sitlington, Lars, & Frank, 2009). The current system’s focus on the college preparatory curriculum disregards potential opportunities in fully preparing students for college and career readiness. Further, much inconsistency exists in the standards for and measurements of college and career readiness.

While college preparation courses may promote skills preparing students for college level academics, vocational and career and technology education (CTE) programs are found to integrate career readiness skills for both college and the workforce. The curricula of vocational high schools are linked to readiness skills for both university and vocational education going
students. However, vocational education focused high schools provide the rigor and skills development suitable for all students’ post-secondary plans (Demerest & Gehrt, 2015). While the skill set necessary for vocational post-secondary plans may seem to exclude those skills required for college success, research indicates that many of these skills overlap and prepare students for both pursuits. Aligning both college and work ready skills with secondary curricula is found to produce high school graduates who are ready for the transition into the expectations of post-secondary education, training, or the workforce (Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittlenger, 2014). Offering CTE programs is one strategy in making education equitable in that the work ready skills acquired are applicable to college and career, though this approach is not widely considered or adopted.

Standards and evaluations of college and career readiness vary across the country. Currently much effort is being put into aligning core curriculum across the nation, however, variability in curriculum occurs from high school to high school. In a study of math skills for college readiness, not only did student performance vary from state to state, but a significant discrepancy amongst college admission standards for math expectations was also found (Lee, 2012). Such variance amongst post-secondary institutions suggests that current measurements of readiness for post-secondary education may be inadequate, especially the use of one single assessment. Maruyama (2012) argues against the use of a single assessment such as the ACT or SAT, two common college entrance exams, but advocates for the use of multiple measures and meaningful benchmarks that speak in terms of possibility of success rather than a guarantee. An in-depth look at the readiness of high school students for post-secondary success indicates that a
profile of student’s scores, work performance, courses taken, and grade point average provide a more complete predictor of success than isolated predictors such as a single exam score (Conley, 2014). Assessing college and career readiness is a complicated task, it appears that it is not accomplished by the use of one exam.

**Barriers to college and career readiness.** There are many obstacles in preparing all high school students for college and career readiness upon graduation. Most prevalent are the barriers faced by the students themselves in their ability to take full advantage of their education and pursue their post-secondary ambitions. Students’ perceptions of the magnitude of barriers towards post-secondary opportunities, relevancy of education, and misconceptions about post-secondary education, training, and work have all been found to be significant difficulties in achieving college and career ready graduates. These struggles are magnified by students’ lack of confidence in their ability to overcome barriers and accomplish their aspirations.

Self–efficacy is the belief a student has in their capability to achieve goals and is essential in progressing towards future goals. Lent and Brown (2000) explore the nature of barriers in career decision making and find that a student’s level of self-efficacy is directly correlated to that student’s perception of a setback as simply a challenge rather than an insurmountable obstacle. Belief in one’s ability to achieve goals is such an important component of the college and career readiness process that some research advocates for the evaluation of student self-efficacy in middle school to implement appropriate self-efficacy building interventions in the career counseling program (Gibbons & Borders, 2010).
Students’ self-efficacy is constructed by factors often beyond their control such as socioeconomic status, culture, and perceived expectations of family and community (Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Thompson & Dahling, 2012). Norms determined by one’s community, culture, and status often contribute to the barriers between students’ aspirations and willingness to progress towards them. Career prospects shaped by cultural and social expectations often influence students’ understanding of the connection between their secondary education and career aspirations (Constantine, Kindaichi, & Miville, 2007). Socioeconomically disadvantaged students, though having similar career aspirations to their non-disadvantaged counterparts, often view post-secondary education attendance as risky due to their status both in terms of socially fitting in with other students and achieving success (Cilesiz & Drotos, 2016). These barriers perceived by students should be acknowledged by educators involved in school career development programs in order to design interventions that build skills, confidence, and support in negotiating challenges that students may not have access to outside of school.

Barriers towards readiness for post-secondary education or work impact students beyond their secondary education. Career decision making difficulties amongst college age students is often due to factors such as indecisiveness and dysfunctional beliefs (Gati & Amir, 2010). Students pursuing post-secondary education may find themselves lacking important skills to fully engage in their course of study and progress towards a fulfilling career, suggesting that such high school graduates could have been better prepared for their post-secondary plans. The vision of college and career readiness in secondary school can only be achieved with insight for the causes of the barriers and strategies for mitigating them.
Career development programs can mitigate barriers to career achievement by supplementing career achievement resources and support for students who lack them (Creed, Patton, & Hood, 2010). The career development models of SCCT point to many influences beyond one’s formal education in the career development process that facilitate one’s career aspirations. While the support school aged students receive outside of their formal education for their career aspirations varies, public education can mitigate these inequities through appropriately designed career development programs. To foster equity in career achievement for all students, career guidance programs must promote self-efficacy and design career development activities and interventions in the context of each students’ interests, abilities, culture, and socioeconomic background (Tang, Pan, & Newmeyer, 2008).

**Early engagement in college and career readiness.** Accomplishing college and career readiness by the completion of high school is a pursuit that must begin in the early years of education. Early exposure to career options through well-structured career guidance at the elementary level introduces students to career options, links education to these occupations, and works to alleviate children’s misconceptions of gender restrictions for careers (Knight, 2015; Porfeli, Hartung, & Vondracek, 2008). The research argues for the long-term impact of early career readiness interventions and promotes starting such programs well before secondary years.

Efforts towards connecting elementary and middle school education to future careers is integral in paving students’ paths towards prospective occupational opportunities. Wood and Kaszubowksi’s (2008) study of the career developmental needs of elementary age children found
that boys scored lower than girls in career curiosity and that all students score low on understanding how their current educational choices may impact future career opportunities.

Schools can create a learning environment relevant to their students’ futures by facilitating the exploration of occupations and connecting lessons and course content to students’ aspirations for these occupations. College and career readiness activities should include classroom strategies to explore careers and link current educational skills to future jobs and exposure to careers through career fairs and guest speakers (Wood & Kaszubowksi, 2008). Efforts starting in elementary school and continuing into middle school towards college and career readiness provides continuity in the career exploration and development process, making for a smoother transition to high school (Adams, 2015).

Career development can be assimilated into the learning process throughout elementary and secondary education and should not be isolated supplemental activities. Instead, college and career readiness curriculum should be integrated into the regular classroom lesson plans and illustrate the link between subject material and potential occupations of which students may not have been previously aware (Curry, Belsor, & Binns, 2013). Middle schools that incorporate a career institute model throughout their entire school curriculum teach students to connect their education to future careers, demonstrate self-efficacy in achieving those careers, and developing vocational identity (Shaefer, River, & Ophals, 2010). Integrating career exploration activities throughout all domains of the elementary and middle school curriculum can help alleviate some of the previously discussed barriers towards college and career readiness by making career exploration a natural component of education.
**Correlation to Social Cognitive Career Theory.** Each of the four models within SCCT illustrates how career choice, interest, performance, and satisfaction develops in an ongoing cycle (Brown & Lent, 2013). The illustration of the career development process as a loop supports the literature discussed in this section for its consideration of the many variables impacting an individual career development. The literature suggests that one single measurement for college and career readiness is limiting, rather a compilation of evidence showcasing one’s skills and abilities is a more accurate indicator of career or educational success. SCCT’s task performance model depicts a continuous cycle of performance attainment based on one’s self efficacy and outcome expectations which influence the setting of performance goals. Using only one measurement of college readiness, say the ACT, would provide a very limited scope of the student’s ability to perform in college.

The SCCT models also incorporate barriers to career development. Contextual variables such as ability and disability, ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status influence learning experiences and moderate constructs such as interests, choice goals, and choice actions (Brown & Lent, 2013). As previously described, the literature on career development barriers demonstrates how contextual factors may significantly inhibit student’s expectations for and hence readiness for college and careers. While the literature promotes early exposure to career development, the SCCT models provide a framework from which to intentionally plan career development interventions from which to produce college and career ready high school graduates. SCCT is a useful framework from which to understand the compilation of the literature regarding college and career readiness.
**Summation.** The output of college and career ready high school graduates is an appropriate, at times complicated, goal of the education system. While this endeavor gives meaning and relevance of public education towards the contribution of a productive society, the measurement for such a goal is not clearly defined. Further, barriers towards college and career readiness may have a profound impact on students’ ability to engage in and commit to future goals that can be perceived as unrealistic and out of reach. The literature supports early engagement in career readiness activities and well-planned and structured career development programs inclusive of all students in order to achieve college and career ready high school graduates. This research project will contribute to this body of literature for its exploration of the students’ perceived readiness for the post-secondary education based on the preparation received in high school.

**College and Career Development Programs**

To achieve the vision of college and career ready high school graduates, schools must have a well-planned college and career counseling program. Kosine, Steger, and Duncan (2008) advocate for a well-structured career guidance program in order for students to build and discover self-identity that will connect to career decisions. School districts typically include in their vision a promise to prepare students for success in the world of work. Though, as emphasized in the previously discussed literature, while career exploration and development activities are appropriate and necessary from elementary through secondary school, much of the focus on career development occurs in high school.
School career development programs are necessary in the career decision making process and in connecting education to career achievement regardless of the demographics of the students attending the school (Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, & Swan, 2011). Schools are a natural setting from which to facilitate important interventions to enhance the career development process for students. The literature advocates for career development curriculum to include activities in fostering students’ vocational identity, promoting career academies, and incorporating transitional programs. This body of literature gives context to this study for the possibilities in public education in preparing students for post-secondary opportunities. The findings in this research project indicate where the participants found support or lack of support in their own career development process due to the absence or presence of the career development programs supported by the literature in the following discussion. These studies strongly emphasize the importance of comprehensive career and college counseling programs that recognize and respect the unique needs of all students.

**Vocational identity.** The exploration of self-identity, especially career identity is an important task during adolescence (Gushue et al., 2006). Vocational identity in education is the process through which students discover their interests and aptitudes correlated to occupational fields. A strong vocational identity will enable students to make career decisions congruent to their strengths and interests.

Career choice is the ultimate desired outcome of career development and involves the process of facing the challenges of career preparation from choosing appropriate preparatory
high school courses to applying to and attending the necessary post-secondary education level (Lent & Brown, 2013). While schools must have a comprehensive career development program that fosters the development of all students, it must also have latitude for individualized strategies according to the needs of the students in which it serves. It is the task of the education system to facilitate this process for students in order to achieve the vision of college and career ready graduates.

Career development in schools should offer not only exposure to occupations, but also a component of interest exploration and the building of self-efficacy. Career development programs in high school are effective when they help students determine and pursue their passions, develop vocational identity according to interests and abilities, and plan for the necessary steps in achieving career goals (Bloxom et al., 2008). A sense of vocational identity and career aspiration can make students’ high school education relevant to their life beyond secondary education. The implementation of comprehensive career development programs in high school are effective when they expose students to viable careers and match their high school education to such endeavors (Packard et al., 2012). Vocational identity is a combination of experimenting and exploring a variety of educational subjects as well as skill development in areas of interest and potential future career fields.

Career development interventions that facilitate the establishment of vocational identity not only enhance students’ awareness of viable career options, but also improve their self-efficacy and attitude towards career preparation (Koivisto et al., 2011). While career aspiration
and ability may be consistent across such factors as socioeconomic status, gender, and race; the ability to advance through the appropriate steps toward specific careers is often unequal amongst students. Students’ level of vocational identity is correlated to engagement in career exploration activities and that a less defined vocational identity is related to perception of a high number obstacles in achieving vocational aspirations (Gushue et al., 2006). Educators play a vital role in empowering students’ vocational identity growth by offering personal context of career development experience in the conversations with students (Kuijpers & Meijers, 2017). Educators’ sharing of their personal career development experiences supports the strengthening of students’ self-efficacy by showcasing how barriers may be overcome and goals can be achieved.

As vocational identity is explored and fostered schools must facilitate further development of the skills and preparation required of students’ desired career paths. The following two components, career academies and transitional programs, are analyzed for their potential in adding depth to the high school career development program, furthering vocational identity, and making direct links between secondary education and post-secondary plans.

**Career academies.** Career academies are schools that focus their curriculum on a specific career field. Career academies offer students in-depth exploration of occupations and opportunities to develop skills specific to those occupations. As educational leaders and policy makers consider potential school reforms and improvements, creating more educational settings based on the career academy or small learning community model is strongly supported for
improving education. Kuo (2010) advocates for smaller learning communities and career academies where a combination of academic, career, and technical skills are learned thus facilitating students’ career development through the exposure to work learning opportunities and career awareness.

The general career skills learned in career academies have long term benefits for students who develop these skills in their secondary education. High school graduates leave their secondary education better informed about and ready for the workforce after attending a career academy (Loera, Nakamoto, Youn, & Rueda, 2013). Students who spend some time during their secondary education on courses related to building skills in specific vocations end up earning higher wages regardless of their post-secondary education achievement (Bishop & Mane, 2004). Career academies are important factor in students developing the college and career readiness skills envisioned for high school graduates.

Career academies also assist students in transitioning into career specific jobs and internships. The literature on transitional programs such as internships and dual credit programs will be discussed in the next section in the context of how they contribute to the vocational identity and career development of secondary students.

**Transitional programs.** Transitional programs in secondary school build upon career development activities in that they bridge students’ roles from high school to college or work. Transitional programs gradually incorporate components of post-secondary education, training, and work skills into the secondary student’s learning experience. While students may have
developed a viable post-secondary plan, they are frequently unprepared to adjust to the lifestyle changes required of the new identity. Transitional programs expose the high school student to the expectations of the next phase of educational and career life while maintaining the support and structure of high school. Transitional programs for high school students include incorporating experiences in college, technical or vocational schools, and internship into the student’s secondary education.

Much of the literature explores the possibility of partnerships between high schools and colleges in helping students transition into post-secondary education. Students with college aspirations are often better prepared to make the transition to college when enrolled in a dual credit program in their junior or senior year (Fowler & Luna, 2009; Kuo, 2010). This process involves the student enrolling part time in a local college for dual high school and college credit while maintaining enrollment in some courses in their home high school. High school to college transition programs entail careful planning and communication between the two educational institutions to assure the students are appropriately supported.

Career and technology education courses in high schools and vocational training centers are also shown to better prepare students for post-secondary education (Kim, 2014). This transitional strategy also offers dual credit towards high school requirements as well as technical preparation credit toward post-secondary vocational training. These programs expose students to the expectations of higher education and training as well as build skills for career readiness while students are still in high school. High schools that partner with leaders of a local industry by
contextualizing the school curricula to industry standards and expectations find that their graduates have increased job opportunities and are better prepared for careers (Flynn, Pillay, & Watters, 2016). Students benefit from engaging in career pathways, becoming informed of the skills and tasks required of particular careers, and the work based learning opportunities of the CTE programs (Stipanovic & Stringfield, 2013; Behle, 2017).

Students enrolled in career and vocational specific programs such the career academies discussed previously are often connected to on the job training opportunities while still in high school. Bennett (2007) found that secondary students enrolled in career and technical education who participated in internships demonstrated higher levels of occupational engagement in their chosen career paths than students not enrolled in a career academy program. Not only do vocational education programs assist in transitioning from school to work, but they also foster students’ adaptation to technology and structural change (Hanuschek, Woessman, & Zang, 2011). High school vocational and technical courses often teach the most career preparation skills and are found to best prepare students transitioning into the work force (Guy et al., 2009; Kim & Passmore, 2016). The combination of learning general career readiness skills and exposure to potential future occupations through transitional activities indicates a high potential for career academies to produce college and career ready graduates.

Internships and mentorships give students an opportunity for in depth exploration of career fields and connections with professionals in those fields. These relationships bridge the gap between having a career goal and taking the necessary steps in achieving the goal through
learning from another’s experience. In a study of high school students participating in a biology laboratory internship, students reported tremendous value for the opportunity to see real scientists at work as well as the chance to reflect upon their own vocational identity and potential future careers (Roth, Eijck, Hsu, Marshall, & Mazumder, 2009). The social support and mentorship included in the internship experience is strongly correlated to students’ occupational engagement and preparedness for their future careers (Bennett, 2007). Further, mentorships with professionals of similar backgrounds to students with few outside supports and many obstacles towards career achievement are found to be significant in the career development of such students (Constantine et al., 2007). Internships during the latter years of high school can provide constructive transitional steps between secondary and post-secondary opportunities.

Post-secondary planning through transitional activities can be especially important in assisting students who have fewer outside supports in post-secondary planning (Packard et al., 2012). Transitional skills such as work based learning provided in a supportive environment of encouraging adults are shown to positively correlate with students’ successful transitioning from high school to the workforce (Phillips, Blustein, Jobin-Davis, & Finkelberg White, 2002). Career development is a complex endeavor that must respect not only the developmental needs of students, but also the context of factors that impose barriers towards career achievement. As previously discussed, career development programs must be aware of the individual needs and barriers faced by students in order to match their intervention programs accordingly.
Transitional activities are an integral component of the college and career counseling programs in high schools. The outcome of such activities includes students’ positive career expectations, engagement in appropriate career exploration activities and developing relevant goals, better self-understanding in the context of career decision making, discovering career interests, applying work readiness skills, and increased engagement in school (Lapan, Aoyagi, & Kayson, 2007). These are all depicted in the cycles of development of career interests, choice, performance, and satisfaction illustrated in the models of SCCT (Brown & Lent, 2013).

Transitional programs are a necessary part of school’s college and career development programs who aim for schools to produce college and career ready students.

Summation. Well-structured career development programs are an integral component of schools producing college and career ready high school graduates. Gushue et al. (2006) state that a career ready graduate must have successfully established a vocational identity and developed a sense of confidence to fully engage in the career decision making process. Making career decisions requires the discovering of one’s vocational identity and self-efficacy to follow through on the steps in reaching those desired careers. The education and skills necessary to achieving desired occupations are linked to students’ current education choices. College and career readiness skills are shown to be developed in programs such as career academies, dual enrollment programs, and internships. The research shows how including these components adds depth to career development programs in schools to help discover vocational identity, engage in the career decision process, and successfully transition into post-secondary education, training, or work. The findings of this study speak to the participants’ experiences or lack of
experiences in these career development components. This study adds to the literature by giving voice to recent high school graduates who speak to the post-secondary preparation activities for students pursuing a technical post-secondary education.

**Argument for Further Study**

A complex, multifaceted gap exists between researchers and professionals in the field of education, where practitioners in the field are found to be largely unaware of or skeptical of most studies (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). However, cooperation amongst researchers and practitioners of education suggest that the gap between the two can be narrowed (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Research in educational practices offer professionals in education a fresh lens from which to view their practice and consider improvements. The following is a discussion of holes in the current literature and suggestions for further study on career development and post-secondary planning. These gaps offer space from which to situate this research project’s aim to investigate the post-secondary planning experiences of high school graduates that pursued their secondary education in a technical program.

The available literature thus far is an evaluation of the degree to which college and career readiness is achieved in secondary schools and how effectively college and career development programs prepare students. An obvious gap in the literature concerning the implementation of effective career development in secondary schools is the perspective of high school graduates in post-secondary education or training programs. As previously discussed, primarily using measurements such as the ACT or SAT claim to indicate college readiness is limiting as they
lack feedback in areas such as aptitude and readiness for particular careers. Similarly, school districts aiming to produce college and career ready graduates must not limit the scope of post-secondary education to the traditional four-year university. There is a lack of information from the perspective of high school graduates on the support they received towards pursuing careers that do not require a four-year college degree.

While high school students’ perception of the relevance of their education and support received toward developing a vocational identity, exploring careers, and receiving career counseling is important, the feedback on the effectiveness of these activities from young adults in post-secondary education is critical to improving them. Perception of the career and college readiness process is subject to change once a high school graduate has the real-life experience of college and career demands and expectations. Where studies of high school students’ perceptions that effective post-secondary transitional activities include work-based learning activities, understanding of the necessary and appropriate support will change with actual post-secondary experience (Phillip et al., 2002).

Recent high school graduates have the added insight of considering their high school career counseling programs in context of the demands of post-secondary education or work. A longitudinal study of young adults’ perceptions of the career development counseling received in high school found that these adults viewed their experiences as inadequate and believed that the majority of counseling services was put into college admissions or crisis intervention (Helwig, 2008). The current body of literature must be expanded upon by further exploring the skills and
career development activities lacking in the career development curriculum as perceived by high school graduates (Loera et al., 2013). Further, young adults who are early in their post-secondary education can assess their skill deficiencies from the vantage point of a recent high school student now facing the demands of their post-secondary training.

The intention of this study on perspectives of high school graduates enrolled in vocational or technical training of the post-secondary preparation they received in secondary school is to help fill this gap in the literature. The findings of this study can inform current practices in college and career readiness in secondary education and show where services can be improved or expanded to provide for the needs of all students.

Conclusion

The aim of this literature review is to analyze the research regarding preparation for post-secondary education, training, or work. Current practices in secondary education primarily focus on the preparation of college going students, likely leaving students with non-college attending interests with few options in skill development. However, the research on effective career development programs and producing college and career ready high school graduates does not suggest favoritism towards traditional university preparation over other post-secondary education options. The literature supports exposure to and skill development in a variety of career fields regardless of the required education level.

Producing college and career ready high school graduates is a common goal amongst school districts in the United States. This endeavor values the role elementary and secondary
education plays towards preparing students in becoming contributing members of their community by engaging in meaningful careers. However, as indicated by the literature, the achievement of college and career readiness is not consistently defined and is often limited in scope of career paths. The definition of college and career readiness must adopt a broad representation of viable post-secondary education options in order for schools to recognize and offer the skills required for students to truly be college and career ready.

The literature advocates for well-structured career development programs in high school in order to achieve college and career readiness. The recommended focus of the career development programs is on the establishment of vocational identity through career exploration activities throughout elementary and secondary school. Vocational identity involves the student’s discovery of aptitudes and interests as well as the self-efficacy to pursue career developing activities that foster those aptitudes and interests. Without self-efficacy students may not have the ability to negotiate the necessary steps in achieving their career aspirations. Recommendations are to implement interventions that specifically target students who lack self-efficacy and outside support in building self-efficacy towards career achievement.

The literature supports two specific components of successful career development programs in secondary education. Career academies and transitional programs are shown to develop vocational identity and acquire post-secondary ready skills. Transitional programs such as dual credit, internships, and mentorships during the last years of high school assist students in shifting from secondary to post-secondary roles. The research does not specify the level of post-
secondary education associated with the internships or career academy attendance. This is significant in context of the study of high school graduates enrolled in vocational training or apprenticeships. The existing research does not suggest a focus on college attendance over other post-secondary education options in the recommendations for and findings of effective career development programs.

Much of the research focuses on the evaluation of career development programs and the high school students’ experiences with them. Very little in the research contains the feedback of students who have moved on to post-secondary vocational training, apprenticeships, or the workforce. This particular perspective is necessary to fill the gap in the literature on improving career development programs in secondary education. This study’s aim is to better understand how the high school curriculum could prepare students with interests in vocational or technical education after graduating high school. This research will add to the literature on best practices in providing a more equitable education system that adequately prepares all students for their post-secondary plans.
Chapter III: Methodology

This research project aimed to explore the phenomenon of post-secondary education planning and preparation practices of a large school district in Alaska. This study focused on answering the question: *What were the post-secondary planning and preparation experiences during high school of graduates of the local school district who are attending post-secondary education at a technical institution?* The purpose of this research project was to understand the perception of high school graduates attending post-secondary education in a technical institution and how their high school education and experiences influenced and prepared them for their post-secondary plans.

A qualitative research design allowed the researcher to study the shared experiences of the study’s participants. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology used to explore the participants’ experiences of their post-secondary planning and preparation. The following is a description of the qualitative research and IPA. Next, the recruiting process is outlined followed by descriptions of the participants and how the data was collected and stored. The analysis process is then illustrated in detail. Lastly, the study’s ethical considerations, trustworthiness, potential biases, and limitations are outlined.

Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research focuses on how an experience is understood by the study’s participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A qualitative research design allows for the researcher to delve deep into the participants’ perspectives of their experience with the research problem.
While a similar study could use quantitative methodology to gather data on the specific post-secondary preparation activities in which the participants engaged during high school, this study sought to explore the participants’ perception of their post-secondary planning experiences. The researcher’s goal in this project was to incorporate the findings into her professional practice as a school counselor to improve post-secondary preparation and planning for all students.

Qualitative research most appropriately fits the goals of the researcher because it offers the perspective of the students who experienced the phenomenon in question. Denzin & Lincoln (2011) describe qualitative research findings as a bricolage, a composition of many pieces or perspectives, that seeks to give meaning to the research question. The researcher synthesizes these many perspectives into a solution that gives insight into the meaning of the research problem. Qualitative research is inductive, where the researcher develops larger meanings from the analyzation of the participants’ detailed interpretations of their lived experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). IPA was used as the research design to gather the shared experiences

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Creswell (2013) states that a phenomenological approach is most appropriate for research problems that aim to explore a phenomenon through the experiences of several individuals. The qualitative methodology, IPA, best suits the purpose of this research for its focus on the interpretation of the phenomenon through the lens of the participant while recognizing that the researcher is interpreting the shared experience through their own lens (Larkin, Eatough, &
Osborn, 2011). Using IPA to answer the research question gives voice to the students who directly experienced the post-secondary preparation curriculum in the local school district. This perspective is important because it offers insight into the meaning the participants attached to this experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

IPA is constructed of three major influences: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Each component plays an integral part in the methodological design and data analysis of the research. IPA has its origins in the phenomenology philosophy and has since matured into its own distinct methodological process. The following is a concise history and description of the three major components of IPA.

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences and was originally developed by European scholars. The founder of twentieth century phenomenology was Edmund Husserl, who argued for viewing and describing an event in its most natural, unbiased state (Macann, 1993; Dowling, 2007). Martin Heidegger contributed to Husserl’s description of phenomenology with his emphasis on the understanding of lived experiences and hermeneutics in the phenomenological process (Dowling, 2007). Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserted that phenomenology is a combination of Husserl’s existence and Heidegger’s essence of the experience (Macann, 1993). Hans Georg Gadamer was a scholar of “new” phenomenology, suggesting that one’s prejudices and biases influence meaning making as the phenomenon is communicated between people (Dowling, 2007). Clark Moustakas is a contemporary American
psychologist who contributed significantly to phenomenology by defining and establishing phenomenological research methods (Moustakas, 1994).

**Hermeneutics.** IPA methodology emphasizes the significance of interpretation in the analytic process. Hermeneutics is the theory of understanding. This theory operates under the assumption that an experience is shared through the participant’s understanding of it given the context from which the participant interprets the experience. Philosopher and scholar of hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher, asserted that the writer or speaker brings personal and unique meaning to their text or speech which must be taken into context by the reader (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Heidegger further developed hermeneutic theory as the analytical process of both the obvious and hidden meanings manifested in a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Gadamer suggested that researchers, readers, and listeners must be aware of their constant projections of their own beliefs, experiences, and interpretations of the words communicated (Smith et al., 2009). IPA emphasizes the awareness of the researcher of the double hermeneutic process in which the data is interpreted. This process means that the research phenomenon is described through the participant’s interpretation which is then examined through the researcher’s interpretation.

**Idiography.** The last major component of IPA is the focus on the particular or idiography. The objective is to have a deep understanding of a particular experience in particular setting and how those in this setting interpret the particular experience (Smith et al., 2009).
Idiography seeks to deliberately and gradually produce broad generalizations from the analysis of these specific experiences.

**Summation.** IPA is well suited for this research because its focus is aligned with the purpose of this study. This research looked to fill the gap in the literature regarding the best practices in preparing high school students for post-secondary plans. As discussed in the previous chapter, this gap is the voice of the students in vocational/technical post-secondary training. This study investigated the deep meaning of the context from which the participants shared their perspective of the phenomenon. IPA recognizes that participants’ words and their meanings are subject to the interpretation of both the participant and the researcher. The interpretation process provides the structure from which to analyze and better make sense of the shared experiences.

**Recruitment and Access**

Preparation for recruitment commenced with permission from the appropriate stakeholders including the Northeastern University’s IRB, the dean of the secondary institution from where the participants were recruited, and from the potential participants (Creswell, 2013). Formal recruitment began after approval by the Northeastern University IRB as well as this researcher’s dissertation chair. The first contact was made via email to the dean of the local technical college for support and consent to recruit students from the college for the research. The email included an overview of the study including its purpose, data collection methods,
requirements of potential participants, how the data will be used, and Northeastern University contact information (Creswell, 2013).

Once consent to recruit from the college was granted, the recruitment letter and flyer were sent to the email list of students attending the secondary institution (see Appendix C). The researcher was also invited to present the recruiting materials before and after courses at the institution. The recruitment letter included the researcher’s role as a doctoral student at Northeastern University, the purpose of the study, the time commitment and interview information, and the researcher’s professional occupation. Potential volunteer participants were screened for the study’s criteria of being a graduate of the local district and enrollment in a technical program. The participant was then informed of confidentiality procedures and the purpose of the study. Participants were asked to review and sign the informed consent document prior to the data collection (see Appendix A).

Ethical considerations are first and foremost for the protection of the participants. The researcher followed the strictest of guidelines to ensure participants’ confidentiality. Participant’s names and identifying information were not used throughout the interviews nor in any of the labeling of the interviews and data. Also, given the researcher’s role as a school counselor in the local district, previous counseling/counselee relationships were considered for appropriateness amongst the participants.
Participants

The participants were graduates of the local school district who, at the time of the study, were enrolled in a technical post-secondary education or training program. Because of the study’s focus on the participants’ perspective on post-secondary preparation, the researcher chose to not limit participants according to a specific career path. Therefore, a convenience sampling of participants from a variety of occupational training programs were recruited for the study (Creswell, 2013). The selection of participants adhered to the focus on the particular as described in the previous section because they make up a sample of the population of local school district graduates enrolled in technical post-secondary program (Creswell, 2013).

Each participant was assigned a pseudonym for their identity protection. The following is a short description of each participant including their area of study.

**Ben.** Ben was a student in the welding program. He was a dedicated student who is excited about the training and education available for trades careers. In high school, he didn’t believe he was a good student nor that education had anything to offer him. He took time off between high school and his post-secondary education. Ben spent several valuable years in the military where he traveled the world and explored various types of jobs and finally matched his interests and abilities to welding. He appreciated his welding training program because it also includes a business management component of the trade.

**Luke.** Luke was a student in the diesel mechanic program. He participated in the automotive maintenance program in high school, earning credits towards a post-secondary
technical degree. Thus, he started his post-secondary education in the fall after high school graduation. He was proud to be completing his post-secondary education quicker than most of his fellow students because of the credit he earned in his high school career courses.

**Dylan.** Dylan was a student in the aviation technology department. He has been passionate about flying since his father introduced him to flying in high school. He started working on earning his pilot’s license while in high school and enrolled in several aviation courses at the career center in high school which earned several credits towards his post-secondary education. Dylan was confident about his job prospects upon completing his degree and also appreciates the strong relationship between his aviation training program and the aviation industry.

**Ryan.** Ryan was a student in the aviation technology department. He grew up flying with his father who is a commercial pilot. Ryan took time off between high school and post-secondary education to play Juniors Hockey. He valued this time off his education to mature and be exposed to different options in life. He enrolled in a university in the Midwest but dropped out after less than one school year when he realized that it was not for him and that he wanted to follow his passion for flying and become a pilot.

**Data Collection**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews on location at the institution. Interviews were conducted solely by this researcher. Smith et al. (2009) suggest preparing six to ten open ended interview questions with prompts prior to conducting the interviews. See
Appendix D for the Interview Protocol questions and prompts. Each participant took part in one interview which lasted 40-60 minutes.

**Data Storage**

The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and saved as an MP3. These interviews were immediately downloaded and saved under a coded pseudonym on the researcher’s password protected computer. The interviews were then transcribed from the audio recording. The transcriptions were also stored on a password protected computer as well as password protected backup external hard drive. Notes taken during the data collection process were stored in a locked container in the researcher’s personal office.

The original recorded interviews, notes, and transcripts were saved and destroyed according to IRB regulation. Participants were informed of this process to ensure their confidentiality was protected.

**Data Analysis**

IPA requires a rigorous process of analyzing data to move from the particular, descriptive experiences of the individual participant to the shared, interpretative experience of the whole (Smith et al., 2009). This in-depth analysis was necessary in order to uncover the rich, textural descriptions of the phenomena as experienced by the participants. Before each interview was analyzed, the transcription of each interview was emailed to the corresponding participant. This allowed the participant to clarify or correct the descriptions of their experience for the validity of the data.
The following is a description of the six-step process suggested by Smith et al. (2009) and used by this researcher to analyze the data. Each interview was analyzed separately, moving through Step 4 as described below before moving on to the next interview. This is important in adhering to the idiographic component of IPA and maintaining fidelity to each participant’s shared experience.

**Step 1: Reading and re-reading.** First, the interviews were listened to and read several times. Smith et al. (2009) recommend using this rereading and listening time to catch nuances and details in the participants’ stories as well as to take notes on the researcher’s strongest reactions and thoughts that occurred during the interview. This first step was important in familiarizing and focusing on one interview at a time. The researcher’s reflection on her own thoughts and emotions offered insight to the researcher for biases and interpretations of the participants’ stories. In this first step, the researcher noted in the transcript margins any thoughts, questions, and observations of both the participant’s described experience and the researcher’s interpretation of that experience that came to mind while reading through the transcript.

**Step 2: Initial noting.** Next, the transcriptions underwent several cycles of analytic note taking. Smith et al. (2009) recommend making detailed notes that comment on the participants descriptions, use of language, and concepts. Descriptive comments brought forth situations of significance shared by the participants, while linguistic comments recognized patterns of speech and word usage that added depth or context to the participants experience. Conceptual noting
was the interpretative stage, where the researcher explored the participant’s understanding of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). The detailed note taking process facilitated intimate familiarity with the participant’s experience, context, and patterns of speaking.

**Step 3: Developing emergent themes.** In this phase, the researcher analyzed the exploratory comments from the previous stage. The hermeneutic cycle, where details are considered within the greater context of the interview while the entirety of the interview is understood with consideration of the details within, was an important component of this stage (Smith et al., 2009). Themes emerged from the researcher’s interpretation of the participant’s experience with the phenomenon.

**Step 4: Searching for connections amongst emergent themes.** At this phase of coding, the emergent themes within each interview were evaluated for connections and relationships. The researcher printed a list of the emergent themes and cut each theme into a single strip. The researcher then laid the strips out in groups to form major themes. This method gave the researcher the flexibility to group and regroup each sub-theme until the major themes within the interview were determined. It is in this stage of coding where the data is chunked into bigger, overarching themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). The researcher developed major themes through subsumption, which is the creation of a major theme from the title of a sub-theme, and abstraction, which is the grouping of related sub-themes to create a new major theme (Smith et al., 2009). Also, a conceptual map of the major themes was drawn by hand to evaluate patterns and relationships amongst the themes within the interview (Miles et al., 2013).
Last, a table was created for each interview. All of the major themes with their corresponding sub-themes were listed on the table. Columns were created identifying the pages and key words correlated with each sub-theme.

**Step 5: Moving to the next case.** In this step, the researcher completes the analysis of one interview and moves on to the next. The researcher made every effort to bracket the themes from the previous interview and focus on the particular of the following interview. The researcher was attentive to the hermeneutic process involving the influence of previous interviews on the interpretation of subsequent interviews and made deliberate efforts to maintain fidelity to the interview being analyzed.

**Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases.** The tables of themes and sub-themes created in stage 4 were compared and contrasted. Patterns and similarities amongst the data were scrutinized, creating a more in-depth and complex understanding of the data. Themes from each data set merged to develop high order themes which united and illustrated the experiences of the participants.

**Ethical Considerations**

The researcher adhered to strict ethical guidelines for data collection. The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) named three basic ethical principles from which to structure research on human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence and justice. Respect for persons includes recognizing the participants autonomy in making decisions according to their personal interests and goals. A
study demonstrates beneficence when it aims to maximize beneficial outcomes of the study and minimize all possible harms. A study is just when it seeks to equally distribute the benefits amongst all people and avoids unduly placing harm on any one person or group. The researcher followed strict protocol to uphold these three principles.

During the recruitment process, the researcher provided the study’s information to potential participants including the study’s purpose, the researcher’s contact information, and confidentiality measures. Once the data collection process started the researcher took further measures to adhere to ethical principles and protect the participants. First, participants were given a consent form which they each signed. The informed consent form ensured the participants anonymity through the use of a pseudonym, that their participation was strictly voluntary and they could end the interview at any time, and the names and contact information of the study’s advisor and Northeastern University’s director of Human Research should the participant have any concerns. Each participant was given a copy of the signed consent form. Digital forms of the data were stored on password protected devices and paper forms of the data were stored in a locked office. The audio recordings of the interviews will be deleted when the research is complete.

**Trustworthiness**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to understand the post-secondary preparation experiences of students in technical post-secondary education. The results are the shared experiences of the participants, subject to their interpretation of the experience. To preserve the
study’s trustworthiness, the researcher observed Yardley’s four criteria (sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, impact and importance) as well as Lincoln and Guba’s four tenets of trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Smith et al., 2009). The following is a description of each of the criteria and tenets.

**Sensitivity to context.** Sensitivity to context occurs through the entire data collection and analyzation process. The researcher strived to develop rapport with the participants by presenting genuine interest and respect for the participant’s experience. Further, this researcher understood that she was interpreting the participant’s experience through her own interpretation and was mindful of staying as close to the participant’s words as possible. Lastly, sensitivity to context was maintained by grounding the study in the current literature on the topic.

**Commitment and rigor.** The researcher demonstrated commitment to each participant by taking great efforts to listen to the participant’s stories and being thorough in the analyzation process. Rigor was adhered to by the researcher’s thoroughness in conducting and analyzing interviews. The researcher was committed to the principals of IPA research and strove for the highest quality of work.

**Transparency and coherence.** The research process was communicated and described as thoroughly as possible. The researcher made every effort to communicate the procedures and the findings of the study in a logical and easily understood manner.
Impact and importance. The purpose of this study was to understand the post-secondary planning experiences of the participants while they were in high school. Being a practitioner of education, the researcher valued the experiences shared by these participants and their implications for improving professional practices in education. The researcher is committed to utilize this study to inform future practices as well as share the findings with colleagues.

Credibility. A study’s credibility refers to the degree to which the findings are reliable and speak to the truth. Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer several suggestions for ensuring credibility of a study including member checking, triangulation, and persistent observation. Participants were given copies of the transcripts to review and offer clarification, known as member-checking. The researcher implemented triangulation by reviewing and analyzing the data with respect to each individual data set as well as in the context of the collection of data. Also, the research was a persistent observer during the data collection process, taking detailed notes of observations of the participants, building rapport, and understanding the context from which the participants were sharing their experiences.

Transferability. A study’s applicability to different settings and contexts is its transferability. Detailed, textured descriptions of the participants and their experiences gives context from which the study took place and allows the researcher to generalize the findings across other sites.
**Dependability.** A study’s findings are dependable when they are consistent and repeatable. The researcher’s procedures and timeline can be reviewed through the researcher’s notes, interview schedule, digital audio tapes and transcriptions, and the report of the study’s themes and findings.

**Confirmability.** To ensure confirmability the researcher must analyze and present the study’s findings according to the participants’ shared experiences while minimizing the impact of the researcher’s biases. This study adhered to the validity principles for qualitative research described above by implementing the following strategies. The researcher took field notes while recording the interviews to note non-verbal communications and nuances not captured on the recordings. Also, the interview transcriptions and interpretations were shared with participants for clarification as suggested by Saldaña (2016). Also, the researcher kept a detailed journal of thoughts, reactions, and reflections throughout the duration of the project (Saldaña, 2016). These journal notes were incorporated into the coding and interpretation process to ensure consistency and thorough understanding of the data.

**Potential Researcher Bias**

The researcher was acutely aware of potential biases throughout the duration of this study. While a detailed description of the researcher’s positionality is provided in Chapter 1, potential biases as a result of this positionality were taken into consideration. The researcher was mindful of how her personal and professional experiences may influence interpretation,
understanding, and analysis of the research problem and the shared experiences of the participants.

The researcher was a school counselor in the local school district. The district’s post-secondary preparation practices are a vital component of a school counselor’s profession. Having worked with hundreds of students in preparing for future goals and potential careers, the researchers biases exist in interpreting the participants’ experiences of post-secondary preparation and planning activities through the lens of the professional partially responsible in facilitating such services. However, the researcher’s primary motivation to investigate the problem of post-secondary preparation experiences of students in technical post-secondary education was in her work with high school students who expressed frustration with the lack of support for their career interests. The researcher’s potential bias was in the assumption that the participants may have also experienced similar frustrations.

This researcher was aware of how her biases and positionality could potentially obscure the research process and outcomes. The IPA framework, however, requires constant vigilance of the impact of the researcher’s beliefs and experiences on the interpretation of the participants’ shared experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This researcher aimed to set aside assumptions based on her professional role. Interview questions were carefully worded to place the research in a position of outside observer rather than a practitioner with potential previous knowledge of participants’ experiences. Despite these efforts, potential researcher biases likely influenced the methodological process, analysis, and discussion of the study’s findings.
Limitations

The limitations of this study are those common to qualitative research. The study focused on the experiences of students at a local technical secondary institution who also attended the local school district in Alaska. The shared post-secondary preparation experiences of the participants do not necessarily represent those of all students who pursued a technical education after high school. The researcher’s interest was to explore the experiences of students who attended the local school district for insight into the district’s post-secondary practices.

Further, IPA utilizes semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. While an interview protocol was created from which to base each interview, the semi-structured nature of the interview allows the researcher to probe deeper into participants’ responses with unplanned questions. The resulting format of each interview may vary greatly. While this allows for in-depth investigation of the participants’ experiences, it also limits the consistency of data collection amongst the interviews.

Finally, the participants were limited to graduates of the local district who were also attending a local technical college. This may reduce the transferability of the results and findings to other public school districts and post-secondary technical training institutions within the state of Alaska as well as other states. While college and career readiness of high school graduates is a goal of most United States public secondary education institutions, the preparation and planning activities may differ greatly amongst states and local districts.
Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the post-secondary preparation experiences of graduates of the local school district enrolled in a technical college. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was the most fitting methodological approach for this research project for its focus on the lived experiences of its participants. The researcher made every effort to maintain the integrity of the study by ensuring trustworthiness and ethical considerations as well as mitigating the impact of potential biases and limitations. The researcher adhered to IPA’s 6 step process of gathering and analyzing the data to produce a comprehensive table of overarching emergent themes presented in the next chapter.
Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this research project was to understand the experiences of high school graduates attending post-secondary education in a technical institution. The participants of the study were enrolled in various technical programs including aviation, welding, and automotive maintenance. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to answer the question: *What were the post-secondary planning and preparation experiences during high school of graduates of the local school district who are attending post-secondary education at a technical institution?* In order to better understand how the local school district facilitates career development, planning, and preparation for all students, this research explored the experiences of a small group of students whose career interests were in a technical career field.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provided the methodological framework to gather and analyze the data and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) guided the structure of the interview questions. After in-depth analysis of the interviews, three superordinate and eight subordinate themes emerged. Table 1 lists each superordinate theme with their corresponding subthemes. These themes capture the post-secondary preparation and participation experiences of the participants. These themes reveal the shared sense of irrelevancy for traditional high school, a similar route to enrolling in a technical degree, and well-defined career plans in their chosen career field.
Table 1

_Superordinate and Subordinate Themes_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Traditional High School Education is Irrelevant</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Connected to Goals and Interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hands-On Learning Preferred</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacked Meaning</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biased Message</td>
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</table>

| **Route to Technical Program**                    |  |
| Professional Guidance                             |  |
| Career Exploration                                |  |

| **Technical Degree Career Plan**                  |  |
| Clear Purpose                                    |  |
| Connected to Short and Long-Term Goals            |  |

In depth, open-ended interviewing was used in this research in order to capture participants’ experience with the phenomenon of post-secondary preparation in high school. This chapter discusses the responses of the open-ended interviews. Each participants’ experience is illustrated through textured descriptions and direct quotes as it relates to the superordinate and subthemes.

**Traditional High School Education is Irrelevant**

I think just making more things applicable to different career paths… It would get kids more excited that they’re going to school for a reason. They’re not going to school just to be there. I feel like that’s the vibe a lot of kids have these days, they’re just going to school just to be there because that’s the progression that they’re supposed to do.
In this statement, Ryan sums up the consensus amongst the participants that their high school education was an obligation, lacking significance in developing skills towards their interests and goals. The participants perceived their traditional high school experience as irrelevant in respect to their learning interests and preparing for their futures. For purposes of this research, “traditional high school” refers to the comprehensive public schools which the participants attended. Participants shared the common viewpoint that their general high school curriculum and course requirements did not correlate with their interests or connect to potential careers. High school was for them, merely the next step in life after middle school and before graduating and moving on into adulthood.

I know plenty of people that were kind of in the same boat that I was in that have gone onto learn trades and they’re doing really well for themselves. They travel a lot and I just wondered why that wasn’t presented better.

Ben captures the disconnect between reality and the messages he perceived during high school regarding post-secondary education and careers. While participants struggled to find meaning in an educational atmosphere which appeared to favor a particular post-secondary path, they also experienced some valuable learning opportunities during high school. Ryan enjoyed his school’s “intensive” workshop style classes, while Ben, Luke, and Dylan found meaning in the career center courses. This section defines and describes the participants’ shared experiences that the general high school curriculum was not connected to their goals and interests, their
common preference for hands-on learning, the lack of meaning connected to the high school experience, and the biased messages perceived by the participants.

**Not connected to goals and interests.** The participants believed that the general high school curriculum was not relevant to their post-secondary plans. Participants shared their experience that high school was an obligation to get through as quickly as possible with no connection between the required curriculum and their career interests. The participants believed that high school does not provide students with “real world” experiences and admitted that they looked for any opportunity to get away from the general high school classes.

While each participant recalled having general career inclinations (Ben and Luke held interests in machinery) or even specific career interests (Dylan and Ryan wanted to be pilots) during high school, the common belief was that most secondary courses had little impact on developing skills in their area of interest. Attending high school was viewed as a barrier towards pursuing other activities. Ryan expressed his frustration, “I wanted to go do stuff that I wanted to do and school wasn’t one of those things, but in order to get to my career I had to go to school.” Ben found much of the high school required courses to be useless. He stated that he “Didn’t like learning about things that I felt I had no use for” and most classes were “boring and dry” with little to catch his interest or appear relevant.

While participants understood that the high school curriculum aimed to prepare students for some post-secondary pursuits, they shared the perception that many courses were not connected to preparation for their particular plans. Luke struggled to find his high school
classes’ relevancy to his future plans and questioned how these classes proposed to prepare him. Dylan captured this feeling in his explanation of how general high school courses could have better prepared him for his post-secondary interest of becoming a pilot:

    The English classes might help you prepare for college. But as for like job and career-wise, like maybe if they offered like… I don’t know if they offer technical writing and stuff like that. I think that’ll be more important than learning how to write or read sci-fi or something.

    The participants not only perceived a lack of relevance between high school and their post-secondary education intentions, but they also viewed high school as lacking the rigor to prepare students for post-secondary plans.

    If you didn’t do your work there weren’t consequences like college where you don’t do the work… You paid for the class you don’t do the work, you fail the class. Now you pretty much paid for nothing. A couple thousand for no reason.

Luke quickly learned in his post-secondary education that consequences for irresponsible behaviors were authentic. Luke emphasized the need for high schools to “get serious” in order to prepare students for adulthood, enrolling in post-secondary training, and obtaining employment. He suggested that post-secondary level curriculum and expectations be implemented at the high school level. Ryan and Dylan revealed similar examples of how the general high school curriculum fell short of preparing students for life after high school. Dylan shared Luke’s view for the low standards of the basic high school requirements. “I only had to go through Algebra 1,
and that barely gets you prepared for college.” He reflected that his general high school classes were “probably not preparing people very well” and could have been more rigorous in order to prepare students for future plans. Ryan also shared the belief that his high school experience did very little to prepare him for the “real world”. He advocated for students taking time after high school where they are “not in a classroom” in order to get more life experience.

A common experience among participants was that classes outside of the general comprehensive high school were found to develop practical skills. These learning opportunities were valued for the connections the participants made with the professors, the course material, and with their own interests and abilities. Dylan preferred his classes at the career center because his classmates in the program were “a lot more mature” than at his home high school and the teachers were “almost like college professors”. He also found that it was easier to learn at the career center because he was actually interested in the subject matter. Ben also preferred his career center classes, stating that the teachers were, “really passionate about their jobs” and “connected” to the course. Both participants appreciated the career center for the opportunity to get away from their home high school for part of the school day as well as learning relevant and interesting skills.

Unlike the other participants, Ryan did not attend courses at the career center, however, he also valued learning opportunities away from the standard high school curriculum. His school offered “intensives” where students chose a special course (yoga, hiking, culinary arts, etc.) in which they would spend the entire school day for one week of the semester. He appreciated
these courses for the connection to post-secondary plans as well as an opportunity to get away from the regular high school schedule:

I think intensives at [my high school] were a very good opportunity for career exploration because it was something that was nonstandard to the curriculum. It wasn’t a math class, it wasn’t science or history. It was actually going and doing something different and being introduced to something else.

The subtheme of high school not being connected to participants’ goals and interests focuses on the irrelevance found in the content of high school curriculum. Participants believed that some high school courses could have been more practically designed to teach students skills related to their career interests as well as more realistically prepare them for the demands of post-secondary education and employment. While the participants experienced little purpose for their general high school courses, they each appreciated learning opportunities in alternative environments such as the career center.

**Hands-on learning preferred.** Despite the general lack of relevancy of the general high school curriculum towards post-secondary education and careers, the participants shared an appreciation for learning opportunities participants described as “hands-on” or experiential. This learning and teaching style was described by the participants as physically engaging and offering valid and relevant skills which are connected to prospective jobs and careers. The participants thrived in hands-on learning environments and advocated for the benefit to all students in expanding this teaching style.
Hands-on learning was commonly referred to in the physical sense, lessons learned away from the traditional classroom setting and in a practical location such as a shop or in the community. Luke best captured this definition in describing his enjoyment for his automotive class at the career center:

> Going through automotive and actually have [the teacher say], ‘Alright class let’s go into the shop.’ Oh, we get to go into the shop today? All right! Then you actually stand up out of your seat and walk out into the shop and then you’re standing on your feet the whole time so it’s a lot better than just sitting there.

Most lesson plans in the career center courses were initially taught in the classroom lecture style setting. However, students were able to immediately apply the skills in a realistic setting such as the automotive shop as experienced by Luke or out in community parks as in Ben’s experience. These two participants described the teaching and learning approach respectively, “This is what you need to do to get this part off and then go do it” and that “we got to go out and do something”. The career center courses were profoundly distinct from the general high school courses for their component of physical participation. “Yeah it’s fun. A new thing every day. Hands-on, I’m not sitting down at a desk or anything.” Luke remembered his automotive trades teacher convincing him of the value of having fun while learning an employable skill. The course was structured around short instructional sessions followed by applying the new skill in a realistic setting, facilitating the participant’s engagement in at least part of his high school experience.
Hands-on learning opportunities stood out as the most engaging and meaningful component of the participants’ high school experiences. Ryan appreciated the interactive nature of a high school course in which students were challenged to develop new skills in debate and verbal reasoning, “discussion based curriculum so kids got to speak their mind.” Ben appreciated learning new skills by putting lessons into practice via community interactions. He shared:

Going out and cleaning up trails and parks. We would use power tools, chainsaws, wood chippers. I really enjoyed that class because we got to out and do something and there was a sense of accomplishment after you finished the job you were on.

Ben valued the authenticity of the learning opportunity where he could see his achievement through the contribution he made to his community. The consensus amongst participants was that when school subject matter was perceived as pertinent, participants were engaged in the class.

The participants clearly identified themselves as hands-on learners. Dylan appreciated the technical learning style used at the career center and preferred this learning style to his home high school because the general attitude of teachers and students was more mature. Luke explained how his trades class was difficult at first when it was instructional and lecture type learning. However, as soon as he was allowed to apply the lessons in the shop, it made sense, it clicked for him, “Oh this is so simple. It’s all hands-on.” Ben also knew he was a hands-on learner and chose his post-secondary education in what he considered a hands-on field, “I chose
welding because I was interested in working with my hands, tangible. I learn better that way. I think I perform better that way.” He also shared that his best grades in high school were in classes he considered to be hands-on due to his staying engaged in what he believed to be relevant classes.

I enjoyed hands on classes, I enjoyed all the PE classes, they had basketball, ping pong, soccer, outdoor field and track, stuff like that. I enjoyed my natural resource management class and I really enjoyed that class. I felt like I probably got one of the higher grades that I received during my entire high school career in that class. Classes that I didn’t enjoy particularly were just lecture, sitting in front of a Power-point.

There was a clear preference for experiential learning opportunities where new skills expose the students to potential post-secondary pathways. Dylan valued the opportunity for secondary students to take classes at the career center.

That’s a really good program for high school students to get their foot in the door in what they’re interested in, or to see what they might. If they’re undecided to see what they… they can try different fields while they’re in high school to see if they want to pursue that in college. So, it was a great program.

Participants found these courses valuable for their direct connection to potential careers. Ryan suggested that all students must be exposed to several different types of hands-on careers courses, “because it’s like branching out, you’re exploring different career pathways and stuff.”
The experiential component of learning was considered more valuable for its direct link to a practical, employable skill.

This teaching and learning style was believed to be effective in developing depth in skill and knowledge. The career center courses offered students the opportunity to earn certifications and credits towards post-secondary education. Luke described how the learning process worked, “Just basic knowledge to set you up for the next level. If people actually want to do well and progress through whatever they’re learning they’re going to absorb it that much faster.” Both Luke and Dylan earned credits towards their post-secondary degree through their career center courses. These courses were more than an escape from the general high school curriculum. These types of learning opportunities were found to be relevant because the curricula were explicitly connected to a career field or area of interest. Luke explained that he could actually see himself performing the skill set or task in a future career.

In conclusion, the subtheme of hands-on learning centers on the participants value for experiential and interactive learning experiences. The participants identified as hands-on learners who performed best when physically engaged in a task. Participants preferred interactive learning experiences during high school for the sense of accomplishment in developing a practical new skill. The participants’ found meaning in classes which focused on hands-on learning and were authentically connected to potential careers and opportunities for students.
Lacked meaning. The common sentiment for high school amongst these participants was a sense of meaninglessness. Attending high school was viewed as a compulsory event of adolescence. The participants described their detachment from the general high school curriculum, the desire to get away from their home high schools, and the apparent irrelevancy in training students for their futures. The participants shared thoughts on how high school could offer practical application to students’ interests and goals and better prepare them for the demands of adult life.

High school was regarded as a lackluster obligation rather than a career preparation opportunity. Participants characterized their school participation as robotic and uninvolved. Ben reflected on his engagement during high school:

I just felt that school was not my thing. I would rather be doing something else. Didn’t like learning about things that I felt I had no use for. It just felt like a process going through the motions and getting through high school was basically the goal.

Ben described his perspective, “I guess the high school experience I just felt was something I needed to get through and then maybe I’d find something after the fact that I was really interested in.” Luke recalled a similar lack of engagement for his secondary course work, “I know when I was going through it I was just going through the motions just to get through.” Ryan believed that most students had the same attitude as Luke regarding their high school education:
I think just making more things applicable to different career paths… in high school. It would get kids more excited that they’re going to school for a reason. They’re not going to school just to be there. I feel like that’s the vibe a lot of kids have these days, they’re just going to school just to be there because that’s the progression that they’re supposed to do.

Several times he suggested that school must become more applicable to students so they get “more excited that they’re going to school for a reason.” He believed many young people just go through the motions of school because that it is what is expected of them. These participants spoke of high school as if it’s main purpose is enduring the four years rather than a learning opportunity.

High school presented as a monotonous line up of requirements where the participants perceived having little self-determination in course options or personalization of the curriculum. Ben remembered following a programmatic series of graduation requirements, stating:

“Whatever was laid out in front of me. Whatever I needed to graduate was what I took.” Because school subject matter wasn’t overtly associated as a foundation for skills towards potential career paths, he questioned the purpose of the general high school curriculum and what it had to offer to students who weren’t taking advanced placement courses. Ben attached little meaning to his high school education because of the regimented requirements and his lack of input for his education, “It was pretty much outlined for me I guess.”
Ryan shared the sense of tedium connected to the high school experience and doubted whether public education would allow room in the curriculum to make school more meaningful to students. The standard curriculum was found to be monotonous and meaningless. He suggested school needs something “where it really gets their mind off the normal school, and doing math, and actually gets them excited to come to school to do something.” Ryan found value in his extracurricular activities, but questioned secondary school’s purpose for students who aren’t there to participate in extracurricular activities:

I did have hockey and that was a big thing for me, but there’s kids that don’t have hockey and are just at school. It’s like I look at them sometimes and I’m like ‘If you’re not really doing any after school activities or anything, what keeps you motivated to go to school?’ Participants questioned high school’s purpose in terms of preparing students for their futures. Luke described his school as overly lenient, with little sense of urgency to perform:

But going through my high school it was fairly laid back. If you failed you didn’t really fail you’d still get pushed through. They just threatened you with it like blackmailing you, ‘If you fail you’re going to be held back.’ But no, that wasn’t really true.

Standards were low for students in terms of academic performance as well as preparing students for the demands of life after high school. Ryan believed he had little “real world” experience needed to make career decisions. He described his school as promoting the message to “do what makes you happy type vibes” but as not following a “standard or guidelines” to prepare students for their futures.
Participants pursued opportunities to get away from their regular high school to “split up” their school days as well as enroll practical and interesting classes. Dylan enjoyed attending the career center for half of the school day for the dual purposes of getting away from the “drama” of his home school as well as the course offerings there:

I’d been interested in aviation for a while and I was already starting to work on getting my pilot’s license at that point. So, I figured I would just do those [career center courses], because it took off classes. It got me out of the normal high school classes, which was a bonus, and it was stuff I was interested in. It’s easier to learn stuff when you’re actually interested in it.

Ryan reflected during his high school years he searched out any opportunity available to get him off his home high school campus. He regretted having not attended the career center and shared what he would do differently in high school given the chance,

Oh, yeah. I would have done… [the career center]. That was a big thing that a lot of my friends did which was cool because they got to go off campus… I had a lot of friends that did that like the auto body shops and the high schoolers that go do the aviation at the [technical college].

The subtheme of lacked meaning underscores the disconnect the participants perceived between high school and life. The general high school curriculum was largely an act of tedium and attendance a mindless requirement. The participants grew weary of traditional high school classes and sought opportunities that pulled them away from their home high schools. Several
participants suggested that school could do more to connect students with potential career options, teach practical skills, and facilitate students’ enthusiasm for the learning possibilities.

**Biased message.** Each participant recalled distinct implications from their high schools regarding appropriate post-secondary preparation and attendance. Most participants observed favoritism for traditional university bound students during high school. These biases were explicitly revealed in some participants’ recollection of high school as well as implicitly via the participants’ descriptions of activities and curriculum promoted in their schools. The following describes how each participant perceived misleading and biased messaging regarding post-secondary preparation and education during high school.

Ben most explicitly proclaimed that high school was not designed to meet the needs and interests of all students and in particular him. He shared that his grade point average wasn’t very high and felt marginalized in high school due to his academic performance. He stated:

> The students with high GPA’s were clearly favored, AP students they were kind of the cream of the crop. But then where does everyone else go? It seemed that if you didn’t have the GPA that was attractive you were kind of left to your own devices I guess.

He recalled these “other students” having access to opportunities that he did not based on their academic performance and post-secondary plans. Students with high GPA’s who were bound for the traditional university were shown favoritism by having a wider selection of college preparation type classes offered at the high school and he “didn’t feel like there was much opportunity for me at least.”
Amidst the “big push” towards traditional university in high school, participants perceived that schools could appeal to a wider variety of student interests and abilities. Ryan was disappointed that his school did not present the career center option to students.

Maybe it was more word of mouth at the bigger high schools, but there is no advertising at least for that at my school of the [career center] opportunities. Not many kids at [my school] did any of the [career center] opportunities.”

The participants believed that other post-secondary pathways could be presented in high schools and suggested that schools could do more to offer courses that pertain to local job demands. School could be more equitable in reaching all students:

I guess if you know the students that aren’t doing particularly well, aren’t being reached, there’s something that they can do. There’s something for everybody and I think they should be given a fair shake, too. It might take a little extra effort, but I don’t know, everyone has their strengths. Sitting in the classroom might not be for everybody, which I know it wasn’t for me, but I think I turned out pretty well.

A range of post-secondary preparation opportunities should be promoted by schools in order to cultivate a variety of interests and aptitudes amongst students. Dylan considered how public education could improve to meet the needs of all students:
Something that’s more… I’m a big supporter of them shifting schools to actually preparing you for technical fields and stuff, other than this kind of like, ‘Oh, go get an arts degree or something like that.’

As Ben put it, students who were not university bound were “left to their own devices” in their post-secondary planning and preparation, whereas the participants saw opportunity for high school to promote practical and career ready skills.

Dylan shared Ben’s perception that high school transmitted the message that the traditional university was the most viable post-secondary route. He recalled an upper class “mentality” at his high school and the assumption that all students would “go to college”. In his experience, the biased message was conveyed by way of course offerings at his school. Dylan found that many of his high school classes prepared students planning to attend a traditional university, but not those students with other post-secondary plans such as a trade or technical education.

The English classes might help you prepare for college. But as for like job and career-wise, like maybe if they offered like… I don’t know if they offer technical writing and stuff like that. I think that’ll be more important than learning how to write or read sci-fi or something, you know?

Like Ben, Dylan believed that the high school curriculum could encompass a wider range of post-secondary interests.
Though Ryan did not find his particular high school to support one post-secondary path over another, he did believe the general message in society steers high school students straight to college and directly onto careers. He shared his observations of others who took this route and do not appear fulfilled in their career path.

I think just the fact that they went high school, college, jobs, it’s like their life is very confined, their direction I guess. That’s just how they were raised up, you go to do these assignments, you have to go follow this and this.

Ryan took a few years off between high school graduation and post-secondary education. He is clearly an advocate for taking time for maturity and self-discovery. He believed that high schools “steer” students in the wrong direction by implementing the mindset that students must attend college immediately after high school.

I think that’s a message a lot of people aren’t getting. It’s like college, college, college… You need to go to high school, college, get your career going… And it might be the millennial type view like there’s no rush in anything. But at the same time, you have people that go high school, college, job and are miserable.

He shared that he has witnessed many people who made better career decisions by delaying post-secondary education after high school as well as exploring careers in the trades fields. Ryan found the pressure to follow the traditional university path immediately following high school leads to poor career choices and unhappiness.
Ryan experienced a mix of vaguely supportive as well as covertly biased messages in high school. He described the vaguely supportive message from his high school regarding post-secondary plans, “It was a very artsy school. I don’t know how to explain it. We had to take our classes, but it was very down to earth, you do what you want to do. Not, ‘oh, you need to go do this, this, this.’” Though Ryan believed that his high school did not promote one post-secondary system over another, he recalled a strong emphasis on university preparation activities such as preparing for and taking college entrance exams (ACT and SAT) as well as support for college applications and scholarships.

That was really important, at least at [my high school] is they had a big emphasis on the ACT/SAT. They had prep courses there… There was a required meeting that we had to go to once a month where it was just talking about ACT and ACT prep and we actually took a prep test for the ACT. So, we have all those scores in our scholarship portfolio as well.

Ryan mentioned several times the pressure he felt for performing well on the college entrance exams, taking them multiple times and enrolling in preparation programs.

Like Ryan, Luke perceived his high school as not specifically favoring one career plan over another. However, he reflected on many ways that his high school sent misleading messages of appropriate preparation for post-secondary options. He referred to his high school as “laid back” and believed students in his high school were “pushed through” in reference to
academic performance. Luke used high school athletic eligibility as an example of the misleading message sent by his high school.

That’s a really good one because playing sports you can get Cs and pass in high school, but if you come [to college], you’re probably not going to be able to pass with a C just doing minimal work. You want to shoot for As and stuff because who’s going to want to hire a dumb sports player?

His high school’s low standard wasn’t a realistic message for the demand of post-secondary education for athletes or any student. Luke believed he was unprepared for the rigor of his post-secondary educational demands. He named writing as a specific skill in which he struggled to keep up according to his post-secondary education demands. It was clear that the message he received during high school was that the rigor and standards of his school did not match the demands of post-secondary education.

The subtheme of biased messaging reveals the various ways in which the participants experienced preference for university bound academic pathways in high school. While some participants perceived an overt message that favored students on the university bound academic pathway, others recalled more subtle suggestions that preparing for university attendance was the preferred plan. In Luke’s case, high school sent deceiving messages about proper preparation for any post-secondary plans. Despite their personal experiences with biased messaging in high school, the participants believed that schools could promote a wider range of career plans. School could capture the interests and aptitudes of more students by connecting them with
existing opportunities as well as integrating more practical and applicable skills in the general curriculum.

**Conclusion**

The superordinate theme, traditional high school curriculum was irrelevant, focuses on the participants shared experience of disconnect between their general high school experience and their interests and career goals. It was clear that the participants struggled to find meaning in the majority of their high school courses and relevancy to their post-secondary plans and interests. The participants considered themselves hands-on learners who learned and performed best in experiential, interactive learning situations. However, biases in the high school curriculum for the traditional university post-secondary education stifled skill development and growth. Favoritism for traditional university students was apparent by course offerings, general high school curriculum, and emphasis on college entrance exams and applications. High school was tolerated at best and participants looked for opportunities to get away from their home high schools. However, participants did find value in hands-on learning experiences and classes such as those taught at the career center.

**Route to Technical Program**

There were job fairs at the high school I was attending and [the career center], but I was only there for a portion of the day. When it was time to go back I think they were offered after class had let out for the day, at least for high schools so people could come to them, and I was all the way out of town.
Ben illustrated the casual nature of the career development activities available to him while he was in high school. While each participant was enrolled in a post-secondary technical program progressing towards employment in a specific career field, the researcher noted the route to enrolling in their respective technical programs was circuitous and somewhat cumbersome due to lack of exposure to a comprehensive post-secondary preparation and planning program.

The researcher observed two specific subthemes distinguishing the participants route to their chosen technical programs: professional guidance and career exploration. The researcher noted a lack of memorable professional guidance available to the participants in formulating a career plan during high school. Dylan captured the common sentiment amongst the participants regarding post-secondary preparation and development with a profession:

We might’ve taken like a survey. I can’t remember any specifics, but they might’ve asked us if we were planning on doing that or not, but yeah, I can’t remember too much on it for sure if that’s what they did.

The limited professional guidance available to participants inhibited and altered their ability to make well-informed plans and decisions for their post-secondary pursuits. Further, the participants lacked exposure to comprehensive career development opportunities during high school. Ryan recalled the minimal post-secondary preparation assistance he received in high school:
As far as career exploration we didn’t really have anything that took us to the colleges for college tours or representatives that came. That was big thing, no college reps really came in for us. Like I said, it was voluntary. You could go.

This section describes the participants influences in their lives for the career decisions they made and the route they took to arrive at the technical program which they are currently pursuing.

**Professional guidance.** An obvious missing component within each participant’s high school experience was a comprehensive post-secondary preparation and planning program. While participants made efforts to pursue their interests such as signing up for career center courses, they received minimal professional guidance in developing these interests into a specific career plan. Participants shared their experiences of professional career development guidance at their school as well as their thoughts on how these practices could be improved.

Each participant explicitly stated that they had either very little or no direct professional guidance in tailoring their high school education in preparation for their future plans. When it came to choosing classes and career planning Luke stated that:

The thing is my first week of school or the last week of school they had a questionnaire, ‘What do you want to do? What are your thoughts? What are your short-term goals? What are your long-term goals?’

However, when asked about an in-person follow up to the questionnaire he recalled the discussion was with, “My parents mostly. None of my teachers. I never went through any
counselors.” Dylan recalled a similar experience, “With counselors and stuff, there wasn’t much help that I can remember.” Ben also spent very little time with a professional educator to plan his high school courses according to his interests, “Whatever was laid out in front of me. Whatever I needed to graduate was what I took. There was a couple of classes I had shifted around, but it was pretty much outline for me I guess.” While both Dylan and Luke recalled having some input for their classes, neither had face to face meetings with a professional with whom to discuss career interests and recommend appropriate high school courses.

Ben also recalled a lack of professional guidance for post-secondary planning and viewed himself as being excluded from this assistance due to his poor academic performance. Ben perceived that the high performing students in his school had ample resources for post-secondary preparation, but that “mine were very limited.” He observed other students involved in post-secondary preparation activities, but did not believe such services were available to him. Ben’s high school experience lacked a professional career development program to introduce the post-secondary options available other than the traditional university.

Ryan also had very few interactions with the school guidance staff, “I just didn’t get any of the guidance through my schooling at least.” Ryan stated the counselor at his school was focused on social-emotional issues. “I never really talked to her. I talked to her if there was an issue with someone or something, not as far as school wise.” However, he had some limited structured post-secondary guidance built into his school program. “We had a teacher ‘advisor’ that made sure we had our grades in line so you could graduate for college and stuff.” However,
this teacher did not offer professional post-secondary planning. The advising time was well-organized, but lacked the professional post-secondary planning component. When asked if the advisor knew about his post-secondary plans Ryan said,

He kind of knew. He knew I wanted to play hockey. I told him about the Air Force Academy, but I was very direct with what I wanted to do so I knew what I needed to do and what I needed to get done. So, he was kind of like, ‘Well you’ve got all your ducks in a row here. Let me know if you need help.’

As a high school student Ryan believed he could design his career plan on his own. But as he reflected on his post-secondary preparation experiences in high school he pointed out gaps where professional guidance may have helped. He stated, “I didn’t know about the technical college at [the local technical school] until I applied. I was looking for aviation so then I found that [the local technical school] had a technical college.” Instead the focus at his school was, “more like the practicing, getting ready for the standardized test because that’s what colleges look at.” Ryan recalled the importance placed on preparing for and taking the ACT and SAT, university entrance exams. He spent many hours studying and retaking these exams in order to get an acceptable score. He also enrolled in a scholarship application intensive offered at his school. The missing component for Ryan was professional guidance in choosing the appropriate post-secondary education according to his desired career field and planning accordingly.

The limited professional career and post-secondary guidance prohibited participants from making informed decisions for their post-secondary education plans. Luke had career aspirations
related to the courses he took at the career center during his senior year. The automotive maintenance program he was enrolled in dove tailed into a post-secondary program at the local technical college. However, like Ryan he learned this through his own inquiry and did not have professional guidance that specifically addressed his career goals. Luke missed out on opportunities to earn credit towards his certification due to the lack of professional guidance. Some of Luke’s post-secondary plans were also driven by financial limitations. However, he had no professional guidance for viable financial aid that may have broadened his options had money not appeared to be an issue.

The participants believed that schools could do more to provide all students with practical guidance in post-secondary preparation and planning. Ben believed that high school students have little understanding of the realities of job markets:

Just have more information about things that don’t involve around [traditional university]. Trade schools would be a great option. Maybe informing the students about what our community needs, what our state’s known for. And maybe prepare them for that offering courses that pertain to those things.

Ryan also wanted to see schools connecting students to the various career fields available, “I think just making more things applicable to different career paths.” Luke believed high schools must facilitate students discovering their career interests and creating a plan towards a desired career. To do this, he suggested “I would have them sit down with someone, possibly a counselor. Make it a mandatory sit down and meet. Talk them through.” These participants
clearly believe that a deliberate guidance program should be a necessary component of high school.

The subtheme, professional guidance, centers on the missing component of professional assistance in career development and planning during high school. Despite having career aspirations, the participants did not have a professional working with them to tailor their high school courses and activities to develop these interests. Some participants spent time on unnecessary efforts such as college entrance exams which were not pertinent to their needs, while others missed out on important information regarding post-secondary opportunities. Each participant clearly believed in secondary school’s potential to improve their career development and guidance programs to meet the needs and interests of all students.

**Career exploration.** A notable subtheme along the participants’ route to their technical programs was the experiences of career exploration. Formal, comprehensive career exploration was clearly a missing component of the participants’ post-secondary preparation during high school. These participants found themselves essentially on their own, receiving most assistance through parents and finding opportunities through their own efforts. Each participant shared beneficial career exploration and development activities that they experienced as well as their thoughts on how high schools could do more to facilitate career exploration and assist students in developing career interests.
Several of the participants were largely influenced by their parents in exploring and determining their career paths. Dylan knew early in his high school years that he wanted to pursue a career in the field of aviation. He recalled his father’s persuasion:

My dad was big into like getting me into the aviation. So, he was the one that pushed me to get my private pilot license. Then once I did that, I knew I wanted to fly for a career and stuff. I just want to fly and get paid for it.

With his father’s encouragement and his own developing interest, Dylan enrolled in aviation courses during high school at the career center. Luke was also highly influenced by his parents’ role-modeling:

My dad was in the military so he was always working, even now he’s always working…

When I was a very little kid like eight or younger, it’s a long time ago but we had an old car that he was trying to fix. I’d go sit out there and I’d be playing in the dirt and he’d be like, ‘Hey hand me a wrench.’

Luke’s mother encouraged him to earn good grades in school, “my mom would always tell me that I need to do good in English and Math.” Luke eventually matched his skills and interests to automotive maintenance. Similarly, Ryan’s career exploration was primarily through the support of his parents. His father was a commercial pilot and his family owned plane. He was inspired by his father’s career and eventually chose this career path.
Despite the encouragement and influence of parents, the participants perceived that they were primarily on their own when it came to career exploration and development. While Luke’s career exposure occurred outside of school under the guidance of his parents, when it came to career planning and development during high school he stated, “I was just on my own.” Luke chose to enroll in the high school career center courses in automotive maintenance to develop his skills and interest in this career field. The other participants sought out opportunities in the military, they pursued this career development activity on their own rather than through the guidance of a career exploration program. Dylan remembered, “Like, I went the military route right out of high school, but that was totally on my own. It wasn’t because recruiters came to the school or anything.” Ben also enlisted in the military, but did so after high school and not through a guidance program during high school. Due to his interest in aviation, Ryan considered applying to the Air Force Academy and sought out recruiters. “That was more me personally going out. It wasn’t really the school.”

Both Ben and Dylan enlisted in the military shortly after graduating high school. Though this choice was not a component of a strategy formalized during high school, the military proved to be a useful career exploration tool for each. Dylan used the military to develop his understanding of aviation career opportunities and Ben found that the military introduced him to a variety of career fields as well as soft skills such as self-conduct and responsibility.

I was in the Navy for five years, I did a lot of different stuff. Supply food service, security, I was a radio operator in Afghanistan, did some IT work, and I pretty much
bounced around a lot in the military as well… Yes. I do believe the discipline that I
learned just how to conduct yourself growing up a little bit more.

Ben valued the time he spent in the military for the opportunity to experience new places and
people. The military served as an important career exploration period in his life.

Participants valued high school career center courses for the exploration and development
opportunities available in a variety of career fields. Dylan participated in the aviation courses at
which covered a broad spectrum of career options and skills within the aviation career field. He
appreciated this exposure and experience and recommended it as a useful career exploration for
any student:

We learned little bit, like we learned how to solder and do logical work on circuitry
boards and stuff. So, it was kind of just like, ‘Here’s a little of everything.’ Which is good
if you’re trying to make up your mind, if that’s the field you want to go into. It gives you
a real broad view of what it’s going to be like.

From his perspective as a student earning his technical degree in the aviation field he believed
this high school experience segued into his post-secondary plans appropriately, “It definitely got
me prepared.” These courses also offered credit towards a technical post-secondary education.
Both Luke and Dylan earned credits in their high school career center classes towards their post-
secondary certification in their respective career fields.
The participants valued high school students having the opportunity to explore and develop skills. Dylan stated that for improved career exploration and preparation for high school students, “I think [the career center] is really the best thing…that I could see being set up because they offer so many different classes right now.” Luke appreciated his career center courses and highly recommended trades classes to students to acquire career experience and develop an understanding of potential future careers. Luke believed in the importance of high school students discovering their aptitudes and interests, “But taking classes that pertain to whatever you’re thinking about going into and actually having a set idea of what you want to do before you graduate, or at least an inkling of your hobbies.” Similarly, Ryan suggested:

I think just getting more, whether it’s like representatives or just opportunity out there for kids to go see that type of stuff and what other places have to offer would be something pretty beneficial that I would have liked when I was growing up.

These participants believed that high schools can and should facilitate the development of students’ interests through career exploration and planning in order to be prepared for their post-secondary pursuits.

Ryan did not know for certain during high school that he wanted to be a career pilot. He experienced little career exploration while in high school, assuming he would figure it out after graduation, “I’ll get to into college and I’ll see what I want to do.” Ryan, as well as Ben and Dylan, took circuitous routes to their post-secondary education. While Ben and Dylan first spent several years in the military, Ryan traveled and competed with a junior hockey team. Ryan
stated that the most valuable exploration period of his life was the time off he took between high school and post-secondary education. He was exposed to different colleges and lifestyles throughout the country and is an advocate for others taking this time to explore the many career and lifestyle opportunities available. Ryan came to this conclusion based on his own experiences as well as observing peers who appeared unhappy with their own career decisions due to lack of career development and exploration, “They’re like, ‘Man I wish I would have explored a little more into stuff.’”

The career exploration subtheme centers on the career development activities these participants encountered along the way to their respective technical programs. While each valued their current career path, the participants reflected on how their career exploration and development could have been more efficient and effective during their high school years. Career exposure occurred mainly through parental influence and the participants seeking out opportunities on their own. Each participant lacked meaningful and deliberate career exploration as a component of their general high school curriculum and believed schools could do more to assist students in the career development process.

**Conclusion.** The participants’ routes to their secondary technical training programs were considerably influenced by the availability of professional guidance and career exploration. The common experience amongst the participants was the lack of professional guidance for career planning as well as career exploration activities provided during high school. While these participants each held vocational interests while in high school, they did not receive professional
assistance in exploring careers and developing a pathway toward a related career field. While some participants took advantage of available courses related to their career interests through the career center, others missed opportunities available to them due to lack of information. The participants recommended that schools educate students to job market demands of their community as well as the various post-secondary education options in obtaining the various careers. Participants believed that students need deliberate professional guidance in exploring viable career options and in developing post-secondary education plans.

**Technical Degree Career Plan**

I already knew I wanted to fly. So, I wasn’t one of the people that wasn’t really decided, but [the career center] definitely got me prepared. It took care of all my ground school. So, when I went and got my… private pilot license, I didn’t have to do the ground school training again, so I didn’t have to pay for that out of pocket. Then when I came [to the technical college], that waives a like a class or two.

Dylan captures the notable similarity amongst all participants in their structured technical degree career plan. The researcher observed that each participant described a well-articulated career plan facilitated by their chosen technical degrees. These participants had clear purpose for their chosen career field. They expressed profound understanding of their strengths, interests, and learning styles. Additionally, the researcher found that all participants developed distinct short and long-term career goals within their respective technical degree career plan.
explained how his technical training would enable his objectives for employment in the near future followed by progression into a leadership position within his career field:

I’m pursuing a degree in applied technology leadership with emphasis on welding…

After I complete my schooling, I could be a certified welder in different processes. Also, the management aspect of welding. Running a shop, a crew. There’s also a huge business side to that program.

The participants had a mapped-out plan for their careers with an understanding of their chosen career’s potential trajectories. This section describes the clear purpose each participant had for pursuing a degree in a technical field and how this purpose was connected to their short and long-term goals.

**Clear purpose.** The subtheme, clear purpose, focuses on each participants’ well-defined career path. Career fields were chosen not only according to participants’ interests, but also for the high employability rates in the career field. Participants believed their particular training programs offered rigorous and respected education within their respective industries with likely guarantee of employment upon graduation. Participants shared their passion for their career field as well as the lifestyle afforded them in the career.

The participants were confident that their technical training would lead to immediate employment. Ben had a thorough understanding of his own interests as well as available jobs:
I’ve heard people having success in welding and they hire, if you’re skilled you’re pretty desirable if you’re in Alaska. There was other technical programs that were offered by the [technical college] here, but I felt that welding was the best fit for me of all the things they offered.

Dylan also chose a career field, aviation, not only out of his passion for the industry, but also for the high probability of being hired upon graduation:

I knew I’d be able to go find a job somewhere. I knew it wasn’t going to be like hard, like a lot of people talk about not being able to find jobs for like a year. The aviation isn’t too bad. Especially if you’re willing to move, I mean, you’ll be able to find a job.

Ryan shared Dylan’s passion for aviation, but also knew that his technical training led to immediate employability upon graduation, “We are qualified to start working for any company gaining our hours.” Certification and education in their respective career fields served the dual purpose of likely employment and fitting their interests and aptitudes.

Not only did the participants choose career fields with a high employment rate, they were also purposeful in choosing a training program qualifying them for their respective careers. Ben knew that welders were in demand in his community and that employers look for well trained workers rather than self-trained welders:
If you do it on your own or you’ve dabbled then that’s great and all, but you still need to have those certs and that’s really what drew me to [this technical college] and the program because that’s what everyone’s looking for, at least employers.

Participants reported that employers are looking for these specific skills and certifications they were earning at the technical college. Dylan reported that for graduates of his program, “A lot of other airlines are doing bonuses.” Several airline companies hired directly from his particular program and the job market for aviation was strong:

There’s pilot jobs pretty much everywhere right now. It’s pretty good for getting hired. [The technical college] has a good connection with [airline companies] right now where they’re offering students that are going to get their flight instructor rating, because the big problem right now is it’s so easy to go get flying jobs.

The post-secondary training program Luke was enrolled in not only met his vocational interests, but also offered a variety of certifications. These skill-developing opportunities were important to Luke because earning additional certifications increased his employability and qualified him for a variety of jobs. He was committed to improving his professional proficiency, “If you get those [certifications] it’s like that much better on your resume.” Luke believed the quality of his technical training program served a distinct purpose in making him a desirable employee and giving him higher earning potential.

The certifications are for… mainly for the mechanic. Then whatever the manager whoever is hiring he sees it they’re like, ‘Alright this guy knows his stuff.’ It gives you
that much more room in the door to get a job. I think they pay a certain amount of money, for each certification that you have.

The participants valued their education and the corresponding opportunities made available to them as a result of completing their technical training. Dylan appreciated the highly employable skills offered in the technical college. He believed the technological education programs directly connect student to careers, whereas students in traditional university programs don’t complete their program with lucrative skills. He observed peers:

And you see it, like there’s so many people that are like undecided that are just taking classes and don’t know what they’re doing. They’re already on like their second year. They’re just getting like a generic associate’s just so they can say they have it. And then those are the people we see complaining how they can’t find jobs.

Lastly, the participants connected their employment to leading an enjoyable lifestyle. Luke was also on a well-planned career path and was determined to work for and earn a comfortable living. As a high school student, he understood the value of being employable and was driven by a desire to live a good life. He observed others in his community who did not complete high school,

I knew the diploma was better than the GED. That’s what I shot for. A lot of the people there, they were just blowing it off like ‘This doesn’t really matter.’ Probably if you looked for them now you would see them living in bad conditions.
Dylan and Ryan each had a long-standing interest in aviation. Dylan initially indulged in this interest by earning his pilot’s license while in high school and eventually realized that he would like to turn his passion into a career, “If you enjoy it, it’s not hard work I guess.” Dylan wanted to do what he loved and make a living at it. Ryan’s aviation training served the purpose of offering appealing lifestyle opportunities such as recreation piloting.

This subtheme, clear purpose, centers on the participants well-planned education plans. All the participants were confident in their career choice and the training program they chose to achieve their career pursuits. High employability rates were associated with the participants’ training programs at the technical college. Additionally, the particular training programs they chose were well known in their respective industries for the rigorous certifications offered. Graduates of these programs were desirable to potential employers, some even hiring directly from the technical college. The participants valued the employment and lifestyle opportunities made accessible to them upon their completion of their technical training program.

**Connected to short and long-term goals.** Not only did the participants have a clear purpose for the career path for which they were training, they each had specific short and long-term career goals. This subtheme, connected to short and long-term goals, summarizes the participants objectives from completing their training and education to obtaining desired employment and eventually achieving professional advancement as well as desired lifestyle opportunities. The participants were actively engaged in accomplishing their short and long-term goals through deliberate planning.
Each participant anticipated immediate employment in their respective career fields. Dylan captured the general plan amongst the participants:

Currently, short term, like we’re on that right now, is just finish getting my instructor ratings, and then I’ll be instructing at the school until I finish a degree, and then after that, hopefully, I’ll be getting a job flying for an airline somewhere.”

The participants looked forward to finishing up their training and starting their careers. Luke stated, “Finish my practicum, get my degree and then stay out in the field for as long as I can.” Ryan considered potential residential changes with his short-term career prospects, “Short-term academically, obviously graduate and then get a job with a smaller company, whether it be in Alaska or someplace warm.” The participants were ready to launch their careers in the near future.

The short-term plans discussed were done so in anticipation of growth and maturity within the career field. Ben’s career plans included not only immediate employment in the field, but also potential need for professional change. While he was vigilant in obtaining certifications for employment as a welder in the near future, he was also working towards further training through his program in leadership and management.

After I complete my schooling, I could be a certified welder in different processes. Also, the management aspect of welding. Running a shop, a crew. There’s also a huge business side to that program.”
He stated “Once I get a little older, if I’m still in the field, it would be nice to not have to weld so much.” Like Ben, Ryan was also pursuing his short-term goals with long range possibilities in his career field. Ryan planned to work for a smaller airline company to build up his experience and eventually, “Then long-term work for a major airline.” This will take time to achieve as Ryan explained he must accumulate hours of piloting before moving up to flying larger aircraft.

He described the progression of the industry:

> It’s all based on seniority. The longer you’re there the more money you get paid… Then once you have a certain amount of hours, which I don’t know what it is, you’re qualified to upgrade to captain for the airline.

Ryan and Dylan shared long-term plans of working for a major airline company. Both of these participants anticipated potential lifestyle changes to accommodate career growth such as job relocations.

Luke’s short and long-term goals encompassed career as well as lifestyle plans. Luke planned to begin his career and eventually buy a house and make a comfortable living.

> Long-term goals, I have a decent house, make lots of money. That’s about it. Pretty simple. I think everybody probably wants in their life. Then short term I’m going to finish this and then work for the practicum because I haven’t done that yet. I’ll just go into working for someone.
To accomplish this, he was earning multiple certifications within his technical training in order to be a highly desired employee in the near future. Luke recognized how his career interests may change over time. Like Ben, Luke also anticipated physical limitations to his career performance. He considered how his training program along with experience would open up management positions in the future.

The subtheme connected to short and long-term goals focuses on the participants’ anticipated career plans. Each participant had specific short and long-term goals and defined strategies to achieve these goals. They each chose a technical training program specific to their personal interests, strengths, and career aspirations and expected immediate employment in their respective field following graduation. Professional maturity was expected and participants shared long-term goals that would accommodate this growth as well as anticipated future physical limitations that accompany physically demanding jobs. The short-term goals described by participants served to build upon skills and experiences the participants would employ to progress toward their long-term goals.

**Conclusion.** Each participant’s technical education played a vital role in their respective career plan. The participants had developed a strong sense of their vocational aptitudes and interests and were each enrolled in a suitable technical degree. They were purposeful in choosing their career field as well as the training program that would facilitate employment in that career. The participants believed the skills and certifications earned in their technical programs made them highly desirable for immediate employment upon graduation. Each
participant looked forward to graduating in the near future and commencing their short-term goals of employment in their respective career field. Additionally, the participants each held long-term goals such as career advancement or shifting to leadership and management positions. These long-term goals would be achieved by the skills and experience participants acquired through their short-term goals.

Summary

The purpose of this research project was to understand the experiences of local high school graduates attending post-secondary education in a technical institution. Data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with four participants to answer the research question: *What were the post-secondary planning and preparation experiences during high school of graduates of the local school district who are attending post-secondary education at a technical institution?* Three major themes emerged from the data: Traditional High School Education is Irrelevant, Route to Technical Program, and Technical Degree Career Path. Participants viewed their high school education as lacking meaning and not connected to their personal life goals and interests. They viewed themselves as hands-on learners and performers in an education system that favored students engaged in the more traditional academic educational path. The participants remembered a lack of professional guidance in exploring and developing a career plan. Lastly, each participant had a distinct and unique purpose and plan for their technical degree and career path despite their circuitous or cumbersome journey.
Chapter V: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to answer the central research question: What were the post-secondary preparation experiences of students enrolled in a technical college? The study was grounded in Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which provided an understanding of how career interests are developed and reinforced or diminished through various factors in a person’s life. A qualitative research design was used to explore the post-secondary preparation experiences of the participants who were graduates of the local school district. The methodological design chosen for this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for its focus on in-depth investigation into participants’ experiences with the study’s phenomenon. IPA best fits the purpose of this study for its focus on how the participants interpret and make meaning of their experiences. Also, IPA recognizes the researcher’s position of influence throughout the research process. As a scholar-practitioner employed as a school counselor in the local school district, the researcher was vigilant of the double hermeneutic process in which she composed meanings alongside the shared interpretations of the participants (Smith et al., 2009).

The in-depth interviews were analyzed according to the six-step process described by Smith et al. (2009). Three superordinate and eight subordinate themes emerged from the analysis of this data. These superordinate themes and their correlating subordinate themes are: Traditional High School Education is Irrelevant (Not Connected to Goals and Interests, Hands-on Learning Preferred, Lacked Meaning, Biased Message), Route To Technical Program...
Three overarching findings were derived from a synthesis of the study’s emergent themes in context of the theoretical framework. This chapter presents and describes these findings in context of the current literature as well as how each is situated within the theoretical framework. The chapter concludes with implications for further research and practice according to the findings.

**Finding 1. High Schools Do Not Equally Support a Diverse Range of Career Fields**

While producing college and career ready high school graduates is a priority of the US public education system (Grundman, 2013), the evidence from this study suggests that the range of career fields students are being prepared for is limited. The superordinate theme, Traditional High School Education is Irrelevant, plainly states that the participants did not perceive their high school education as relevant in preparing them for their particular future goals. The subordinate themes, Not Connected to goals and Interests, Hands-On Learning Preferred, Lacked Meaning, and Biased Message, elucidate the specific ways that the participants felt disconnected from their secondary education. This first finding suggests that a major contributing factor to the participants’ perception that high school education is irrelevant is due to high schools’ lack of
support for the career interests of all students. This finding is comprised of two sub-findings that explain how schools do not provide post-secondary preparation for a range of career fields:

Connecting Secondary Curriculum to Career Ready Skills and Barriers to Post-Secondary Preparation. The current literature supports this finding in revealing strategies schools must use to connect curriculum to future skills and produce career and college ready high school graduates. This finding adds to the existing body of literature by offering the students’ perspectives in how secondary education is irrelevant and disconnected to their career interests. The theoretical framework provides an understanding of the function of this finding in the career development process for all students.

**Connecting secondary curriculum to career ready skills.** The participants’ perception that high school is irrelevant was largely fueled by the participants not finding connections between the curriculum and their career interests. Skill development objectives for high school courses were either obscure or entirely unrelated to the participants’ career goals. For example, one participant described how his high school literature requirement may have prepared students for college level courses, but was completely unrelated to his career goals and suggested that a technical writing course would have been more meaningful. However, participants did report meaningful learning experiences in career center courses where the skills taught were directly applicable to careers and interests. The contrasting value for the learning experiences between the general high school curriculum and career center courses offers insight for how secondary education can become relevant for all students. While the participants’ shared experiences highlighted the disconnect between the general secondary curriculum and future career goals,
both the current literature and the theoretical framework underscore the necessity to implement opportunities for career interest and skill development.

This sub-finding compliments the current literature on preparing students for post-secondary education and careers by connecting secondary education to skill building for future careers. The literature shows that secondary schools should offer more courses teaching work-based competencies, distribute employability skills lessons across all subject areas, and include technical and general skills to enhance the career preparedness of all students (Guy et al., 2009). Despite having career interests and inclinations during high school, the participants did not perceive the majority of their high school education as the foundation from which to prepare for post-secondary plans. The current literature underscores the participants’ perception of not being prepared for their career goals by their high school education. Darling et al. (2014) found that the incorporation of college and work ready skills into secondary curricula produces high school graduates who are prepared for the demands of post-secondary education, training, or the workforce.

This sub-finding incorporates the perceived bias in schools for the university bound post-secondary pathways evidenced by a narrow range of career readiness activities and measurements. Participants recalled the majority of post-secondary preparation activities including college and scholarship application assistance and preparing for and taking college entrance exams. These observations skewed the participants’ understanding of both the availability of a range of post-secondary training options and the significant ways the
participants were already preparing themselves such as taking career center courses. This is complimented by the current literature that argues against single assessments of readiness such as college entrance exams (Maruyama, 2012). Further literature discrediting the traditional limited assessment for post-secondary readiness shows large discrepancy from state to state on student skills as well as inconsistencies in college admissions standards (Lee, 2012). This finding is further supported by literature finding that the most accurate indicator of college and career readiness is through a compilation of work and assessment results, courses taken, and other activities (Conley, 2014). The narrow scope of post-secondary readiness activities revealed in this study’s results not only reinforced the participants’ sense of meaninglessness for the high school education, it also denied connecting much of the school population to valuable college and career ready skills.

Vital career preparation opportunities may be missed when schools have a limited focus of post-secondary preparation activities. This study’s results show that participants perceived their career center courses as relevant to future careers and the most beneficial component of their secondary education in preparing them for the post-secondary training. This is supported by the literature that shows that schools which incorporate vocational education throughout the general curriculum are found to be suitably rigorous and appropriate for all post-secondary plans (Demerest & Gehrt, 2015). Further literature advocates for career academies for the academic, career, and technical skills incorporated into the curriculum that enhance students’ career development (Kuo, 2010). More specifically connected to this finding is that students who attend career academy style courses graduate from high school better informed about and
prepared for the workforce than peers who do not (Loera et al., 2013). While the propensity to focus post-secondary preparation and guidance efforts towards a narrow selection of career paths may leave out a large population of students, this limited scope is also depriving all students of vital career ready skills. Schools that broaden their scope of career skills development not only become relevant for more students, but also better serve the career readiness of all students.

**Barriers to post-secondary preparation.** Students’ perceptions that the education system does not support their interests limits their post-secondary preparation. The first superordinate theme, Traditional High School Education is Irrelevant, along with the second superordinate theme, Route to Technical Program, combine to reveal the circuitous path the participants traveled to achieve their post-secondary plans. Participants were largely without guidance in constructing their plans and they did not believe their high school supported their interests and aptitudes. The lack of proper support for these participants’ career goals in a technical field was partially due to the failure of the participants’ schools in presenting a relevant curriculum and exacerbated by the participants’ limited association with an effective career counseling program.

The current literature on the importance of building self-efficacy for career development supports this sub-finding regarding the barriers to post-secondary preparation created by schools that do not support all students’ career interests. Lent and Brown (2000) argue that strong self-efficacy is key to students’ perception of barriers to career achievement. This is complimented by the literature showing that self-efficacy building interventions must be implemented into
career counseling programs well before high school (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Further research supporting this finding reveals that expectations for career achievement impact students’ understanding of the link between secondary education and career goals (Constantine et al., 2007). The norms created by the participants’ schools did not suggest career interests in a technical field was a viable option. This presented a barrier in the participants’ accessing post-secondary preparation opportunities. While the current literature indicates that comprehensive career development programs can mitigate the impacts of such barriers (Creed et al., 2010), the second superordinate theme reveals that the participants experienced very little career development programming during high school. Both the lack of a comprehensive career development program and irrelevancy of the high school curriculum present obstacles in preparing students for all career field options.

**Connections to the theoretical framework.** The theoretical framework, SCCT, indicates that career interest and skill development is a cyclical process. Students need repeated opportunities to develop their interests through career goal and activity selection, where they can strengthen their self-efficacy in specific career interests. The process is cyclical because the more successful performances the student experiences in their career related activity selection, the more favorably they perceive their learning experiences, thus strengthening their self-efficacy and outcome expectations for their particular career interest. The cyclical nature of this model suggests that students must have repeated opportunities to explore potential career interests through a variety of activities and learning experiences.
Self-efficacy, the belief in one’s abilities, is a major construct of SCCT. A student’s self-efficacy to achieve career related tasks impacts their expectations and willingness to develop their interests by setting new goals and selecting correlated skill building activities (Brown & Lent, 2013). While self-efficacy is a complex compilation of factors including family and community expectations, socioeconomic status, and culture (Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Thompson & Dahling, 2012), educational expectations and experiences are a significant contributing factor as well. Using the career interest development model of SCCT, this finding that schools support a narrow range of career fields and particularly focus their efforts on university bound students, points to the shortcomings in the school system in achieving the goal that all students graduate high school ready for college and careers.

**Conclusion.** The first finding represents the accumulation of the participants’ perceptions of their high school education as meaningless, lacking connection to their goals and interests, and having biases for university bound students. The literature and theoretical framework support this finding in providing rationale for the participants’ shared experiences. This finding correlates with the current literature on supporting all students’ post-secondary goals through a comprehensive career development program, it also enhances the body of literature by offering the perspective of students on how schools fail to prepare all students. Further, the theoretical framework grounds the finding and the current literature in the career development process.
Finding 2. High School Career Development Programs Are Incomplete

The results of this study culminate into the finding that secondary education does not provide comprehensive and complete career development programming. This finding builds on the first finding which argues that schools do not present and prepare students equally for all career fields. This finding continues on that thread and compliments the current literature on the necessity of comprehensive career guidance to the career development process and the failure of the current practices in preparing all students for college and careers (Kosine et al., 2008; Balfanz, 2009). While the first superordinate theme of this study describes the irrelevancy of the general high school curriculum, the second superordinate theme demonstrates the participants’ experience of minimal post-secondary planning and preparation guidance during high school. The current literature states that a vital task during adolescence is the exploration and development of vocational identity and that career development programs can facilitate vocational identity and enable students to pursue their career interests (Gushue et al., 2006; Bloxom et al., 2008). However, the first and second superordinate themes of this study suggest that sizable gaps exit in the career development practices of the local school district.

This finding is comprised of two sub-findings that support the literature regarding effective comprehensive career development programs. First, the significance of students’ involvement in career exploration activities are presented. The participants’ experiences with career exploration during high school is supported by the literature on how these activities should be incorporated into school curriculum. Next, the college and career readiness activities learned by the participants is discussed as it relates to the current literature. This sub-finding confirms
the current research on the necessary components of effective career development and contributes to the current literature on comprehensive career development programs by demonstrating the perspectives of students who did not experience support and guidance in the post-secondary preparation and planning.

**Career exploration activities.** Career exploration offers insight to the skills and tasks associated with specific careers, cultivates vocational interests and identity, and is vital to the career development process. The second superordinate theme revealed that career exploration activities occurred primarily through independent choices outside of the high school curriculum. Counter to the participants’ experiences, the existing literature reveals the extensive benefits to post-secondary preparation and readiness skills delivered through career exploration activities such as career academies and transitional programs.

Despite the consensus that the general high school curriculum was irrelevant, the participants agreed that increasing career exploration opportunities would make secondary education more applicable to all students. Those career exploration opportunities were largely found at the career center and the participants believed that the education model of the career center was the best opportunity for students to explore and try out potential careers as well as prepare them for post-secondary plans. This directly correlates to the literature supporting career exploration and readiness through career academies. High school career technology courses associated with career academies prepare all students for post-secondary education (Kim, 2014). Further research states that not only do career academies offer students an opportunity to explore
specific career fields, but that they also offer the important opportunity to develop academic, career, and technical skills (Kuo, 2010). Later research shows that high school students who attend career academies are informed about and ready for the workforce (Loera et al., 2013). Similar studies confirm that the benefits of career courses include students’ being informed of skills and tasks required of particular careers and general career skill development opportunities (Stipanovic & Stringfield, 2013; Behle, 2017).

Career exploration courses also benefit students by serving as a transition from secondary education to college or careers. The second superordinate theme included participants’ appreciation that their career center courses offered them dual credits for high school as well as their post-secondary training program. This finding specifically correlates to the current literature stating that students in dual credit programs during high school are better prepared for the transition to post-secondary education (Fowler & Luna, 2009; Kuo, 2010). The literature reveals that high school career and technical courses best prepare students for the transition to the workforce (Guy et al., 2009; Kim & Passmore, 2016). Additionally, the current literature shows the work based learning skills modeled at career academies by encouraging adults correlates to students’ successful transition to careers (Phillips et al., 2002). The current literature associates many benefits of transitional activities including positive career expectations, appropriate career exploration activities and goals, improved self-understanding in career decision making, developing and discovering interests, utilizing work readiness skills, and improved school engagement (Lapan et al., 2007).
This study compliments the current literature with the participants’ experiences of valuable career exploration activities through career center courses and transitional activities that prepared them for the demands of their post-secondary education. This study revealed that the career exploration and transition opportunities offered at the career center was a valuable component of high school education in preparing students for post-secondary education. However, career center opportunities were the exception rather than the rule of the participants’ high school experiences. This research also contributes to the literature by revealing the limited availability of career exploration activities. Participants suggested that offering students more career center type opportunities would greatly improve post-secondary planning and preparation practices of high school. Career exploration activities were not integrated into the general high school curriculum. Enrolling in career related courses at the career center was sought out individually by the participants rather than a component of a mapped-out career plan. Limited availability of career exploration activities hindered the post-secondary preparation of the participants.

**Incorporation of college and career readiness skills.** Effective career development programs are integrated into the general curriculum from elementary through secondary education in order to connect education to potential careers. However, the first superordinate theme of this study reveals that students experienced very little connection between their career interests and high school education. Further, the second superordinate theme discusses the shortcomings of post-secondary readiness activities as experienced by the participants. These two themes resulted in this sub-finding on the importance of incorporating comprehensive
college and career readiness schools throughout education. This sub-finding compliments the current literature on early engagement in college and career readiness activities. The participants recalled that most of their career development activities occurred outside of the school setting. While the majority of the participants primarily credit their parents for exposure to career development skills, they also reported having spent time exploring post-secondary options after graduating high school. The current literature advocating for college and career readiness lessons incorporated into the general school curriculum gives meaning to the results of this study and is supported by the finding that these activities must be implemented into the daily activities of school.

Counter to the experiences of students in this study, the current literature asserts that in order to produce high school graduates equipped with skills to enter post-secondary education or the workforce, schools must intentionally incorporate skill building activities into the curriculum. To achieve the goal of producing college and career ready high school graduates, schools must include career exploration into the classroom curricula and connect school classwork to potential careers (Grundman, 2013; Wood & Kaszubowksi, 2008). Further research shows that college and career readiness curriculum must be incorporated into daily lesson plans in order to connect school subject material to potential careers (Curry et al., 2013).

A review of the literature shows that these activities must begin well before high school. The participants of this study reported the majority of their career exploration occurred outside of the school curriculum and even after high school graduation. This sub-finding acknowledges the
participants’ deficits in acquiring important career readiness skills and draws upon the research that supports college and career readiness skill building strategy. The current literature advocates for career exploration activities to begin in elementary and continue through middle school in order for a smooth career development process with which to begin high school, giving students insight for their career interests and the ability to connect high school education to future careers (Adams, 2015). Well-structured career guidance activities that expose students to career options in the elementary learning years is found to link students to a wide scope of viable careers, connect education to career interests, and alleviate misconceptions on potential restrictions in achieving those careers (Knight, 2015; Porfeli et al., 2008). Further literature reveals that students of middle schools that incorporate a career institute model throughout the curriculum demonstrate the ability to connect their education to potential careers, possess self-efficacy in achieving career interests, and vocational identity (Shaefer et al., 2010).

The current literature offers an explanation for the study’s participants’ lack of engagement in their education. The first theme describes the irrelevancy students attach to their high school education and the second underscores the lack of post-secondary support they received in exploring and preparing for their careers. The career readiness activities the participants valued included the career center courses, but these were only available to participants once they were in upper secondary years. This finding that college and career readiness activities must be delivered to students earlier and throughout their education is supported by the literature on preparing students for careers and college.
Connections to the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework, SCCT, demonstrates how career interests and career related choice activities are developed and reinforced. Students’ self-efficacy for their career interests are reinforced or weakened depending on the outcome of the career activities and goals they choose. Contextual, personal, and experiential factors such as socioeconomic status, ability, cultural norms, and gender also affect students’ access to career related behaviors (Brown & Lent, 2013). However, the current literature proposes that schools can mitigate students’ potential barriers to career achievement with career development resources and support for all students (Creed et al., 2010).

This research shows where there are significant gaps in the career development programs in schools through minimal opportunities for career exploration and late engagement in the career development process. However, as previously stated, producing college and career ready high school graduates is a common goal of the U.S. public school system (Grundman, 2013). SCCT provides a framework from which to understand the impact of the missing components of the career development process revealed in this study. Being comprised of students of a range of socioeconomic statuses and family and community support systems, public schools must recognize their students’ varying needs and deficiencies in the career development process. To help students build self-efficacy, schools must offer a complete and thorough career development program. This study supports increasing students’ opportunities to explore careers and integrating the exploration and career readiness throughout the curriculum from elementary to secondary.
Conclusion. The results of this study reveal that the participants experienced an inadequate career development program during their secondary education. However, current research informs that effective career development programs are key in the decision-making process and connecting education to potential future careers for all students (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2011). This finding is confirmed by the literature on need for integrating career exploration activities into the general curriculum and for career development lessons to be implemented as early as elementary school. The current literature shows where these strategies work to build student vocational identity, better inform students of the skills and demands of the workforce, and connect school work to future career skills. This finding is supported by the theoretical framework because it correlates to building self-efficacy, supporting career interests, increasing career activities, and understanding personal and contextual factors that impact career development.

Finding 3. Technical Education Programs Facilitate a Purposeful Career Path

The results of this study show that initially the participants’ routes to their respective careers were somewhat meandering, however, through their own efforts and choices the participants eventually found themselves on a direct path towards their careers. The third superordinate theme, Technical Degree Career Plan, illustrates the participants’ clear purpose and strong connection to short and long-term goals in their chosen career fields. An in-depth examination of the third superordinate theme in context of the first and second superordinate themes, which highlight the supportive and unsupportive post-secondary preparation activities of
secondary education, reveals the effectiveness of technical education in student career
development. All of the participants were enrolled in a technical post-secondary education
program and three out of the four participants were enrolled in a career and technical program
during high school. This finding asserts that technical education provides the skills, structure,
and guidance for students in determining a clear path towards their career. This finding is
supported by the current literature that advocates for the role of career academies and more
specifically career and technology education in preparing students for their post-secondary plans.
This study compliments the current literature offering insight for effective career and college
readiness strategies in secondary education. The research also extends the literature by showing
how similar career readiness practices at the post-secondary level correlate to a clear and
purposeful career path. Finally, the theoretical framework supports this finding by illustrating the
essential tasks in career interest development in order to establish a career path.

The second superordinate theme of this study reveals that the most informative and
meaningful component of students’ secondary education was the career center courses. The
participants advocated for the career center program for giving students an opportunity to
explore careers as well as connecting them to post-secondary training. The participants’
promotion of the career center is complimented by the literature advocating for small learning
communities and career academies for their success in facilitating career development and
incorporating academic, career, and technical skills into the curriculum (Kuo, 2010). The
purposeful career path established by the participants is explained by the literature that states that
career academies promote occupational engagement through the career development activities
incorporated into the career academy curriculum such as internships (Bennett, 2007). Further, the participants’ understanding of the demands of their chosen career field is supported by the literature stating that high school students are best informed about the demands of the workforce having graduated from a career academy (Loera et al., 2013). The career academy model of the career center was clearly an effective career preparation experience for this study’s participants. However, their purposeful career paths were further facilitated by their respective technological career fields.

The third superordinate theme presents the participants’ confidence in their employment opportunities facilitated by the skills and training they would gain in the technical training program. This career knowledge was developed both in the secondary and post-secondary technical training courses, and a review of the literature offers evidence that career and technological education is strongly related to career readiness skills. A study by Kim (2014) plainly states that career and technology education courses prepare students for post-secondary education. The participants’ strong support for the career center as their best post-secondary preparation activity is supported by the current literature stating that compared to the general high school curriculum, career and technology education courses are found to teach more career preparation skills and better prepare students for the post-secondary plans (Guy et al., 2009; Kim & Passmore, 2016). The participants’ confidence in their acquired career skills and preparation for the workforce is complimented by the literature which reports that career and technology programs assist in the transition process as well as keep students up to date on technology and structural change in the industry (Hanuscheck et al. 2011). Similar studies show that career and
technology education benefits students by teaching them the skills and tasks necessary to specific careers, engages them in career pathways, and offers work based learning opportunities (Stipanovic & Stringfield, 2013; Behle, 2017). This study underscores the current research on the post-secondary preparation benefits of career and technology education and career academies in secondary education and extends the literature through the evidence that similar post-secondary education programs directly prepare and connect students to careers.

**Connections to the theoretical framework.** Social cognitive career theory is comprised of four overlapping models illustrating various aspects of career development, attainment, and satisfaction. The SCCT models for career interest development and factors affecting career-related choice behavior best explain this finding (Brown & Lent, 2013). This study’s results show where students miss out on valuable post-secondary planning and preparation activities due to incomplete career development programs. However, this finding points to important factors, as defined by SCCT, that supported their career development such as the career and technology education and career academy style education.

Self-efficacy and outcome expectations are important factors in the development of career interests. Previously explained was the role an effective career development program has in facilitating self-efficacy by offering students numerous opportunities to explore career interests and build outcome expectations for career related activities. While the first finding in this research shows that participants did not have access to a complete and effective career
development program in their secondary education, this last finding points to the choices and efforts made by the participants that facilitated the development of a purposeful career plan.

The post-secondary planning and career development activities in which the participants engaged, such as career center courses and post-secondary career exploration through travel and military, fit into the SCCT models for developing career interests. These career interest activities educated the participants on the skill expectations of their chosen career fields and provided feedback on the participants’ ability to perform those skills. The current literature informs us that common difficulties of college age students in making career decisions are related to indecisiveness and dysfunctional beliefs about the career development and attainment process (Gati & Amar, 2010). SCCT provides an understanding for how these participants overcame a lack of support in post-secondary preparation and planning through their own chosen career development activities and avoided career decision difficulties faced by their peers.

**Conclusion.** This finding describes how the participants constructed a direct career path via their technical secondary and post-secondary education programs. While the overarching results of this study in context of the current literature underscore the incomplete career development programs in the participants’ school systems, the career exploration and skill building activities chosen by the participants were notably effective. Secondary and post-secondary technical education programs facilitate building self-efficacy and developing career interests, both important components of the career choice process.
Implications for Practice

Secondary education plays a key role in launching students into their career path. The goal of the public education system is to develop college and career ready high school graduates (Grundman, 2013). The results of this study, however, reveal that students find the traditional high school curriculum irrelevant to their interests and future goals. As the job market shifts according to a constantly evolving economy, the public education system must stay abreast of such changes and produce graduates ready to enter the workforce. Post-secondary planning and preparation can no longer be a supplemental activity to the general curriculum, offered in annual intervals in isolated guidance lesson plans. The current literature and this research project promote career development woven into all school subjects and integrated into the curriculum from elementary through secondary education. The findings of this study invoke implications to both this researcher’s daily practice as a school counselor in the local school district as well as the broader post-secondary planning and preparation practices across the school district. The following is a description of those recommended practices.
Implement comprehensive career development programming. Currently lacking in public schools are comprehensive post-secondary planning and preparation programs. The findings from this study show that students do not experience complete post-secondary planning assistance, resulting in missed opportunities for relevant career development activities and creating a sense of disconnection to secondary education. This study’s findings show two specific components missing from the current practices: integrated career exploration activities and correlating lessons and skills to future careers.

Career exploration and skill development must be incorporated into the general curriculum across all subjects (Curry et al., 2013). Because vocational identity is such a crucial task of adolescence and a key component of the career interest process (Gushue et al., 2006), schools must introduce students to the numerous available career fields and offer lesson plans from which to discover and nurture interests. Students should begin this process as early as elementary school in order to delve deeper into specific career fields during high school (Adams, 2015).

With awareness of the multitude of careers available, students must then understand how their education relates to those potential careers. The results of this study show that students find the general high school curriculum irrelevant to their interests and goals. Educators across all subjects and grade levels must have training and professional development in lesson planning to authentically and meaningfully connect their curriculum to viable careers. Making intentional
and obvious connections between high school curriculum and skills necessary for specific career obtainment can improve students’ interest and value for their secondary education.

As a leader in implementing post-secondary preparation activities, this researcher must work with the school’s counseling team to develop a comprehensive career develop program. Integrating career exploration activities and correlating lessons and skills to future careers primarily rests within teachers’ responsibilities. However, the school counseling team can facilitate and assist the implementation of these recommendations. First, professional development must be provided that illuminates how educators can directly connect their curriculum to skills required of a variety of career fields. The counseling team must work closely with school administration to carefully select and provide such training to educators. The school counseling team must also provide school wide career exploration activities. To do this, the team must develop and maintain relationships with local industry leaders who may able to provide authentic exploration experiences such as mentors, job shadowing, and internships. Further, the counseling team must stay abreast of effective career development activities practiced throughout the state and country and implement such activities in the school.
Assess student barriers to career development. Barriers to students’ developing and exploring career interests are often comprised of factors often beyond their control such as socioeconomic status, culture, and perceived expectations of family and community (Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Thompson & Dahling, 2012). School districts must be aware of the characteristics and needs of the communities whom they serve in order to design appropriate career development curricula. While cultural, family, and community norms may support students’ career aspirations, they can also serve as a barrier to understanding the connection between their education and potential careers (Constantine et al., 2007).

Opportunities to build self-efficacy in career interest and development must be implemented throughout elementary through secondary curriculum. Lent and Brown (2000) find that students’ self-efficacy is directly correlated with their ability to overcome barriers towards career achievement. School districts must be aware of the workforce demands of their community, educate their students of those demands, and connect the curriculum to those potential careers. Further, schools must foster students’ belief that they are capable to learn the necessary skills to achieve potential careers. As part of a comprehensive career development curriculum, schools can assess student self-efficacy and design their post-secondary planning and preparation activities accordingly.

This researcher’s position as a school counselor facilitates her ability to spearhead the recommendation of assessing both the general needs of the school’s student population as well as the specific needs of individual student’s pursuit of career development. Utilizing the theoretical
framework, SCCT, as a guide, interventions in career interest development can be implemented throughout the school curriculum. For example, an assessment of the student population may indicate that students struggle with developing career activity goals. The school counseling team would provide guidance lessons to specifically assist students in setting and achieving career interest goals. Further, school counselors have access to working with students individually and can tailor career interest development activities specific to the individual needs.

**Broaden the scope of post-secondary planning and preparation activities.** The current literature declares that the secondary education system can prepare all students for college and career readiness but fails to do so (Balfanz, 2009). The findings of this study indicate that this failure is partly due to schools do not supporting all post-secondary plans and showing a bias for traditional university going students. With the common goal of preparing all students to be college and career ready by graduation, schools must recognize the various post-secondary education and training options beyond the traditional university. Career development programs must educate students on local, regional, and national job market demands and the correlated post-secondary education needed to obtain those jobs.

Secondary career development programs center on traditional college readiness and application processes, side-stepping valuable career exploration and skill development activities. The results of this study show that much of the post-secondary planning activities in high school involve preparing for and taking college entrance exams, enrolling in college preparation academics, and applying to universities and for scholarships. However, this study reveals that
students on a clear and purposeful career path focused their attention during high school on career exploration and skill building activities such as career academies and secondary to post-secondary transitions. School systems can design the general curricula to assure all students’ secondary education encompasses such valuable post-secondary preparation activities.

This study and the current literature support career skill and exploration focused post-secondary preparation programs. Schools must offer career academies and transitional opportunities to pave the path from secondary to post-secondary education, internships, or the workforce. Career development programs should showcase the expansive range of career field options and especially inform students of the local job market. Further, schools must work in partnership with local industry to develop and implement secondary curriculum that both exposes and prepares student for the skills needed in the industry. The general high school curriculum must directly correlate to prospective jobs across all career fields. Post-secondary planning must encompass the necessary measures students must take to procure training and education in the career field for which they have fostered interest and self-efficacy throughout a comprehensive career development program. This researcher can implement this suggestion within her own practice by updating the post-secondary planning activities to match the current job markets. Further, the researcher must keep students aware of post-secondary education and training options including technical institutes, training centers, apprenticeships, as well as the traditional university option. Additionally, students must be informed of the necessary steps to enter post-secondary options. It is this researcher’s role as a school counselor to stay informed and up to date of these steps and assist students in the secondary to post-secondary transition.
Implications for Further Research

The purpose of this study was to investigate the post-secondary planning experiences of graduates of the local school district who are enrolled in a technical post-secondary degree. While the current literature supports various methods of producing college and career ready high school graduates, this study fills the gap in the literature by capturing the perspectives of recent high graduates. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research method provided rich, detailed descriptions of the participants’ account of the post-secondary preparation and planning support they received during high school. The results of this study reveal that there are significant shortcomings in the post-secondary planning and preparation practices in public schools including favoring certain post-secondary plans over others and incomplete career development programs. The study also demonstrated that career and technical education connects students directly to employable skills and a direct career pathway. These findings have implications for further research in three areas.

First, the study was limited to a small sample size of graduates from a school district in Alaska pursuing a technical post-secondary degree. The results may not be transferable across all US public education systems with varying levels of post-secondary preparation and planning programs integrated into their curriculum. The community in which the participants reside has a unique demographic, economic, and labor market profile, thus influencing specific career norms and job availability for the community. For generalization purposes, the study may be repeated with technical post-secondary education students who are graduates of school districts from other parts of Alaska or the country.
Additionally, this study’s purpose was to investigate the post-secondary planning and preparation experiences of students of a technical training program. The findings of this study point to career development program deficits from the perspective of students receiving those services. Further evaluation of the skills and deficits of recent high school graduates would be beneficial for understanding the needs of post-secondary preparation programs. For a more complete picture of the readiness skills of recent high school graduates entering a technical training program, the study may be repeated gathering the perspectives of the professors and instructors of post-secondary technical training programs.

Third, this study exclusively investigated the post-secondary preparation experiences of students in a technical education program. This limited participant group does not offer a complete picture of the post-secondary preparation services of the local school district as experienced by students of a variety of career field interest. Repeating the study on the post-secondary experiences of graduates of the same school district enrolled in a different post-secondary training program may compliment and extend the findings of this research project.

**Conclusion**

This study aimed to inform and enhance the post-secondary preparation practices for all students by investigating the experiences of such practices of current students enrolled in a technical post-secondary education program. The participants reflected on both valuable and ineffective career development and readiness activities of their high school experiences to give a complete picture of how they felt supported in their career interests as well as how their
experiences could have been improved. This research adds to the current literature of post-secondary planning and preparation practices because it offers the unique perspective of the students who had post-secondary education aspirations outside of the typical university setting.

The findings of this study led to several implications for practice that center on preparing all students with college and career readiness skills before high school graduation. First, schools must assure that they offer a comprehensive career development program. The results of this study reveal that students experience fractured elements of a complete career development program. This study’s findings suggest that an effective school career development curriculum include ample career exploration opportunities and connections between the general high school curriculum and future careers.

Next, schools must be cognizant of the educational needs of their school community. The theoretical framework of this study, SCCT, provides a model from which to visualize important components of career interest development. While the participants of this study lacked a range of career related activities from which to build self-efficacy, other students may experience contextual barriers such as cultural and community norms. This study, along with the current literature, supports the capacity of a comprehensive career development program to assess these potential barriers and implement interventions strategies in order to maximize student career development.

Last, schools must broaden the range of career fields of which they show case and support. Students must be educated on the variety of post-secondary education and training
options available to achieve their careers of interest. The results of this research revealed a biased message delivered by high schools that the university post-secondary path was most desired. While this trend is counter to the goal of preparing all students to be college and career ready, it is also impractical to the demands of job market. This study reveals that student perception of the traditional high school curriculum as irrelevant is derived from the lack of connection between the curriculum and student goals and interests.
References


of career development services within high schools. *Canadian Journal of Counselling / Revue Canadienne De Counseling, 42*(2), 79-100.


doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2009.10.015


doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2011.10.001


Appendix A: Unsigned Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies  
Principal Investigator: Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed  
Student Investigator: Danielle Dalton  
Title of Project: Post-Secondary Preparation Experiences of Students Enrolled in a Technical College

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being asked because you are a graduate of the local school district and you are currently enrolled in a two year technical post-secondary program.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to understand the post-secondary planning and support experiences of high school students who plan to attend a technical or vocational post-secondary education program.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in an interview. The interview will be recorded.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interview process will include 1 or 2 interviews each lasting 30 to 60 minutes. We will meet at a pre-arranged agreed upon location that assures privacy and confidentiality.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
During the interview you will be asked to recall your experiences during high school regarding career development and post-secondary planning. Specifically you will be asked about your perception of support from educators. Recalling these experiences may invoke uncomfortable feelings associated with this time in your life. Your experience is highly regarded and respected by this researcher. You will not be coerced into sharing more than you are comfortable with sharing or urged to hurry through the interview.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. However, your input may offer leaders and policy makers in education your perspective on the post-secondary planning process.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only this researcher will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way. Pseudonyms will be used for all the participants in this study. The digital data will be saved in a password protected computer. Paper documents will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office for 2 years. All paper, digital, and audio recorded forms of the data will be destroyed at that time.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would
only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

It is up to you whether or not you participate. You may quit at any time with no recourse.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, there will be no consequences.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

Danielle Dalton (907-903-4028) or email dalton.d@husky.neu.edu – the student researcher of this project.

Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed the Principal Investigator at k.reissmedwed@northeastern.edu

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact:

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection
960 Renaissance Park
Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115.
Tel: 617.373.4588,
Email: irb@neu.edu

You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

You will be given a $25 gift certificate to Amazon.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There will be no costs to you for participating in this research.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**

You must be at least 18 years old to participate unless your parent or guardian gives written permission.

I agree to [have my child] take part in this research.

_____________________________ ________________________
Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part Date

_____________________________
Printed name of person above

_____________________________ ________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent Date

_____________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix B: IRB Application and Approval

For NU IRB use:

Date Received: ____________________________  NU IRB No. CPS17-04-05

Review Category: __________________________ Approval Date ______________

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL FOR USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Before completing this application, please read the Application Instructions and Policies and Procedures for Human Research Protections to understand the responsibilities for which you are accountable as an investigator in conducting research with human participants. The document, Application Instructions, provides additional assistance in preparing this submission. Incomplete applications will be returned to the investigator. You may complete this application online and save it as a Word document.

If this research is related to a grant, contract proposal or dissertation, a copy of the full grant/contract proposal/dissertation must accompany this application.

Please carefully edit and proof read before submitting the application. Applications that are not filled out completely and/or have any missing or incorrect information will be returned to the Principal Investigator.
REQUIRED TRAINING FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Under the direction of the Office of the Vice Provost for Research, Northeastern University is now requiring completion of the NIH Office of Extramural Research training for all human subject research, regardless of whether or not investigators have received funding to support their project.

The online course titled "Protecting Human Research Participants" can be accessed at the following url: http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php. This requirement will be effective as of November 15, 2008 for all new protocols.

Principal Investigators, student researchers and key personnel (participants who contribute substantively to the scientific development or execution of a project) must include a copy of their certificate of completion for this web-based tutorial with the protocol submission.

A. Investigator Information

Principal Investigator (PI cannot be a student)  Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed

Investigator is: NU Faculty  X  NU Staff  ______  Other  ______

College:  ______ Northeastern University  _____________________________

Department/Program  College of Professional Studies

Address  20 Belvedere Ave, Boston, MA 02115-5000

Office Phone  617-390-4072  ______ Email  k.reissmedwed@northeastern.edu

Is this student research? YES  X  NO  ______ If yes, please provide the following information:
Student Name Danielle L. Dalton  Anticipated graduation date 12/17

Undergrad ___ MA/MS ___ PhD ___ AuD ___ EdD ___ DLP ___ Other Degree Type ___

College: Northeastern University

Department/Program College of Professional Studies

Full Mailing Address 2411 Foxhall Drive, Anchorage, AK 99504

Telephone Primary Email dalton.d@husky.neu.edu

Cell phone 907-903-4028 Secondary Email

B. Protocol Information

Title Post-Secondary Preparation Experiences of Students Enrolled in a Technical College

Projected # subjects 4-10

Approx. begin date of project 04/20/17  Approx. end date 12/31/17

It is the policy of Northeastern University that no activity involving human subjects be undertaken until those activities have been reviewed and approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

- Anticipated funding agency/source for project (or none) None

- Has/will this proposal been/be submitted through:
  - NU’s Office of Research Administration and Finance (RAF)
• Provost ____
  • Corp & Foundations ____
  • Other ____

• Grant Title: ________________________________
  ________________________________

• Grant ID: ________________________________
  ________________________________

C.

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<tr>
<th>Will Participants Be:</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<td>Children (&lt;18)</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northeastern University Students?</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>Institutionalized persons?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Prisoners?</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitively Impaired Persons?</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non or Limited English Speaking Persons?</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>People Living outside the USA?</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pregnant Women/Fetuses?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other? (Please provide detail)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Does the Project Involve:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Blood Removal?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigational drug/device?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audiotapes/videotapes?</td>
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Please answer each of the following questions using non-technical language. Missing or incomplete answers will delay your review while we request the information.
D. What are the goals of this research? Please state your research question(s) and related hypotheses.

What were the post-secondary planning and preparation experiences during high school of graduates of the local school district who are attending post-secondary education at a two year technical institution?

E. Provide a brief summary of the purpose of the research in non-technical language.

The purpose of this research project is to understand the perspective of high school graduates attending post-secondary education in a vocational institution. This research investigates how their high school education in the local school district influenced and prepared them for their post-secondary plans.

F. Identify study personnel on this project. Include name, credentials, role, and organization affiliation.

Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed is the Principal Investigator, Northeastern University College of Professional Studies

Danielle L. Dalton, NEU graduate student researcher, will conduct the interviews and analyze the data.

Transcriptions services will be hired through Rev at www.rev.com.

G. Identify other organizations or institutions that are involved. Attach current Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals or letters of permission as necessary.

Participant recruitment will be at:

UAA Community and Technical College
(907) 786-6400

Dr. Denise Runge, Dean

University Center (UC), Room 141

Permission Forthcoming

H. Recruitment Procedures

Describe the participants you intend to recruit. Provide all inclusion and exclusion criteria. Include age range, number of subjects, gender, ethnicity/race, socio-economic level, literacy level and health (as applicable) and reasons for exempting any groups. Describe how/when/by whom inclusion/exclusion criteria will be determined.
Participants are required to be graduates of the local school district and currently enrolled in one of the Technical College’s two-year training programs. The participants’ gender, ethnicity/race, socio-economic status are not factors for inclusion or exclusion in this study. Rather, the participants’ criteria of having attended and experienced their secondary education in the local school district and their current enrollment in a 2-year technical degree are the sole qualifying criteria. This research aims to understand how the local school district prepares its graduates for post-secondary education at a technical institute.

Describe the procedures that you will use to recruit these participants. Be specific. How will potential subjects be identified? Who will ask for participation? If you intend to recruit using letters, posters, fliers, ads, website, email, PsyLink description, HIT, etc., copies must be included as attachments for stamped approval. Include scripts for intended telephone recruitment.

My first contact for recruitment will be to the Dean of the local Technical College explaining the purpose of the research, how the data will be collected, and the requirements of the participants. After gaining formal permission from the Dean, recruitment for the research will be conducted via email and advertisement within the College.

What remuneration, if any, is offered?

A $25 gift certificate to Amazon will be given to participants.

I. Consent Process

Describe the process of obtaining informed consent*. Be specific. How will the project and the participants’ role be presented to potential participants? By whom? When? Where? Having the participant read and sign a consent statement is done only after the researcher provides a detailed oral explanation and answers all questions. Please attach a copy of informed consent statements that you intend to use, if applicable. Click here for consent form templates.

If your study population includes non-English speaking people, translations of consent information are necessary. Describe how information will be translated and by whom. You may wait until the consent is approved in English before having it translated.

After volunteering, participants will be provided the signed consent form. Confidentiality procedures will be described in detail. The purpose of the study and reminder that the participant’s involvement in the study is completely mandatory will be restated before the interview process begins. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher will go over the form with the participant. The participant will sign the consent before any interview begins.
If your population includes children, prisoners, people with limited mental capacity, language barriers, problems with reading or understanding, or other issues that may make them vulnerable or limit their ability to understand and provide consent, describe special procedures that you will institute to obtain consent appropriately. If participants are potentially decisionally impaired, how will you determine competency?

N/A

*If incomplete disclosure during the initial consent process is essential to carrying out the proposed research, please provide a detailed description of the debriefing process. Be specific. When will full disclosure of the research goals be presented to subjects (e.g., immediately after the subject has completed the research task(s) or held off until the completion of the study’s data collection)? By whom? Please attach a copy of the written debriefing statement that will be given to subjects.

N/A

J. Study Procedures

Provide a detailed description of all activities the participant will be asked to do and what will be done to the participants. Include the location, number of sessions, time for each session, and total time period anticipated for each participant, including long term follow up.

Participants will be asked to participate in 1 or 2 interviews with this researcher. The interviews will last approximately 30 to 50 minutes each and will be audio recorded. I will offer to share with each participant a copy of the transcription of their interview in which they may offer clarification of their responses if they feel necessary.

Who will conduct the experimental procedures, questionnaires, etc? Where will this be done? *Attach copies of all questionnaires, interview questions, tests, survey instruments, links to online surveys, etc.*

I alone will conduct the interviews. The interview will be conducted in a mutually agreed upon location and NO interviews will be held in the building where the student researcher works.
K. Risks

Identify possible risks to the participant as a result of the research. Consider possible psychological harm, loss of confidentiality, financial, social, or legal damages as well as physical risks. What is the seriousness of these risks and what is the likelihood that they may occur?

While the nature of this study does not aim to investigate particularly sensitive and personal experiences, I recognize that the participants may have had difficult and potentially traumatic associations with their secondary school experiences. Should the participant become upset during the interview, I will stop the interview if needed and give the participant time to process feelings and remind the participant that he or she may end the interview at any time.

Loss of confidentiality could link the participants’ responses to their former secondary school as well as their current school. The outcome of this loss of confidentiality may range from mild embarrassment to social damages as a result of the participant living and working in the same community in which he or she attended secondary schools.

I will take every precaution to ensure that confidentiality is maintained. This includes using pseudonyms for both the participants and any names they may inadvertently use in the interviews. Digital data will be stored on a password protected computer. Paper copies of data will be stored in locked cabinets in my locked office.

Describe in detail the safeguards that will be implemented to minimize risks. What follow-up procedures are in place if harm occurs? What special precautions will be instituted for vulnerable populations?

I will discuss potential risks with the participants during the informed consent process. Also, confidentiality procedures will be described including the use of pseudonyms and storage of the data.

L. Confidentiality

Describe in detail the procedures that will be used to maintain anonymity or confidentiality during collection and entry of data. Who will have access to data? How will the data be used, now and in the future?

Pseudonyms will be used for all participants in the study. If the participant uses names during the interview, either a pseudonym will be used or a generic title will be assigned when identifying information is given to a person or place (ie. “teacher”, “counselor”, “high school” etc.). Any information that identifies the participant, any other person, schools, and exact location will be deleted.
The recorded interview will be transcribed. The audio recordings will be described after the study is complete. Digital copies of the data will be stored on a password protected computer. Paper copies of data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researchers locked office.

The Primary and I will have sole access to the data.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>How and where will data be stored? How will electronic data be encrypted? When will data, including audiotapes and videotapes, be destroyed? If data is to be retained, explain why. Will identifiers or links to identification be destroyed? When? Signed consent documents must be retained for 3 years following the end of the study. Where and how will they be maintained?</th>
</tr>
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</table>

The interviews will be audio recorded and saved as an MP3. The recordings will be saved on a password protected computer. The audio recordings will be transcribed and saved to a password protected computer. Pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants and any identifying information will be destroyed. The audio recordings and digital data will be destroyed when the study is complete. Paper copies of the data will be locked in a cabinet in this researcher’s personal office and will be destroyed when the study is complete. The signed consent forms will be saved for 3 years after the study in a locked cabinet in this researcher’s personal office. A scanned digital copy will also be saved for three years the researchers password protected computer.

M. If your research is HIPAA-protected, please complete the following; Individual Access to PHI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Describe the procedure that will be used for allowing individuals to access their PHI or, alternatively, advising them that they must wait until the end of the study to review their PHI.</th>
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N/A

N. Benefits

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<tr>
<th>What benefits can the participant reasonably expect from his/her involvement in the research? If none, state that. What are potential benefits to others?</th>
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</thead>
</table>

There are no direct benefits anticipated for the participants.

Benefits to others could include giving a voice to the experiences of graduates of the local public education system. This voice may contribute to the improvement of post-secondary planning and preparation activities in the local school district for those students intending to pursue their post-secondary education at a technical school.

O. Attachments
Identify attachments that have been included and those that are not applicable (n/a).

attached Copy of fliers, ads, posters, emails, web pages, letters for recruitment *
attached Scripts of intended telephone conversations*
n/a Copies of IRB approvals or letters of permission from other sites
attached Informed Consent Form(s)* (see our templates for examples)
n/a Debriefing Statement*
attached Copies of all instruments, surveys, focus group or interview questions, tests, etc.
attached Signed Assurance of Principal Investigator Form (required)
attached NIH Human Subject Training Certificate(s) (required if not already on file at HSRP)

*(Approved forms must be stamped by the IRB before use)*

P. Health Care Provision During Study

Please check the applicable line:

__x____ I have read the description of HIPAA “health care” within Section 4 of the Policies & Procedures for Human Research Protection. I am not a HIPAA-covered health care provider and no health care will be provided in connection with this study.

______ I am a HIPAA-covered health care provider or I will provide health care in connection with this study as described in Section 4 of the Policies & Procedures for Human Research Protection. This health care is described above under “Study Procedures,” and the Informed Consent and Health Information Use and Disclosure Authorization form will be used with all prospective study participants.

If you have any questions about whether you are a HIPAA-covered health care provider, please contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection at n.regina@neu.edu or (617) 373-4588.

Completed applications should be submitted to Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection with the exception of applications from faculty and students of the College of Professional Studies, which should be submitted to Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator for CPS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nan C. Regina, Director</th>
<th>CPS applications only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northeastern Univ., Human Subject Research Protection</td>
<td>Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>360 Huntington Ave., Mailstop: 560-177</td>
<td>Northeastern Univ., College of Professional Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston, MA  02115-5000</td>
<td>Phone: 617.390.3450; <a href="mailto:k.skophammer@northeastern.edu">k.skophammer@northeastern.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone: 617.373.4588; Fax: 617.373.4595</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The application and accompanying materials may be sent as email attachments or in hard copy. A signed Assurance of Principal Investigator Form may be sent as a scan, via fax or in hard copy.
NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: April 27, 2017  IRB #: CPS17-04-05
Principal Investigator(s): Karen Reiss Medwed
                                                Danielle Dalton
Department: Doctor of Education Program
                                      College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
                              Northeastern University
Title of Project: Post-Secondary Preparation Experiences of Students
                      Enrolled in a Technical College
Participating Sites:  UAA Community College permission forthcoming

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: APRIL 26, 2018

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when
   recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
   information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must
   be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month
   prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any
   other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix C: Sample Recruitment Materials

Dear Participant,

My name is Danielle Dalton. I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University in the College of Professional Studies. I am studying the post-secondary preparation experiences of the local school district’s graduates. Specifically, I am interested in the experiences of students pursuing their post-secondary education at technical institute.

This study is important to Alaska’s public education system which proposes to produce college and career ready graduates. While several measures exist of students’ preparation for the traditional four year university, little evidence is available indicating the school district’s success in preparing students for technical post-secondary education programs. This research is unique in that it gives voice to the high school graduates currently enrolled in a technical training program. This voice is an important component in implementation of successful post-secondary planning programs in the school district.

The data collection process will consist of 1 or 2 interviews with each participant that will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes each. A series of opened ended questions and prompts will be asked concerning the participant’s experience in post-secondary preparation and career development process. The interview will be recorded and later transcribed. The participant’s confidentiality will be secured. The interview and transcript will be stored under a pseudonym and stored in a password protected computer and file. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and the participant may end participation at any time.

If you would like to volunteer for this research or have any questions, please email me at dalton.d@husky.neu.edu. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Danielle L. Dalton
907-903-4028
Dalton.d@husky.neu.edu
Participants Needed for Graduate Study:
Students Enrolled in Technical Program

This research project is concerning the post-secondary prepping and planning of students who pursue their post-secondary education in a technical field. Participant requirements are: graduates of Anchorage School District and enrolled in a technical/2 year training program. Volunteers are asked to participate in a 1 to 2 interviews, approximately 30-60 minutes hour at a convenient and private location on campus. Volunteers will be compensated with a $25 Amazon gift card. Please contact Danielle Dalton @ dalton.d@husky.neu.edu if you are interested in participating in this study.

Student Investigator: Danielle Dalton
dalton.d@husky.neu.edu
Principal Investigator: Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed
k.reissmedwed@northeastern.edu
Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies
Interview Protocol Form

Institution: Northeastern University

Interviewer: Danielle Dalton

RESEARCH QUESTION: What were the post-secondary planning and preparation experiences during high school of graduates of the local district who are attending post-secondary education at a two year technical institution?

Part I:

Introductory Protocol

You have been asked to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about postsecondary education and training outside of the traditional four year university setting. My research project focuses on the experience of graduates of the local school district who pursued postsecondary education or training outside of the traditional 4 year university or college and how their high school education prepared them for this. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into postsecondary preparation in high school. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can improve postsecondary planning and preparation for all students.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

The interviewing will consist of 1 or 2 sessions lasting 30 to 60 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. First, I will ask many general questions about this
I will also ask follow up questions for details on the experiences you have shared. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

**Part II:** Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)

Interviewee Background

1) Where are you completing your postsecondary education?
2) In what field are your training?
3) What jobs/careers will you be qualified for upon completion?
4) What are your short and long term career goals?

**Part III:**

One of the things we are interested in learning about is how high school students are prepared and supported in their pursuit of post-secondary education outside of the traditional 4 year university. I would like to hear about your experience in postsecondary preparation during high school in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences you encountered. If you mention other people, please use do not use names. You say that you are giving the person a pseudonym.

1) Please tell me about your postsecondary preparation experiences in high school.
2) What activities, guidance, or programs were available in high school to help you explore potential career options? (Prompts: Did you take an interest or aptitude test? Sign up for electives or extracurricular activities related to this field?)
3) How did you develop your postsecondary plan? (Prompts: How did teachers/counselors/staff help you explore and develop this plan?)
4) How did you come about choosing this training program in which you are studying? (Prompts: Who or what inspired this interest? How did you learn of this field?)
5) Knowing what you know now about the demands of this program, talk about how high school prepared you for your current training program? (prompts: Did you choose specific classes? Volunteer? Internships? Jobs? Which specific classes/teachers/lessons prepared you?)
6) What experiences would you change or add? (Prompts: What skills or classes would you recommend or invent to better prepare future students?)

Do you have anything else that you would add to this topic?