An Exploratory Case Study on the Perspectives of African American Men Pursuing a Career and Technical Education (CTE) Pathway at an Urban Community College in Illinois

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ABSTRACT

AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF THE PERSPECTIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN PURSUING A CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION PATHWAY AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN ILLINOIS

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This qualitative case study explores the motivating factors that influence CTE pathway selection for African American men students and will investigate the interplay between two components of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), self-efficacy and outcome expectations, and their role in the career decision-making process. Drawing upon SCCT, this case study seeks to understand the decision-making process of African American men pursuing CTE programs at an urban community college in Illinois. This study further explored whether culture/race shapes the perspectives of African American men students and their decision to pursue a CTE pathway. Lastly, the study will investigate the types of supports this population uses and needs to persist to completion. A review of extant literature demonstrates there is a gap in the literature of qualitative research that specifically examines African American men’s’ perspectives on CTE pathways, particularly those enrolled at community colleges. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted – seven African American men students and two CTE Advisors. Four themes emerged from the findings: lived experiences, career outcome expectation: financial freedom, social networks, race and culture.
AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF THE PERSPECTIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN PURSUING A CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION PATHWAY AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN ILLINOIS

BY

KIMBERLY K. HOLLINGSWORTH
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Xiaodan Hu, PhD
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“It always seems impossible, until it is done.” It is only fitting to quote the man that tackled institutionalized racism and fostered racial reconciliation, the honorable Nelson Mandela. The unwavering support of my “village” has sustained me throughout this journey. I would be remiss if I did not first acknowledge the courageous men who trusted me enough to share their stories and found solace in their own vulnerability. Thanks to them, my commitment to supporting students has been strengthened.

To my “sisters” Kenyon and Erika, thank you for being a sounding board and consistent source of support. Not a single complaint along the way, just constant reassurance that I was more than capable of completing my goal. To my friends and colleagues Tasha, Brandon, Shaw, and Juan, thank you for pushing me to complete. Your words of encouragement have sustained me; specifically, the three words that resonate with me most - “get it done.”. To my son, Kendall, thank you for understanding and for your continued support, I love you.

Finally, to my amazing committee Dr. Xiaodan Hu (Chair), Dr. Carrie Kortegast, and Dr. Stacia Edwards. Your collective expertise, patience, and belief in me and in this study has reaffirmed my purpose as a higher education professional. Thank you for guiding me throughout this journey.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my brother, Clinton Hollingsworth, who passed away the final semester of my program. You were the impetus of my research study. I felt your presence every step of the way; I hope that I have made you proud.
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THE AIM OF THIS DISSERTATION PROJECT WAS TO UNDERSTAND THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN WHO PURSUE A CTE PATHWAY AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE. SOCIAL COGNITIVE CAREER THEORY (SCCT) IS THE FRAMEWORK USED TO VIEW THE CAREER DECISION-MAKING BEHAVIOR OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CTE STUDENTS. THE STUDY EXPLORED WHETHER SELF-EFFICACY, OUTCOME EXPECTATIONS, OR RACE AND CULTURE PLAYED A ROLE IN THEIR DECISION TO PURSUE A CTE PATHWAY.

FURTHER INVESTIGATED WAS THE SUPPORTS THAT AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN SEEK OUT AND USE AS THEY PERSIST THROUGH THE CHOICE PHASE. THE CASE STUDY RESEARCHED THE EXPERIENCES OF 7 AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN PURSUIT A CTE PATHWAY AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN ILLINOIS. TWO ADVISORS WERE INTERVIEWED TO GARNER INSIGHT ON HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN SELECT A CTE PATHWAY AND WHAT SUPPORTS THEY SEEK OUT AND USE TO SUPPORT THE CAREER DECISION-MAKING PROCESS. THE RESULTING CHAPTERS DESCRIBE THIS RESEARCH PROJECT FROM THE PROPOSAL STAGE TO A REPORT ON THE STUDY FINDINGS, AS WELL AS A SCHOLARLY REFLECTION ON MY PROCESS AND LEARNING AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY.

CHAPTER ONE IS A VESTIGE OF THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL DEFENSE. THE PROPOSAL WAS DEFENDED IN MARCH OF 2022, AND THIS CHAPTER OUTLINES THE INITIAL PLANS TO CONDUCT THE RESEARCH. CHAPTER TWO DETAILS THE PROCEDURES THAT WERE CARRIED OUT IN THE SPRING AND EARLY SUMMER OF 2022, DESCRIBES PARTICIPANTS THAT WERE INVOLVED IN THE RESEARCH, AS WELL AS PRESENTS THE STUDY FINDINGS. IT WAS REALIZED IN CHAPTER TWO THAT A CODING PROCESS DIFFERENT THAN WHAT WAS OUTLINED IN THE INITIAL PROPOSAL, WOULD NEED TO BE EMPLOYED. ADDITIONALLY, DOCUMENTS THAT WERE TO BE ANALYZED WERE NOT COLLECTED DUE TO THE COVID PANDEMIC. THE FINDINGS REFLECT FOUR THEMES THAT EMERGED: A) LIVED EXPERIENCES B) FINANCIAL FREEDOM C) SOCIAL NETWORKS AND D) RACE AND CULTURE.
Chapter Three is a scholarly reflection of my process and learning at the conclusion of the study. This chapter discusses changes that occurred during the research process, including the need to pivot to an alternate transcription and coding process. The chapter also examines what I learned by conducting this research that practitioners can apply to professional practice. Considerations for policy makers are also shared. Key take-aways include recognizing the time and commitment that qualitative research requires and making the time to conduct research with integrity, finding a balance between empathy and implicit bias, and the benefit of building in personal milestones of accomplishment to encourage pursuit of completing the journey started.
CHAPTER 1 DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF THE PERSPECTIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN PURSUING A CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION PATHWAY AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN ILLINOIS

Abstract

Career and technical education, CTE, are classes designed to prepare students for work (Fletcher, 2013; Gewertz, 2018). Historically, CTE has been associated with low performing students and has often been a dumping ground for students who are not considered as “college material,” which often meant low-income students and students of color (Gantt, 2010). This study explores the experiences of African American men who are pursuing a career and technical education program at an urban community college in Illinois. Employing a constructivist approach grounded in Social Cognitive Career Theory, the author found that self-efficacy and outcome expectations influence the career decision-making process of CTE students. Race and culture was also found to have a bearing on the participant’s views on CTE and on the decision-making process. The participants and two CTE Advisors shared their perspectives on supports CTE students use along their pathway. Four themes emerged from the study: lived experiences; financial freedom; social networks; and race and culture.

Keywords: Career decision-making; career and technical education (CTE); social cognitive career theory (SCCT); community college; higher education; African American men; case study
Introduction

Over the last ten years, career and technical education has gained tremendous popularity in post-secondary education, remodeling itself from a “college alternative” into a viable college pathway. Career and technical education, CTE, is defined as classes that are designed to prepare students for work (Fletcher, 2013; Gewertz, 2018). These courses prepare students for jobs that do not typically require college degrees, such as childcare, welding, cosmetology, or plumbing. Historically, CTE has been associated with low performing students and has often been a dumping ground for students who are not considered as “college material,” which often meant low-income students and students of color (Gantt, 2010). However, contemporary CTE programs are becoming more academically rigorous than vocational education programs of prior generations (Gewertz, 2018).

Promising outcomes for CTE such as employment outlook and competitive salary, make it clear that the scholastic-centered approach of pursuing a liberal arts education, especially for poor students, is a thing of the past. For example, two thirds of Chicago Public School graduates who attend community college place into remedial courses with about one-third completing a credential within six years (The Illinois Report Card, 2019). Since many CTE programs are short-term, lower in cost than degree programs, and do not require college placement to pursue a pathway, more students find these to be a practical and attractive option. That said, it is unknown if these are the reasons why students, specifically African American men, select a CTE pathway. Additionally, there is limited qualitative research that has considered students’ perspectives on CTE pathway selection.
Many students no longer view post-secondary degree completion as their way out of poverty or as a guaranteed “ticket to the middle-class.” Instead, many have lost trust in the higher education system as they witness family and friends amass substantial student loan debt only to find themselves eventually dropping out, or completing, yet unable to find employment after graduation (Davis et al., 2013). African American students participate in CTE more than any other racial or ethnic group (Silverberg, 2004). Thus, CTE has become a critical path to program completion for African American students (Espinosa et al., 2019; Jacobs 2017). Marginalized populations typically persist and complete at lower rates than any other demographic (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Unlike students attending four-year institutions, many community college students encounter challenges that they juggle such as family responsibilities, working, lower socio-economic status, and their inability to decide a “suitable” college major (Hagedorn et al., 2001).

Overwhelmingly, African American men students enroll in community college CTE programs - nearly 21% (Espinosa et al., 2019). CTE was formerly identified as industrial schools for African American students. It has transitioned from being a "dumping ground" option for underprepared students to a place where students earn college credits as well as gain valuable career and workplace skills. The unemployment rate of African American men nearly doubles that of their White counterparts even at times when the economy is characterized as being at full employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Career and technical programs play a vital role in shrinking the employment gap because they prepare students for careers in high demand fields, which leads to increased economic mobility and the long-term benefit of an improved
education (Jacobs, 2017). Because of the perception of CTE, a great deal of debate about how to improve CTE programs has occurred.

Understanding the perspectives of African American men pursuing a CTE pathway is paramount if institutions are committed to improving student retention and completion as well as dispelling the negative perception typically associated with CTE. The negative perceptions of CTE have inherently discouraged pathway pursuit (Symonds et al., 2011). Research studies show that CTE pathways are an underutilized option that could be used to promote diversity within STEM fields, improve labor market earnings, and increase completion rates of African American men students (Carnevale et al., 2010; Hirschy et al., 2011; Wood & Williams, 2013). Recent research suggests that students who benefit most from CTE programs are men and low-income students. Unfortunately, many African American men still do not have access to social networks, resources, and lack motivation and self-efficacy, which can make career pathways and possibilities clear and attainable. Understanding the perspectives of African American men students will help college administrators predict diverse educational needs and to identify and develop targeted programs and services necessary to support African American men as they matriculate through CTE pathways.

Purpose Statement

Drawing upon Social Cognitive Career Theory, the purpose of this case study is to understand the decision-making process of African American men pursuing CTE programs at Our Community College (OCC) in Illinois. The study will explore the motivating factors that influence CTE pathway selection for African American men students and will investigate the
interplay between two components of SCCT, self-efficacy and outcome expectations, and their role in the career decision-making process. This study further seeks to understand whether culture/race shapes the perspectives of African American men students and their decision to pursue a CTE pathway. Lastly, the study will investigate the types of supports this population uses and needs to persist to completion. Overwhelmingly, existing research on CTE has focused on short-term outcomes and is comprised of quantitative reports or dissertations and not peer-reviewed studies (Brannon, 2015; Dabney, 2012; Hirschy, et al., 2011; Mason, 1998). Few African American men earn their degrees at the community college level (Bahr, 2012). In 2016, 4,951 first-time African American men students (9%) out of 55,013 students enrolled in community colleges across Illinois; 21% were enrolled in CTE pathways (IL State Plan, 2020). It is critical to learn how to help this student population persist and complete their respective pathway.

Although there is substantial research about why and how such individuals are challenged by barriers, few studies examined why and how these students select a CTE pathway. To help address this gap, this study is intended to explore the experiences of African American men who can persist and progress toward certificate or degree attainment at one Illinois community college. This case study will add to the limited research exploring CTE pathway selection by African American men community college students in Illinois. Employing a constructivist approach, the case study aims is to add substantive, qualitative data about African American men students’ selection of CTE pathways as a course of study and to explore how their lived experiences influence their decision-making process. Accordingly, the guiding questions for this study are as follows:
1. What are the motivating factors that influence African American men CTE pathway choice?

   1a. What role does self-efficacy, and career outcome expectations play in the CTE pathway decision-making process?

   1b. How does culture/race play in African American men students’ views of CTE and their decision to pursue a CTE pathway?

2. What academic and social support did participants receive in making educational and career choices?

   2a. How did participants obtain academic and career information?

Review of Literature

This section reviews literature related to CTE, providing a history of the evolution of CTE over the years, specifically within a community college context. Reviewing the history of CTE within community colleges is essential to better understand their progression in relation to each other. Because this study is examining a community college in Illinois, a snapshot of CTE in Illinois and future plans for CTE reform will be highlighted. This section further explores what student populations have historically pursued CTE pathways. Additionally, the chapter discusses what influences, motivates students to pursue CTE programs, and reviews studies that have identified the determinants of CTE pathway selection by African American men who attend community colleges. African American men are the focus of this study; accordingly, the chapter will further examine gender, race, and the extant literature that links CTE to racism and inequality. Overall, the section provides a foundation for the study and demonstrates there is a
gap in the literature of qualitative research that specifically examines African American men’s’ perspectives on CTE pathways.

Research indicates that students in CTE programs who gain the technical skills required for employment in today’s economy make more successful career choices and can smoothly transition from college to a career (Fletcher, 2013; Fletcher & Zirkle, 2009; Koivisto et al., 2011). Additionally, Stone and Lewis (2012) found that CTE pathways, coupled with academic curricula and work experience, can improve the skills needed to be competitive in today’s economy. Community colleges have historically been the drivers of career and vocational education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Community colleges “live their mission” and have taken the lead in providing job training at a postsecondary level for many, particularly those who are identified as academically and economically disadvantaged, displaced workers, and other nontraditional groups (Kasper, 2003). The following section will provide a brief history of both Community colleges and CTE.

**Evolvement of the Workforce Development Mission of Community Colleges**

In the early 20th century, several social factors led to the need to provide “a workforce trained to operate the nation’s expanding industries; the lengthened period of adolescence, which mandated custodial care for the young for a longer time, and the drive for social equality” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 1). In 1901, Joliet Junior College (Joliet, IL) was founded and deemed an extension of high school by adding a fifth and sixth year to the curriculum (Joliet Junior College, 2015). Community colleges have historically provided career training through vocation focused courses that lead to both certificates and associate degrees (Kasper, 2003).
During the 1930s, policy makers and leaders in higher education were proponents of vocational education; this was attributed to student’s lack of interest in transfer to a four-year institution and liberal arts education (Brint & Karabel, 2006). By the early 1940s, vocational programs were offered in 70% of community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Before the 1960s, vocational programs failed to grow because of their terminal status. During the 1970’s into the early 1980’s community college enrollments doubled from 2.2 million to 4.3 million (Kasper, 2003). The surge in community college enrollment slowed down between 1980 and 1999, growing only 23% between that span. Between this period, racial and ethnic minorities made up 33% of community college enrollment (Kasper, 2003).

In 1992, the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC) voted to drop “Junior” from their title and is currently known as the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015c). This move was initiated to help temper the negative perceptions inherently associated with community colleges. Today’s community colleges are diverse institutions and representative of the populations they serve. There are more than 1,100 community colleges across the nation serving more than 12-million students annually.

In concert with community colleges, CTE has been evolving since the 19th century. CTE began as trade schools and transitioned to vocational education before landing on its current moniker, CTE. A major proponent of American Junior Colleges and CTE programs was William Harper. Harper called for the inclusion of vocational education within two-year institutions. Gordon (2014) identified three types of trades (a) schools that offered only trade training, (b) schools that offered a combination of trade training and general education, and (c) schools that
allowed students to be apprentices and to take both trade and general education courses. Career and technical education programs were created for students who were not interested in the traditional four-year college pathway but wanted instead to enter immediately into the workforce.

In the 1930s, because of students' disinterest in transfer programs, higher education officials became fervent about vocational education within a two-year college framework (Brint & Karabel, 2006). In the 1940s, over 70% of the vocational programs were offered at community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). In the 1960's vocational education gained substantial momentum (Brint & Karbel, 2006). Programs in the health, engineering, and technology fields became highly sought out majors upon completion of high school. These more "prestigious" fields were key contributors to the decision-making of students and their families.

In 1963, the groundwork for the Perkins Act and CTE development was accelerated when the Vocational Education Act was passed (Cervantes et al., 2005; Cohen et al., 2014). The Act appropriated financial resources to 2- and 4-year colleges and universities, with some of those resources dedicated for CTE (Cohen et al., 2014). Two years later, the Higher Education Act of 1965 granted a provision for federally funded scholarships for higher education for the first time (Cervantes et al., 2005). Funding from this act resulted in a significant increase in the number of CTE programs at community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014). Vocational education experienced a stable period of growth from the 1980s to the 1990s and during this period a series of vocational education acts and amendments were passed (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

For years, community colleges continued to maintain a strong focus on CTE coursework. In the twenty first century, community colleges and CTE programs are confronted with new obstacles and challenges. There is a need to train a more diverse and younger workforce, federal
and state funding appropriations are shrinking, and proprietary schools remain strong competitors (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). These circumstances are additional contributing factors that influence African American's ability to pursue and persist within CTE programs (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

**Career and Technical Education in Illinois**

Students at the secondary level, particularly from urban areas, are not adequately prepared with the essential skills, academic instruction nor technical training, to enroll and persist in college; this results in their inability to meet the demands of a challenging 21st century labor market (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Across the state of Illinois, there are over 170,000 community college students enrolled in CTE programs (Association for Career & Technical Education (ACTE), 2016). Additionally, the ACTE (2016) reports that, 12.9% of Illinois CTE students are Black and over half are men. Overwhelmingly, the research on CTE in Illinois centers on student preparedness and success at the secondary level with a focus on STEM. Moreover, studies on CTE in Illinois is mostly comprised of reports and quantitative longitudinal studies conducted by the Illinois State Board of Education, ISBE, the Illinois Community College Board, ICCB, and the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, OCCRL. A common finding amongst the research is that CTE reform and support is necessary to diversify STEM fields and improve outcomes for marginalized populations pursuing CTE credentials (Espinoza et al, 2019; Gantt, 2010). There is limited research about student decision making and selection of CTE pathways at Illinois community colleges.
The lowering of academic expectations comes with consequences; the skills gap in the U.S. workforce grows resulting in students lacking the requisite knowledge and skills to be productive workers in a knowledge-based economy (Hamilton et al., 2015). This gap is particularly challenging in the state of Illinois, where 80% of jobs within the state require some form of postsecondary training but only 41% of adults have attained industry credentials or earned postsecondary degrees (Advance Illinois, 2012). Governor J.B. Pritzker “describes the skills gap as arguably Illinois’ most serious barrier to economic prosperity,” according to a 400-plus page state policy document (State Plan, 2020, p. 65). Figure 1. represents the skills shortage in the United States through 2029. For these statistics to improve at the post-secondary level, the pipeline and transition from secondary to post-secondary CTE must be strengthened.

Figure 1. Skills shortage across the United States. Note. Adapted from State Plan, 2020, p. 65
There is promise for the future of CTE in the state of Illinois. In July of 2020, the ISBE and the ICCB created a joint State Plan Illinois for the administration of the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) for State Fiscal Years (SFY) 2021-24 (July 1, 2020- June 30, 2024). The vision and mission of the plan is centered around developing high quality pathways that promote student success. The goals of the State Plan are as follows (2020):

1. Increase the percentage of students who obtain a postsecondary certificate, degree, or industry-recognized credentials.
2. Strengthen CTE offerings by improving access, program quality, and transition points between education and workforce systems and programs.
3. Increase participation in CTE dual credit coursework.
4. Increase responsiveness to local, regional, and state workforce needs based on labor market information and employer input.
5. Recruit and retain a robust and sustainable pipeline of CTE educators.
6. Expand access to quality work-based learning for all students. (p.18)

**CTE and African American Community College Students**

Community colleges continue to be the dominate entry point into academia for African American men students (Wood & Palmer, 2015). According to Branch (2017), African American men choose to attend community colleges because of open admission policies, a diverse option of academic pathways, and convenience. Nationally, the retention rate of African American men at community colleges is the lowest among all racial groups (Hagedorn, Maxwell, and Hampton, 2007). Much of the research on African American men in community colleges has focused on academic deficits and this population’s notable underachievement (Wood & Williams, 2013).
Flowers (2006) found that African American men in community colleges have considerably lower levels of academic and social integration. To date, African American students enroll in CTE programs more than any other ethnic group (Gordon, 2014; Silverberg, 2004).

Historically, schools placed African American students into technical education programs as an extension of Jim Crow-era segregation. CTE, formerly known as vocational education, was used for tracking the ability of these students. Students who were deemed to be underprepared and not suited for academic coursework would be vocational education programs. Research has found significant disparities in CTE outcomes between Black students and white students who attend community colleges (Dabney, 2012; Hamilton & Hackmann, 2015; Mason, 1998; Vasquez et al., 2017). Disproportionately, Black men have been found to be over-represented in vocational education. According to research studies conducted on African American men and their perceptions of CTE (Gauthier, 2010), the stigmatized perception of vocational education has affected the pursuit of CTE by African American men students. Dougherty (2016) conducted a recent study of CTE graduates in Arkansas and found students that benefited the most from CTE belong to groups characterized as susceptible to low performance: men and low-income students.

In review of the relevant literature pertaining to African American men and their pursuit of career and technical education pathways, it is important to note that early theorists did not consider the unique circumstances of racism that Black males face as they navigate post-secondary institutions. The social and cultural underpinnings of career and technical education versus a more liberal arts education are deeply rooted in the post-enslavement quest for equality (Ball, 2015). In the early 1600's to the 1800's, apprenticeships were popular programs for slaves,
teaching them the requisite skills to labor for former slave owners. Two conflicting opinions of vocational education existed; Booker T. Washington, American educator, was a proponent of apprenticeship vocational education because he believed it helped African Americans economic mobility, which would allow them to easily integrate into society (Gordon, 2014). Conversely, W.E.B. Dubois believed that an academic (liberal arts) education was more important than a vocational education (Gordon, 2014). The "Talented Tenth", founded by Dubois, was a prestigious leadership class of African American men who focused on using their intellect to strategize for integration and social equality. These conflicting viewpoints on CTE and liberal arts underscore the historical and continuing misconception that career and academic programming cannot coexist or do not mix.

Powell (2000) posited, “It is only through education that we can come to know ourselves and the ways in which our taken-for-granted cultural assumptions are grounded in a racist and classist ideology” (p. 11). Academic persistence and completion for African American college students, is often interrupted by their inability to escape societal discrimination. Research studies prove that structural inequality has systematically disenfranchised African Americans pursuing post-secondary education (Arrington, 2015; Ball, 2015). Results from several studies (Aragon et al, 2013; Bragg & Durham, 2012; Castellano et al., 2012) demonstrate that intentional steps toward improving racial equity would aid in improving African American men’s access to and participation in CTE programs. Thus, improving access and participation precipitates improved academic and workforce outcomes, thus narrowing the substantial opportunity gaps that exist along racial lines. Hess (2010) asserts that vocational education has encouraged social divisions
along racial lines because Black students have enrolled consistently in vocational education at a higher rate than white students (p. 119).

**Students’ Choice of CTE Pathways/Programs**

Most of the research and reporting around 2-year college student pathways focuses on traditional liberal arts programs that lead to transfer to four-year institutions (Adelman, 1999; Crisp & Nuñez, 2014; LaSota & Zumeta, 2016; Vasquez et al., 2017). There is a limited knowledge base on 2-year college pathway selection and even less empirical data on CTE pathway/program selection and student mobility (Johnson & Muse, 2012; Wickersham, 2020). A methodical analysis has yet to make clear the causal process that leads 2-year college students to pursue one or more pathways as they navigate college and what this means for student progress and success in higher education (Ingram et al., 2016; Wickersham, 2020). Although growing, there is a tremendous gap in the literature that addresses students’ motivation for choosing CTE pathways (Bahr, 2012).

Wickersham (2020) examined the underlying process that drives 2-year college students into one or more pathways as they navigate higher education. Because of the study, a conceptual model was developed to understand college students’ decision-making process when choosing among competing postsecondary pathways. The College Pathway (Re)Selection Model Among Beginning 2-Year College Students consisted of two tracks—lifetime decision-making and short-term decision-making—that classified the motivations of students’ decisions as they navigate postsecondary education (Wickersham, 2020). The results found that community college students described the role of payoff, fit, flexibility, ease of transfer, and improved economic mobility as
key considerations in their decision-making process (Wickersham, 2020). Additionally, results from a report developed by the National Career Development Association concluded that of the four racial groups surveyed, African American respondents indicated the greatest need for career planning and information (Hendricks, 1994).

Research on college major selection practices of African American men is mostly quantitative. Qualitative research around the phenomena of "why" African American men select a specific major/pathway and their experiences is limited but growing. Qualitative research examining these students is primarily limited to dissertations and not refereed or peer reviewed studies (Branch, 2017; Brannon, 2015; Dabney, 2012). Dozier (2018) evaluated the performance of African American men in select career and technical education programs at a large community college in North Carolina. The study identified which courses this student population outperforms in when compared to other courses based on final grade. Utilizing a mixed method approach the data provided a summary of what factors African American men consider important to their success in career and technical education programs at a large urban community college in North Carolina. The results identified the impact of support groups such as mentors, peers, role models, and family support as factors contributing to their success.

Theoretical Framework

There are several postulated theoretical models on CTE pathway selection (person-environment fit, career integration, career development theory, Community College Taxonomy). Research suggests that traditional career theory has menial relevance for African American men because these theories are overwhelmingly based on experiences of White men who attend four-
This study will be grounded in social cognitive career theory (SCCT). Social cognitive career theory is a new theory that is aimed at explaining three interrelated aspects of career development: (1) how basic academic and career interests develop, (2) how educational and career choices are made, and (3) how academic and career success is obtained (Lent et al., 2013). The theory incorporates a number of concepts (e.g., interests, abilities, values, environmental factors) that appear in earlier career theories and have been found to affect career development (Lent et al., 2013). Developed by Robert W. Lent, Steven D. Brown, and Gail Hackett in 1994, SCCT is based on Albert Bandura’s general social cognitive theory, an influential theory of cognitive and motivational processes that has been extended to the study of many areas of psychosocial functioning, such as academic performance, health behavior, and organizational development (Bandura, 1986).

To date, little research has examined the influence of self-efficacy and outcome expectations of Black (or other racial minority) men in community colleges and its impact on the career-decision making process. The SCCT will guide this study because its underpinnings will be useful in gaining an understanding of the career decision-making behaviors of African American male students at the case college. Instead of focusing on the physical aspects of gender and race, SCCT considers the psychological and social effects (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). These factors, and how they relate to a career, underscore the importance of the personal and societal responses to gender and race might create. Equally as important is how gender or race influences self-efficacy and outcome expectations related to specific vocational education or career choices. Gainor and Lent (1998) found, in accordance with SCCT, self-efficacy belief and outcome expectation have a direct influence on intention, which can be changed because of self-
efficacy belief and outcome expectation (Gainor & Lent, 1998). Thus, selecting SCCT to investigate the career decision-making intention is a reasonable framework to study the issue.

SCCT’s assumptions about the importance of environmental and cultural influences are critically important as recent research suggests that interests may play a smaller role in the choice-making process of young adults from particular cultures. Specifically, those from a culture characterized by collective decision-making are more inclined to choose a career path that is consistent with the preferences of their family members and with their self-efficacy beliefs rather than one that necessarily fit their personal interests (Lent et al, 2013). Gibbons and Shoffner (2004) examined how schools and career counselors can help students using Social Cognitive Career Theory. The study underscored that SCCT, and its focus on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, barriers, and goals, can help with career and academic decision-making (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). SCCT suggests that self-efficacy and outcome expectations are key predictors of career choice goals and actions, with contextual influences moderating those choices and actions (Albert & Luzzo, 1999). The SCCT model further purports that interests are developed by one’s self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Brown & Lent, 1996; Lent et al., 1994) Background and contextual variables may serve as perceived barriers, or supports, to entry or to outcome expectations. An African American male that may be interested in serving others and working in a health-related field may not go into nursing because of his perception that nursing is not an appropriate occupation for a man. Additionally, he may perceive minimal support from others to enter that occupation, crucial support that might have helped him to overcome that barrier.
Because the self-efficacy of African American men can be influenced by contextual inequities such as racism, economic disparities, or lower educational attainment, these factors often influence their career choice. Albert and Luzzo (1999) assert that individuals from ethnic minority groups are not afforded an opportunity to make career choices under ideal circumstances. African American men may notice that representation in certain career fields is limited within their ethnic group. Perceived barriers arise due to their conceptual processes, self-beliefs, standards, and outcome expectations, which, in turn, are internalized. Consequently, they give up on a potentially rewarding career because the environment has offered limited efficacy building opportunities (Albert and Luzzo, 1999).

This study seeks to garner the perspectives of African American men students about why they decided to pursue a CTE pathway. Framing the study from a lens that values and respects the lived experiences of the subjects and simultaneously takes into consideration the impact one’s race, gender, pre-dispositions, background contextual affordances, and learning experiences has on pathway selection will be critical in acquiring rich feedback from the participants. The infrastructure of the framework for this study will be established on the premise that African American men have beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions that influence career pathway selection. (Bush & Bush, 2015; Collins & Bissell, 2004; Mason, 1998). Collectively, the highlighted studies indicate a pattern of cultural barriers African American men encounter in higher education and more specifically, at community colleges. These studies also reveal the social and educational "harm" African American men encounter within a higher education context. It is the responsibility of higher education professionals and policymakers to educate
and invest in programs, resources, and services that support African American men in their pursuit of CTE pathways.

Research Design

Constructivism is an epistemological position in which knowledge is regarded as constructed (Given 2008). A constructivist approach values theory yet the established theory is used to support interpretation of the data collected through the research process, not to validate a hypothesis. Constructivism allows the researcher to be subjective as they co-construct understanding with the participants. Constructivist research is not inherently objective; this approach requires the researcher to be subjective in their co-construction of understanding and acknowledging the experiences of the participants. This study will be grounded in constructivism throughout the design, data collection and analysis process. Interviews will be the primary data collection method in which participants will demonstrate or describe their experiences during the “discovery” phase. Within this constructivist paradigm, the data analysis will involve identifying themes that emerge from the rich data from participants and if applicable, organized into categories. Focus on individual participant experiences is a strength of constructivism. However, as the researcher, I am cognizant that this approach does not allow for conclusions that can be generalized to other populations.

The purpose of this study is to understand the decision-making process of African American men pursuing CTE programs. This study seeks to understand whether culture/race shapes the perspectives of African American male students and their decision to pursue a CTE pathway at an urban community college in Illinois. The methodology for this study will be an
exploratory qualitative case study design. According to Yin (2009), “qualitative case study methodology provides tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts.” This approach allows the researcher to explore individuals or organizations, simple through complex interventions, relationships, communities, or programs (Yin, 2009) and supports the deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena.

As noted by Cohen et al. (2018), case study is utilized when a researcher is studying a program and more than one individual; thus, the use of case study is necessary to gain an insight into student perspective of CTE program selection. This study will extend the knowledge base of CTE by employing the use of a case study to gain access to the voices and garner a deeper understanding of the perceptions African American men students, enrolled at an urban community college, in Chicago, Illinois, have of CTE pathways. This research will yield information to inform practice and to gain a better awareness of the elements that lead to successful persistence toward degree completion for African American men community college students. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), establishing a theoretical perspective in qualitative research provides an orientation to the nature of the study and sets a foundation for the primary and guiding research questions.

Research Site

The college designated for the study, Open Community College (OCC), is situated in an urban community in Illinois. Open Community College is a comprehensive community college that has an annual enrollment of nearly 4900 students. Open Community College was selected due to access to study participants, the number of CTE programs offered, and because it is a
predominately black institution. As an Administrator at OCC, the researcher has access to over two hundred African American men, 30% of whom have identified CTE as a pathway of interest. This purposeful selection will allow the researcher to collect data that will lend itself to an in-depth understanding of the issue under investigation.

Located on the far southeast side of Chicago, OCC attracts many of its students from the Chicago Public Schools District #299. OCC is an open enrollment institution for students from every neighborhood in the city of Chicago. Most of the college’s student population originates from the far southeast side neighborhoods where the educational attainment and the economic means of households have suffered from the historical effects of systemic racism. The top twenty feeder high schools for OCC educate over 15,000 secondary students. Most high school students are eligible for free or reduced lunches. In general, every neighborhood directly served by OCC endures chronic economic and educational challenges that discourage postsecondary education and upward socio-economic mobility among youth (ISBE, 2020a).

Sixty-nine percent of the first time, full-time student population are Black or African American and one-in-four (24%) is Hispanic. Nearly 75% of the students attending OCC receive Pell grants (IPEDS, 2021). The college is a federally designated predominately black institution (PBI) and demographically includes students that are 2.89% two or more races, 2.15% White, 0.138% American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.4459% Asian, and 0.4459% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders. Open Community College offers Associate degrees, certificates, and short-term programs to prepare students to transfer to bachelor’s degree programs or to move directly into the workforce. (“City Colleges of Chicago - Olive-Harvey College Presidential Search”)
The research site offers general education courses and awards Associate in Arts, Associates in Science, Associates in General Studies, and Associates in Applied Science degrees. The site also awards Advance and Basic certificates as well as offers GED, ESL, and Continuing Education courses. The college hosts a Center of Excellence that is comprised of CTE programs in Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics (TDL). Pathways include Automotive and Diesel Technology, Forklift Operations, Commercial Driver’s Licensing (CDL), Supply Chain Management and Logistics (SCML), and Aviation Maintenance and Technology (AMT).

All CTE programs are open admission and do not require placement testing into college-level English or mathematics. Students are required to apply directly to the College; there is no special application or admission process for CTE programs. Enrollment into CTE programs is on a first come-first served basis. Lower than typical class size instructor-to-student ratios exist in the CDL, Auto/Diesel Technology, and Forklift courses, thus, it is not unusual for students to be waitlisted due to the demand of these programs. The CDL program requires students to take a drug and background check. The CDL students must provide a copy of their Motor Vehicle Record (MVR) demonstrating they have no major vehicular infractions. The TDL programs are categorized as “second chance friendly” – students that have previously been justice involved are able to enroll and persist in the programs.

Open Community College has established partnerships within the TDL industry. Partnerships include work-based learning opportunities, apprenticeships, and pipeline employment initiatives. Workforce partners include UPS, Amazon, Ozinga, FedEx, PepsiCo, Navistar, Whole Foods, and Walmart. The Office of Career Planning and Placement and the
Director of Workforce Partnerships work closely to ensure that CTE students have resources, connections, and employment opportunities made available to them.

**Participants**

Purposeful sampling will be conducted to identify participants for the study. Purposeful sampling will be conducted because it allows the researcher to identify small, specific groups to work with. It is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Random purposeful sampling is intended to increase the generalization of the study (Given, 2008). Participants for this study will be selected to describe their CTE pathway selection process and to share experiences of being an African American male student pursuing a CTE pathway at the community college level. Additionally, this study seeks to delve deeply into understanding what motivates the participants to pursue a CTE pathway. The participants will be intentionally selected based on their willingness to contribute comprehensive, information-rich information. Participants for the study must be a) a man or and individual that identifies as male, b) African American/Black, c) currently enrolled in a credit CTE program (not non-credit), d) pursuing a CTE certificate/degree (selected pathway in the SIS).

The target number of participants to interview for this study is between 10 to 12 students. Participants will be identified and referred based on a variety of outreach efforts. The researcher will solicit students for the study via direct emails, face-to-face meetings with students in CTE courses (with faculty permission), email messages, and telephone calls. Flyers will be posted throughout the CTE building.
I will work closely with Student Services staff, Advisors, and faculty by sharing the information and requesting their assistance with recommendations of students. The Office of Research and Planning will be engaged to confirm enrollment of African American men students who meet the study criteria. Students will be offered a $25 gift card as incentive to participate in the study. This is necessary because 73% of the CTE students are part-time and have part-time/full-time jobs. Once participants are identified, they will complete a Research Participant Eligibility Questionnaire that will be developed by the researcher, to ensure that the participants meet the research criteria.

**Data Collection**

This section details the criteria and methods that will be used to identify participants and collect data. Students who agree to participate will be contacted to identify a time and location that is convenient for them to participate in a 60-minute semi-structured interview. This one round of interviews will emphasize depth of rich information sharing. Participants will receive a printed research consent form to review and sign. The interview protocol will consist of 10-12 questions. Semi-structured interviews are particularly well suited for case study research because they allow for open-ended responses from participants for more in-depth information and encourages two-way communication (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The interview questions will center on the career decision making process as it relates to self-efficacy, career outcome expectations, race and culture and support services; the interview protocol is presented in the appendix. The College Researcher and the Dean of CTE will review the interview protocol tool.
The questions and interview process will be field-tested by two African American men students from OCC.

Participant confidentiality is a high priority. To ensure confidentiality is not compromised, participants will be assigned a pseudonym and will be referenced according to their assigned pseudonyms throughout the study. A participant informed consent document will be created to reassure the participants that their anonymity will be respected and that all transcripts will remain confidential. Interviews will be conducted face-to-face or virtually dependent on the participants' comfort relative to the COVID19 pandemic. A digital audio recorder will be used to capture face-to-face interviews. The interviews will be transcribed utilizing appropriate and reputable software. Each transcript will be reviewed and matched to the audio file to check accuracy. Participants will be able to review transcripts for completeness and accuracy.

In addition to African American men CTE student interviews, Academic Advisors will be interviewed. Investigating what motivates African American men to pursue a CTE pathway, from the perspective of the advisor, is critically important to understanding what up-front resources are needed to support CTE students through to completion. The list of interview questions will be around CTE caseloads, the advising approach to appropriately advise this population, unpacking the “profile” of a CTE student, and most common barriers faced and supports CTE student’s use. The interview protocol is presented in Appendix B.

Advisors also encourage their CTE students to complete a series of documents to assist in determining an appropriate career pathway match. In addition to the interviews, the following documentation will be reviewed: 1) student education plan worksheets housed within the student
information system (SIS), 2) career inventory worksheets (if completed by participants). These documents provide critical data on career interests and future goals of the students.

Data Analysis

According to Given (2008), researchers should look for concepts, ideas, themes, and categories that help the researcher to organize and interpret data. Consequently, I will employ a general inductive research approach to data analysis. An inductive research approach allows research findings to surface from the recurrent, dominant, or meaningful themes representative in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies (Thomas, 2006). Atkinson (2002) proposes four steps of case study data analysis 1) create a data repository 2) initial, expand, and rationalize codes 3) analyze coding data 4) final propositions. Coding software, NVivo, will be used to assist with the analysis of interview data. Purposeful first cycle coding will be conducted to understand the depth and range of potential coding categories. Employing NVivo coding as a first cycle step will help to maintain the integrity of participants' voices (Charmez, 2014). The second cycle coding method for this study will include focused coding (Saldaña, 2016). Focused coding is a logical extension of NVivo coding because it allows the researcher to do more in-depth coding of the data collected and analyzed during first cycle coding. Specifically, focused coding can allow the researcher to categorize the most frequent and prominent codes identified during NVivo coding to determine categories, or themes, “without distracted attention…to their properties and dimensions” (Charmez, 2014; Saldaña, 2016, p. 240). Lastly, thematic coding will occur between first and second cycle coding and will involve
multiple coding methods (Saldaña, 2016). It is important to avoid establishing pre-identified themes and codes to mitigate the introduction of biases and assumptions into the data analysis.

Several documents will be analyzed as a part of this study. The documents include 1) student education plan worksheets housed within the student information system (SIS), 2) career inventory worksheets (if completed by participants). Document analysis will be conducted to assess themes. The document analysis process will follow a similar procedure to the interview coding process. When used in triangulation, the documents can corroborate, refute, or expand on findings across other data sources (Patton, 1999). Triangulating the data through the convergence of information from various sources is an effective way to test the validity of the study (Patton, 1999).

Researcher bias will be addressed by ensuring that the study is trustworthy, dependable, and replicable; participant voices will be the dominant voice of the study so that their story is told from their point of view (Mehra, 2002). Intentional measures by the researcher will be taken to ensure that bias does not compromise the integrity of the study. The interview questions will be constructed according to the guiding research questions intending to explore African American men’s perspectives on CTE. The coding process will follow sound methodology by using first and second cycle coding. To strengthen the integrity of the study, maintaining participant eligibility criteria will be a priority. The Research Participant Eligibility Questionnaire will serve as a nonintrusive measure to remind participants of the research criteria. The goal of the study is to establish credibility and trustworthiness by accurately capturing and presenting the experiences and stories of participants. Trustworthiness and validity will be established by employing member checking, also known as respondent validation. The results of
the interviews will be returned to the student participants and Advisors to ensure that what was captured is accurate and resonates with them.

Positionality Statement

In advance of embarking upon this research study, it is important that I examine my own experiences to establish self-awareness of personal experiences and assumptions influencing my views on this topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Clark and Vealé (2018) stated: “Qualitative researchers must minimize and disclose their personal assumptions and biases while collecting, coding, and sorting qualitative data to acquire an accurate representation of the phenomenon or topic” (p. 484). The academic and racial context of the study will require me to acknowledge my own experiences and leverage them as an asset for building rapport and a connection with the participants. I self-identify as an African American female educator and administrator at a community college in Illinois. Experiences from growing up in a predominately African American neighborhood in a small, poverty-stricken, urban city in the Midwest, being the sister of a brother guided towards a CTE pathway, and mother of an African American male college student, fuels my desire to understand and support the well-being of these students.

My position is that a study that explores the perspectives of African American men students pursuing a CTE pathway is important for informing successful practices, developing support services, and identifying appropriate resources to ensure the success of these community college students. Twenty-seven years of higher education experience, twenty-two years at the community college level, has shaped my worldview about the critical role community colleges play in the lives of marginalized populations. I have served seventeen years as a college
Administrator which has broadened my understanding of policies and procedures that have systemically been counterintuitive to promoting the success of African American men students attending community colleges.

My professional position as an executive level administrator at the community college will afford me privileged knowledge and context for institutional challenges participants may encounter. I have personally witnessed African American men being steered towards CTE programs because they have been considered less rigorous and rarely require placement scores or pre-requisites. The abysmal data on enrollment, persistence, and completion rates of African American men will not prejudice my research approach; rather, it has fueled my focus and underscores my commitment to the multiple missions of a community college. I acknowledge and honor the perseverance of the participants. I value these men as worthy contributors to the educational landscape of higher education and as individuals who can contribute valuable insight to inform practice for prospective, current, and future students.

Significance

There is an opportunity for academia to positively influence the experiences of African American men who pursue CTE pathways. A disparity exists between African Americans who enroll in college and subsequently complete as compared to their counterparts. Most discouraging are the completion rates of African American male students at two-year colleges (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2019). Just over one-third of freshmen at these colleges in 2012 completed a credential within six years, with nearly half of these students no longer enrolled (Shapiro et al., 2017). Understanding the experiences and
perspectives of African American men in community colleges is important because they represent a small number of students who complete college.

Academic administrators can garner a better understanding of the requisite support that is necessary to integrate academic and CTE curricula, develop professional development, and align with institutional reform, to improve outcomes for African American men in CTE pathways. Existing research has primarily focused on student experiences in Career and Technical Education in rural areas; however, gaps in the literature exist with studies that specifically deal with African American students attending urban community colleges. Many researchers have examined college major selection/choice of African American students attending four-year institutions (Crisp et al., 2014; Fletcher, 2013; Wood et al., 2015).

Existing research consists primarily of quantitative studies that investigate factors that influence pathway selection. There is limited qualitative research on African American men attending a community college and pursuing a CTE pathway. Studies that exist are primarily published dissertations with limited citations in peer-reviewed journal articles. Viewing the CTE pathway selection process through the lens of the research participants, getting their point of view, versus merely quantifying factors, enriches the current body of knowledge. Additionally, differently focused research, from a SCCT lens, can identify effective ways to increase African American men’s success in the community college, helping them meet their career goals.
CHAPTER 2: TRADE VERSUS TRADITIONAL: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF THE PERSPECTIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN PURSUING A CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION PATHWAY IN ILLINOIS

Introduction

Promising outcomes in CTE, such as employment outlook and competitive salary, make it evident that the scholastic-centered approach of pursuing a liberal arts education, especially for poor students, is outdated. Two thirds of Chicago Public School graduates who attend community college place into remedial courses with about one-third completing a credential within six years (The Illinois Report Card, 2019). Since many CTE programs are short-term, lower in cost than degree programs, and do not require college placement to pursue a pathway, more students find these to be a viable and attractive option. It is unknown if these are the reasons why students, specifically African American men, select a CTE pathway. Additionally, there is limited qualitative research that has considered students’ perspectives on CTE pathway selection.

Many have lost trust in the higher education system as they witness family and friends amass substantial student loan debt only to find themselves eventually dropping out, or completing, yet unable to find employment after graduation (Davis et al., 2013). African American students participate in CTE more than any other racial or ethnic group (Silverberg, 2004). Thus, CTE has become a critical path to program completion for African American students (Espinosa et al., 2019; Jacobs 2017). Marginalized populations typically persist and
complete at lower rates than any other demographic (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Unlike students attending four-year institutions, many community college students encounter challenges that they juggle, such as family responsibilities, working, lower socio-economic status, and their inability to determine a “suitable” college major (Hagedorn et al., 2001).

Overwhelmingly, African American men students enroll in community college CTE programs - nearly 21% (Espinosa et al., 2019). Historically, CTE was formerly identified as industrial schools for African American students. Over time, it has transitioned from being a "dumping ground" option for underprepared students to a place where students earn college credits as well as gain valuable career and workplace skills. The unemployment rate of African American men nearly doubles that of their White counterparts even at times when the economy is characterized as being at full employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Therefore, career and technical programs play a vital role in shrinking the employment gap because they prepare students for careers in high demand fields, which leads to increased economic mobility and the long-term benefit of an improved education (Jacobs, 2017). Because of the perception of CTE, a great deal of debate about how to improve CTE programs has occurred.

First of all, if institutions are committed to improving student retention and completion as well as dispelling the negative perception typically associated with CTE, understanding the perspectives of African American men pursuing a CTE pathway is critical. The negative perceptions of CTE have inherently discouraged pathway pursuit (Symonds et al., 2011). Research studies show that CTE pathways are an underutilized option that could be used to promote diversity within STEM fields, improve labor market earnings, and increase completion rates of African American men students (Carnevale, et al., 2010; Hirschy et al., 2011; Wood &
Williams, 2013). Recent research suggests that students who benefit most from CTE programs are men and low-income students. Unfortunately, many African American men still do not have access to social networks, resources, and they lack motivation and self-efficacy, which can make career pathways and possibilities clear and attainable. Understanding the perspectives of African American men students will help college administrators anticipate diverse educational needs and identify and develop targeted programs and services necessary to support African American men as they matriculate through CTE pathways.

This qualitative case study explores the factors that influence African American men’s decision to pursue a career and technical education pathway at an urban community college in Illinois. The following questions guided this study:

1. What are the motivating factors that influence African American men CTE pathway selection?
   - Does culture/race play in African American men students’ views of CTE and their decision to pursue a CTE pathway?
   - What role does self-efficacy and career outcome expectations play in the CTE pathway decision-making process?

2. What academic and social support did participants receive in making educational and career choices?
   - How did participants obtain academic and career information?
Review of Literature

Evolvement of the Workforce Development Mission of Community Colleges

During the 1930s, policy makers and leaders in higher education were proponents of vocational education; this was attributed to student’s lack of interest in transfer to a four-year institution and liberal arts education (Brint & Karabel, 2006). By the early 1940s, vocational programs were offered in 70% of community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Before the 1960s, vocational programs failed to grow because of their terminal status. During the 1970s into the early 1980s, community college enrollments doubled from 2.2 million to 4.3 million (Kasper, 2003). The surge in community college enrollment slowed down between 1980 and 1999, growing only 23% between that span. Between this period, racial and ethnic minorities made up 33% of community college enrollment (Kasper, 2003).

In concert with community colleges, CTE has been evolving since the 19th century. Initially, CTE began as a trade school and transitioned to vocational education before landing on its current moniker, CTE. A major proponent of American Junior Colleges and CTE programs was William Harper. Harper called for the inclusion of vocational education within two-year institutions. Gordon (2014) identified three types of trades (a) schools that offered only trade training, (b) schools that offered a combination of trade training and general education, and (c) schools that allowed students to be apprentices and to take both trade and general education courses. Primarily, career and technical education programs were created for students who were not interested in the traditional four-year college pathway but wanted instead to enter immediately into the workforce.
In the 1940s, over 70% of the vocational programs were offered at community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). In the 1960s, the Perkins Act and the Higher Education Act of 1965 changed the trajectory of CTE (Cervantes et al., 2005). Funding from these acts resulted in a significant increase in the number of CTE programs at community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014). Consequently, vocational education growth was stable from the 1980s to the 1990s, and during this period a series of vocational education acts and amendments were passed (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). In the twenty-first century, community colleges and CTE programs are confronted with new obstacles and challenges. Thus, there is a need to train a more diverse and younger workforce, federal and state funding appropriations are shrinking, and proprietary schools remain strong competitors (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

**Career and Technical Education in Illinois**

Across the state of Illinois, there are over 170,000 community college students enrolled in CTE programs (Association for Career & Technical Education (ACTE), 2016). Additionally, the ACTE (2016) reports that 12.9% of Illinois CTE students are Black and over half are men. Overwhelmingly, studies on CTE in Illinois is mostly comprised of reports and quantitative longitudinal studies conducted by the Illinois State Board of Education, ISBE, the Illinois Community College Board, ICCB, and the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, OCCRL. A common finding amongst the research is that CTE reform and support are necessary to diversify STEM fields and improve outcomes for marginalized populations pursuing CTE credentials (Espinoza et al, 2019; Gantt, 2010).
There is a particularly challenging in the state of Illinois, where 80% of jobs within the state require some form of postsecondary training, but only 41% of adults have attained industry credentials or earned postsecondary degrees (Advance Illinois, 2012). (“Racial/Ethnic and Gender Equity Patterns in Illinois High School Career ...”) For these statistics to improve at the post-secondary level, the pipeline and transition from secondary to post-secondary CTE must be strengthened. Therefore, there is promise for the future of CTE in the state of Illinois. In July of 2020, the ISBE and the ICCB created a joint State Plan Illinois for the administration of the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V) for State Fiscal Years (SFY) 2021-24 (July 1, 2020- June 30, 2024).

CTE and African American Community College Students

Currently, community colleges continue to be the dominate entry point into academia for African American men students (Wood & Palmer, 2015). According to Branch (2017), African American men choose to attend community colleges because of open admission policies, a diverse option of academic pathways, and convenience. Nationally, the retention rate of African American men at community colleges is the lowest among all racial groups (Hagedorn, Maxwell, and Hampton, 2007). Much of the research on African American men in community colleges has focused on academic deficits and this population’s notable underachievement (Wood & Williams, 2013). Flowers (2006) found that African American men in community colleges have considerably lower levels of academic and social integration. Currently, African American students enroll in CTE programs more than any other ethnic group (Gordon, 2014; Silverberg, 2004).
Historically, schools placed African American students into technical education programs as an extension of Jim Crow-era segregation. Thus, CTE, formerly known as vocational education, was used for tracking the ability of these students. Students who were deemed to be underprepared and not suited for academic coursework would be placed into vocational education programs. Research has found significant disparities in CTE outcomes between Black students and white students who attend community colleges (Dabney, 2012; Hamilton & Hackmann, 2015; Mason, 1998; Vasquez et al., 2017). Disproportionately, Black men have been found to be over-represented in vocational education. According to research studies conducted on African American men and their perceptions of CTE (Gauthier, 2010), the stigmatized perception of vocational education has affected the pursuit of CTE by African American men students.

More importantly, several studies prove that structural inequality has systematically disenfranchised African Americans pursuing post-secondary education (Arrington, 2015; Ball, 2015). Results from several studies (Aragon et al., 2013; Bragg & Durham, 2012; Castellano et al., 2012)) demonstrate that intentional steps toward improving racial equity would aid in improving African American men’s access to and participation in CTE programs. For example, improving access and participation precipitates improved academic and workforce outcomes, thus narrowing the substantial opportunity gaps that exist along racial lines.

**Students’ Choice of CTE Pathways/Programs**

Most of the research and reporting around 2-year college student pathways focuses on traditional liberal arts programs that lead to transfer to four-year institutions (Adelman, 1999; Crisp & Nuñez, 2014; LaSota & Zumeta, 2016; Vasquez et al., 2017). There is a limited
knowledge base on 2-year college pathway selection and even less empirical data on CTE pathway/program selection and student mobility (Johnson & Muse, 2012; Wickersham, 2020). A methodical analysis has yet to make clear the causal process that leads 2-year college students to pursue one or more pathways as they navigate college and what this means for student progress and success in higher education (Ingram et al., 2016; Wickersham, 2020). Although growing, there is a tremendous gap in the literature that addresses students’ motivation for choosing CTE pathways (Bahr, 2012).

Wickersham (2020) examined the underlying process that drives 2-year college students into one or more pathways as they navigate higher education. Because of the study, a conceptual model, The College Pathway (Re)Selection Model Among Beginning 2-Year College Students consisting of two tracks—lifetime decision-making and short-term decision-making, was developed to understand college students’ decision-making process when choosing among competing postsecondary pathways. The results found that community college students described the role of payoff, fit, flexibility, ease of transfer, and improved economic mobility as key considerations in their decision-making process (Wickersham, 2020).

Furthermore, research on college major selection practices of African American men is mostly quantitative. Qualitative research around the phenomena of "why" African American men select a specific major/pathway and their experiences is limited but growing and is relegated to four-year, predominately white institutions. Dozier (2018) evaluated the performance of African American men in select career and technical education programs at a large community college in North Carolina. Utilizing a mixed method approach, the data provided a summary of what factors African American men consider important to their success in career and technical
education programs at a large urban community college in North Carolina. The results identified the impact of support groups, such as mentors, peers, role models, and family support as factors contributing to their success.

Theoretical Framework

The current research suggests that traditional career theory has menial relevance for African American men because these theories are overwhelmingly based on experiences of White men who attend four-year universities (Brown, 2002; Walsh et al., 2001). This study is grounded in social cognitive career theory (SCCT). The theory incorporates several concepts (e.g., interests, abilities, values, environmental factors) that appear in earlier career theories and have been found to affect career development (Lent et al., 2013). Developed by Robert W. Lent, Steven D. Brown, and Gail Hackett in 1994, SCCT is based on Albert Bandura’s general social cognitive theory, an influential theory of cognitive and motivational processes that has been extended to the study of many areas of psychosocial functioning, such as academic performance, health behavior, and organizational development (Bandura, 1986).

Currently, limited research has examined the influence of self-efficacy and outcome expectations of Black (or other racial minority) men in community colleges and its impact on the career-decision making process. SCCT was useful in gaining an understanding of the career decision-making behaviors of African American male students at the case college. Instead of focusing on the physical aspects of gender and race, SCCT considers the psychological and social effects (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). These factors, and how they relate to a career, underscore the importance of the personal and societal responses gender and race might create.
Equally as important is how gender or race influences self-efficacy and outcome expectations related to specific vocational education or career choices. The below figure is a visual representation of SCCT that provides an overview of the framework.

Figure 2. Visual Representation of SCCT

Those from a culture characterized by collective decision-making are more inclined to choose a career path that is consistent with the preferences of their family members and with their self-efficacy beliefs rather than one that necessarily fit their personal interests (Lent et al., 2013). SCCT suggests that self-efficacy and outcome expectations are key predictors of career choice goals and actions, with contextual influences moderating those choices and actions (Albert & Luzzo, 1999). The SCCT model further purports that interests are developed by one’s self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Brown & Lent, 1996; Lent et al., 1994). Thus, an African American man that may be interested in serving others and working in a health-related
field may not go into nursing because of his perception that nursing is not an appropriate occupation for a man. Additionally, he may perceive minimal support from others to enter that occupation, crucial support that might have helped him to overcome that barrier.

Because the self-efficacy of African American men can be influenced by contextual inequities, such as racism, economic disparities, or lower educational attainment, these factors often influence their career choice. Albert and Luzzo (1999) assert that individuals from ethnic minority groups are not afforded an opportunity to make career choices under ideal circumstances. Hence, African American men may notice that representation in certain career fields is limited within their ethnic group. Perceived barriers arise due to their conceptual processes, self-beliefs, standards, and outcome expectations, which, in turn, are internalized. Consequently, they give up on a potentially rewarding career because the environment has offered limited efficacy building opportunities (Albert and Luzzo, 1999).

Research Design

This study was grounded in constructivism throughout the design, data collection, and analysis process. In this exploratory qualitative case study, I aimed to study phenomena within their own contexts and co-construct knowledge with the participants (Yin, 2009). The methodology for this study was an exploratory qualitative case study design. According to Yin (2009), qualitative case study methodology provides tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts. This approach allowed me to explore the participants and the site services by deconstructing and subsequently reconstructing the phenomena. As noted by Cohen et al. (2018), a case study is utilized when a researcher is studying a particular program
and more than one individual; thus, the use of case study was useful to gain insight into each participant’s perspective on CTE program selection at the case site. This study sought to extend the knowledge base of CTE by employing the use of a case study to gain access to the voices of the participants and to garner a deeper understanding of the perceptions African American men pursuing CTE at a community college in Illinois.

**Research Site**

Open Community College (OCC) is situated in an urban community in Illinois. In addition, Open Community College offers a comprehensive cache of CTE programs offered and is a federally designated predominately black institution (PBI). OCC enrolled over two hundred African American men, 30% of whom identified CTE as a pathway of interest. Most of the college’s student population originates from the far southeast side neighborhoods where the educational attainment and the economic means of households have suffered from the historical effects of systemic racism. In general, every neighborhood directly served by OCC endures chronic economic and educational challenges that discourage postsecondary education and upward socio-economic mobility among youth (ISBE, 2020a). Nearly 75% of the students attending OCC receive Pell grants (IPEDS, 2021).

Most importantly, Open Community College offers Associate degrees, certificates, and short-term programs. The college hosts a Center of Excellence that is comprised of CTE programs in Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics (TDL). The TDL pathways include: Automotive and Diesel Technology, a 2-yr Applied Science Degree program; Forklift Operations—a four day certificate program; Commercial Driver’s Licensing (CDL) – a 16-week
certificate program; Supply Chain Management and Logistics (SCML) – a 2-yr Applied Science Degree Program; and Aviation Maintenance and Technology (AMT) – a two semester certificate program.

All CTE programs are open admission and do not require placement testing into college-level English or mathematics. Students are required to apply directly to the College; there is no special application or admission process for CTE programs. The TDL programs are categorized as “second chance friendly” – students that have previously been justice involved are able to enroll and persist in the programs.

**Participant Recruitment**

Purposeful sampling resulted in the identification of a small, specific group of participants to work with. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Criteria for selecting research participants for this study included individuals that were; (a) at least 18 years old or older (b) African American/Black men, (c) currently enrolled in a CTE program at the site. A request was made to the site’s Office of Institutional Research requesting data that was used to initiate targeted emails to potential participants. Two targeted emails were sent to 63 prospective participants enrolled at the research site. In addition, flyers were also prominently located in high-traffic areas throughout the TDL building. Finally, a targeted email was sent to the TDL instructors to improve the likelihood of identifying prospective participants. Nine students responded and seven were selected to participate in the data collection process.
Seven students along with two CTE Advisors participated in the study. Per the qualifications to participate, all participants were 18 years old or older, were men, and were enrolled in a CTE program at the research site. Three out of seven student participants identified as first-generation college students, and all participants were on a need-based scholarship/grant or using some form of financial aid to finance all associated costs of the programs. Two out of seven student participants identified as not being financially independent and three indicated that they have dependents. All participants were enrolled in a transportation, distribution, and logistics (TDL) program. Table 1 presented a detailed description of the participants.

Data Collection

First, I conducted one round of seven 45-minute, semi-structured student interviews. Semi-structured interviews are particularly well suited for case study research because they allow for open-ended responses from participants for more in-depth information and encourage two-way communication (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The one round, semi-structured interviews allowed the flexibility to ask the sixteen pre-identified questions and sub-questions while allowing space to prompt and probe deeper into the given situation. The interview questions centered on self-efficacy, career outcome expectations, race/culture and support and were
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Total Interview Length</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>First in College</th>
<th>Dependents</th>
<th>Financially Independent</th>
<th>Financial Aid</th>
<th>Academic Major</th>
<th>College Advisor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>51 min</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Cannabis</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>47 min</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Supply Chain</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>47 min</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>CDL</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>52 min</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Diesel Tech</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earl</td>
<td>40 min</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>CDL</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>33 min</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Forklift/Welding</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>43 min</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Forklift/SCML</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>32 min</td>
<td>W</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issa</td>
<td>37 min</td>
<td>W</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Y</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: "Y" = Yes, "No" = No. "Total Interview Length" summarizes cumulative interview time (in minutes).*
constructed according to the guiding research questions. Also, intentional measures were taken to ensure that bias did not compromise the integrity of the study. Participants were the dominant voices as they talked about their experiences from their point of view (Mehra, 2002). The interview protocol is presented in Appendix E.

Furthermore, participant confidentiality was a high priority; therefore, participants were assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Interviews were conducted via zoom and audio recorded and transcribed using the same platform. Interviews were scheduled for an hour; the average length of time for the interviews was 45 minutes. In addition, transcripts were reviewed and matched to the audio file to check accuracy. Due to COVID, participants had the option to conduct interviews virtually or in person. All participants elected to interview virtually. Therefore, the absence of the opportunity to conduct in-person interviews may have contributed to the researcher missing non-verbal cues, due to some participants’ cameras being off and not being able to build the rapport needed to deeply engage African American me. Foremost, trustworthiness and validity were established via member checking.

In addition to the seven student participant interviews, two College Advisors participated in a 30-minute zoom recorded semi-structured interviews and followed the same process as the student participants. Interviews with Advisors sought to understand their role, the resources and support services available to CTE students, and whether they leverage these resources as a part of the pathway decision-making process. Interview questions centered around CTE caseloads, the advising approach to appropriately advise this population, most common barriers faced, and supports CTE student’s use. The interview protocol is presented in Appendix B.
Advisors require CTE students to complete two documents to aid in identifying or determining a suitable career pathway match. Along with Advisor interviews, the student education plan worksheets and the career inventory worksheet were reviewed. The documents provide data on career pathway at enrollment and help students with identifying the right coursework for pathway completion. No data was collected from these documents because they were not required for participants to complete during remote advising sessions during the pandemic.

Data Analysis

A general inductive research approach to data analysis was employed to help identify concepts, ideas, themes, and categories to help organize and interpret the data (Given, 2008). The approach allowed findings to surface from recurrent and meaningful themes represented in the interviews, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies (Thomas, 2006). Moreover, specific attention was given to the coding technique based on the technique’s alignment with a constructivist approach. The interviews were transcribed using the Zoom transcription feature. The researcher conducted several rounds of coding to ensure validity and accuracy of the study.

The primary data pass began with open coding – Level 1. This allowed for an initial interpretive process to categorize data at the onset of analysis. In addition, the compiled words and phrases from Level 1 were aggregated into analogous themes that highlight the connectiveness of the codes; thus level 2 coding. From the level 2 codes, broad – overarching themes emerged, Level 3 coding. Thus, each theme was defined or given a description and
mapped to the research questions. Establishing pre-identified themes and codes was avoided to mitigate the introduction of biases and assumptions into the analysis. The coding and theme process can be found in Appendix I.

Two documents were reviewed as a part of this study: the student education plan worksheets housed within the student information system (SIS) and the student intent form located in Appendix H. Initially, the documents were slated to be reviewed to compare intended educational goals upon admission into the college against the actual pathway the participant was pursuing. Study participants entered their pathways during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Advisors did not complete these documents for many students due to limited virtual services being offered at the time. The researcher reviewed the documents to better understand the tools used to guide CTE student pathway choice. Recommendations to improve the usefulness of the documents are discussed in the findings.

Findings

I analyzed and synthesized the data collected from semi-structured interviews. The participants discussed internal and external factors that impacted their decision to pursue a CTE pathway and further shared how and what supports they used along the way. The group of themes document how their decision-making process was influenced by their self-efficacy and outcome expectations. The responses are grouped into the following themes: “Life Happens” – Reflection on Lived Experiences; The Career Outcome Expectation: Financial Freedom; Social Networks Matter; and Race and Culture
Theme #1 – “Life Happens” Reflection on Lived Experiences

The first overarching theme that emerged is that the lived experiences of participants had a significant impact on CTE pathway pursuit. Participants’ past and current experiences were the fuel that drove them to select a pathway to success. All seven African American men expressed that they have endured struggles and challenges throughout their lifetimes. In addition, they indicated they experienced challenges, such as being low-income, living in poverty, working dead-end jobs, or previously flunking out of college. Six out of seven participants were over twenty-five years old; most participants have adult children who attended college; one participant was justice involved; two participants previously attended a four-year university; one has a bachelor's degree. Participants had already explored specific paths that did not lead to a desired status or economic outcome. Thus, entry into the CTE pathway later in life allowed them the opportunity to choose a new path armed with real world experience based on lessons learned.

Six of the seven participants identified the COVID-19 pandemic as a life experience that played a role in their decision to pursue a CTE pathway at OCC. Participants spoke openly about losing family and friends noting that “life is short” and the importance of seizing the opportunity to “do something you love” before it’s too late. Participants used the pandemic as an opportunity to upskill by enrolling in CTE programs that are in demand. One student referred to the programs offered at OCC as “pandemic proof”. Earl, a 49-year-old, CDL student, shared:

I have been wanting to get my CDL for a long time. When COVID hit I heard about this shortage of truck drivers all on the news and how the aging drivers were retiring. I was working as a package handler at a hotel for like ten years but got let go due to shipments being backed up due to the pandemic. I’m like I was waiting on packages that couldn’t get here cause ain’t no drivers. A lightbulb went off and I said I’m going to finally go get my CDL, it’s like a pandemic proof job.
Furthermore, the backgrounds of participants varied greatly. Most participants were not first-generation college students (FGCS). Also, participants had at least one parent who attended college. Several had children that were in or had attended college. Many participants expressed that they did not fit the stereotypical profile of a non-FGCS, often referring to how they should be much further ahead in life than their parents. In examining socioeconomic status (SES), family income, parent’s education, and the prestige or perceived prestige of parent’s jobs is looked at. Since most participants are not FGCS and have parents who make a livable wage, they established a self-imposed expectation that they would be successful.

CTE has been associated with low performing students and has often been a dumping ground for students who are not considered as “college material,” which often meant low-income students and students of color (Gantt, 2010). This was not the case for participants of this study. Most of the participants shared that they were “good students” academically and grew up in a traditional household but admittedly made bad choices early on in life and now wanted to course correct. Fred, a nineteen-year-old CTE student, attended a vocational high school and knew that upon graduation he wanted to attend a community college where he could take up forklift and continue his studies in welding:

I believe experiencing CTE in high school broadened my perspective on higher education in general. My teachers told me about all the opportunities, and I saw them doing well for themselves. I like working with my hands and welding is really fun. When I graduate, I won’t have a problem finding a job; I feel like I am two steps ahead of my friends who went off to universities. CTE pathways should be promoted as a first choice for kids right out of high school. CTE doesn’t have to be a second option after a failed attempt at a traditional track.

Although Fred is not as tenured as his peers, the positive experience he had in his high school CTE program motivated him to pursue a CTE pathway at OCC.
Theme #2 – The Career Outcome Expectation: Financial Freedom

Outcome expectations are defined as one’s beliefs in the results of an action (Bandura, 1997). More specifically, vocational/career outcome expectations are considered as the perceived consequences of performing academic and career behaviors that would be useful to subsequent career options and decisions (Betz & Voyten, 1997). This finding directly answers Research Question One and indicates that outcome expectations played a role in participants’ decision to pursue a CTE pathway. The participants identified their desire to quickly increase their economic mobility, improve their socioeconomic status (SES), and their desire to earn a credential of economic value, as factors that impacted their decision to pursue a CTE pathway. When asked what the reasons were for attending OCC, most students commented that they are motivated to earn more money and make a better life for themselves and their families. Therefore, participants viewed the pursuit of a CTE program as the pathway to financial freedom.

Socioeconomic Status

Adam, a 30-year-old cannabis operations student, shared that his motivation to obtain his certificate comes from his family’s struggling most of his life. Coming from a low-income single-parent household, he saw how limited resources promoted hardship, thus, he recognized that completing the cannabis certificate could be his ticket to the middle-class. Moreover, he looked forward to earning money so he could end the cycle of being low-income and to earn a living wage that could support not just himself but also his family. Through a recent event, the
reminder of the importance of financial stability for not only for oneself but for others was a rude awakening for Adam:

My friend was killed a few months back. I went to his mom’s house to send my condolences and an argument ensued between her and my friend’s father about how and who was going to pay for the funeral. They landed on creating a GoFundMe page. That’s sad. I am in this program because that’s not how I am trying to go out. I want my family to be in a better position than where we are right now so that financing a funeral is not their concern. Knowing how hard I worked to provide for them is what I want them to remember.

Based on the personal reflections of the participants, by pursuing a CTE pathway, they are moving in the right direction to improve their socioeconomic status. The men recognize that a high school education is not enough; in order to provide for themselves or others, a post-secondary education is required in order to end the cycle of low-income status.

**Economic Mobility**

Economic mobility describes how one's economic well-being changes over time. All participants perceived a CTE career as economically rewarding. Most participants indicated that they were financially independent but all of them indicated that they chose the CTE pathway they were in because they had a desire to earn or needed more money. The expectation of better pay once students complete their program of study stimulated their decision to pursue a CTE pathway. When asked why he chose OCC, Dave, a Diesel Tech student, was eager to share:

I have been interested in fixing cars since I was a kid. My uncle is a mechanic. I have the potential to make more money as a tech. Techs diagnose the problem, that’s where the money is. I worked at an auto shop before and their [the mechanics] hands stay dirty. I want to know why the truck broke down and not really fix it. I decided to go back to school and chose OCC (be)cause I knew completing this program would be the only way I could make more money. I just need that piece of paper.
Additionally, many participants spoke openly about the debt family and friends amassed while attending and graduating from college, only to be working to “make ends meet.” This reality was one reason some participants did not immediately go to college out of high school. Bill, a 49-year-old supply chain student, attended NIU right out of high school; he was put on probation because he “prioritized partying over academics”, accumulated past due debt, and eventually just gave up on the traditional route to a degree. Bill shared:

I have had so many jobs, juggling three at a time at one point. I was trying to prove to my family that even though I dropped out, I could still find my place in society; that I could still be successful. It has not happened yet but when I complete my program, my current job has a management position waiting on me. This program will help increase my earning potential.

Furthermore, participants expressed their desire to gain and maintain more financial security for themselves and family. Many cited the prospect of building generational wealth as one of the reasons for pursuing a CTE program. Intergenerational economic mobility—the likelihood that children achieve a higher standard of living than the household in which they were raised, was a common theme of the participants with younger children. Bill talked about working in the supply chain industry for a number of years but that he always desired to move up to a managerial role. Not having a degree was an impediment to his progression. Bill lamented:

I started at NIU and found myself on academic probation after a couple of semesters. I came back home and got my forklift certificate and then started working in supply chain. I have been working in supply chain for a while. I am tired of doing the hard labor but without a certificate or degree, I can’t get the managerial job I’m shooting for in supply chain and I can’t earn the money I know I should be making. I decided to come to OCC to get my supply chain degree which will ultimately increase my earning potential.

Every participant in the study qualified for and used some form of financial aid to pay for their programs. Identifying funds to enroll was a non-factor as most participants were Pell/Map eligible. Additionally, because CTE pathways are short-term programs that lead to employment,
some of the participants qualified for OCC’s Future Ready and Workforce Equity Initiative funding. Conversely, participants seemed highly motivated to find opportunities to earn money while pursuing their degree or certificate. Participants shared that they felt that they made the best decision because the CTE pathways are short-term yet having to juggle work and attending class was not easy. Specifically, two participants suggested that OCC offer paid internships; students that are struggling financially could gain practical experience and earn a living wage while pursuing their pathway. Dave expressed frustration over his financial situation throughout the interview. Participants were offered a $25 gift card as an incentive to participate in the study. Dave asked if he could request a gas card because he did not have money for gas to get to and from work and school.

Additionally, participants consistently expressed that a motivating next step for their future was to become an entrepreneur. They spoke of economic mobility in terms of moving their own families and communities towards becoming “economically healthy” and wanting to contribute in a significant way. Six out of seven of the participants indicated that they lived near OCC and expressed their dissatisfaction with the disinvestment of the community in which they live, and OCC is located. Despite a number of obstacles compounded by the non-traditional paths most of the participants took to get to OCC, participants were extremely optimistic about their futures and the impact completing a CTE program would have on their economic mobility.

Earning Credentials of Economic Value

Socio-demographic variables, such as race/ethnicity, culture, and gender, are thought to have an influence on career outcomes because of overall learning experiences and existing
opportunity structures (Lent et al., 1994). Carl, a 32-year-old CDL student, felt that he should be at a specific economic status and earning a CTE certificate would help to obtain that goal. Carl explained:

I have a bachelor’s degree – it is in Music, here I am, unemployed at 32 years old. I thought at age thirty I would be earning at least $50,000, I’m not even close. My wife has her PhD, she makes a decent salary but as the man of the house, I should be making an even better salary than her. I jumped at the opportunity to participate in this study not just because I wanted to share my story but the $25 gift card you are offering is going to buy diapers for my child. I am embarrassed as a man to admit that, but it’s my reality today. Getting the CDL (Commercial Driver's License) is priceless – it's going to change my life.

Participants shared that when identifying an educational pathway there was intentionality around choosing a program that could be feasibly completed in short but with long term impact. There was an emphasis on the need to feel a sense of accomplishment by earning a certificate; not for the sake of completing but completing something that could change their economic status and increase their economic mobility.

Furthermore, participants indicated that they selected OCC because they were able to make small milestone accomplishments rather than having to bite off more than they could chew. An example provided by Fred was the Forklift Operator Certificate program that can be completed in four days. Students walk away with a credential of economic value – they are immediately employable and can earn a living wage. Students can gain practical industry experience with the certificate and return to take the next educational step if they choose, completing a degree in Supply Chain Management.
Theme #3 - Social Networks Matter

A social network is defined as a set of personal relationships which individuals rely on for resources, information, advice, and help (Bers & Schuetz, 2014). Social networks consistently emerged as a theme amongst all participants. Family was identified as being critical sources of support for CTE students as a part of the decision-making process and instructors and peers were identified as being the support system participants leveraged once enrolled in the program.

It Takes a Village

Interview question two asked, “how did your family feel about you going to college?” Overwhelmingly, participants identified family support as a key factor to pursuing a CTE pathway. This recurring theme surfaced as an intrinsic and extrinsic support that influenced the career decision making process. Thus, family support resonated throughout various interview question responses. Six out of seven participants indicated that their families were supportive of their decision to pursue a CTE pathway. Carl shared how excited he was when his mother volunteered to watch his four children until he completed the CDL program. Therefore, the support of the family reaffirmed that they were making the right decision. Participants exhibited high levels of self-efficacy by the confidence they demonstrated in their ability to achieve their goals because of their family’s support.

Greg, a 38-year-old, forklift and supply chain student, was an outlier. He expressed trepidation about sharing his desire to pursue a vocational program out of shame and fear. Greg
temporarily resides in transitional housing; he talked about how important it was that his “temporary family” supported his decision to go to college. Greg shared:

I fell into some tough times – depression and drug use left me homeless. I know it was because my mom passed away and then my brother was killed. I have some college credits and I knew I could make something of myself if I could be somewhere stable. My caseworker here at [sic] told me about Fresh Start at OCC. I applied and was accepted. Folks here have been encouraging and my confidence is improving. I drive a forklift now at [sic] and they are going to promote me when I finish the Supply Chain Program. I believe in me, my “family” believes in me too.

Also, friends were identified as being supportive of the participants' decision to pursue a CTE pathway. Fred’s friends, who he indicated were mostly recent high school graduates, were apprehensive yet supportive. Many of them decided to enroll at OCC as well. He gleamed with pride when sharing:

My friends were like, “man, what about COVID?” and I told them it was not going to be around forever, but we all are going to need a job when we come out of this. I completed my forklift certification in four days, started on Monday done by Thursday afternoon and got hired at [sic] that Friday. My friends were so happy for me. They also realized that if I could do it, so could they, and they did.

Earl was not as quick to share his plan to go to OCC with his friends. He indicated that you must be careful not to fall victim to crabs-in-the-bucket syndrome. He explained:

I didn't share my decision to go to OCC with my friends (be)cause why would they need to know? You can’t share everything with everybody (be)cause everybody ain’t happy for you. My family was cool. My kids are grown but they still ask for money and so does my mama. So of course, they were supportive, if I get a job, we all get a job.

Earl, admittedly, was moved and motivated to enroll when he and his 7-year-old granddaughter were riding together, and he pointed to a big truck and informed her that when he received his license, he would take her for a ride. She giddily replied, “papa, I am proud of you”!
Instructors as Mentors

Research suggests that African American men do not have access to social networks, resources, and lack motivation and self-efficacy, which can make career pathways and possibilities clear and attainable (Bush & Bush, 2005; Mason, 1998; Vasquez et al., 2017). The findings from this study contradict these studies. First of all, participants purport that instructors are accessible and very influential in helping them to navigate their selected pathway and are their first recourse when they encounter issues or need advice. SCCT considers the influence the cultural environment has on career choice, and it places more emphasis on the role mentors play in career exploration and training. Stone and Lewis (2012) assert that career decisions among students are extremely complicated and should be directed by a professional. The advisors that were interviewed indicated that CTE instructors are considered paraprofessionals in advising because they are invited to advisor in-service training each semester to ensure they are equipped with key information to support students. Pre-enrollment connections to instructors had an impact on decision-making for one participant. Carl shared:

I am driving Uber right now. I actually really like it. I told one of my friends, a truck driver, about how much I like driving and he suggested I get CDL. I started researching the employment opportunities and was like, wow...I did not know truck drivers make that much money. I came to visit the college for a CTE info session and met with one of the CDL teachers. He was so cool and explained everything I needed to know, especially the earning potential, I applied to OCC that very same day.

The most significant impact where instructors played a role was in their capacity to serve as critical in-class resources. Overwhelmingly, participants highlighted how influential, motivating, and supportive their instructors were. According to Greg:

I felt comfortable sharing my living situation with Mr. [sic]. I didn’t want him to think I was a bad student. He totally understood and even had recommendations for transitional
housing options closer to the college. The guys look up to him because he has similar experiences as us and I swear this man knows everything about OCC and the industry.

“A Bond Between Brothers”

Interview question number fourteen explained that CTE pathways at OCC are cohort-based (groups of students taking the same courses together from time of enrollment until completion). Also, it questioned if the cohort model was a factor in participants’ decision to pursue a CTE pathway. All participants indicated that this instructional model had no bearing on their decision. Participants admitted they were not familiar with the term. Once the term was defined, participants indicated that although the cohort model did not influence their decision to pursue a CTE pathway, the cohort construct did aid in creating a “bond between brothers”. Earl shared:

If I did not have these other dudes, I don’t know what I would do. Like, I am disciplined but a few times I was like man, bump this. The theory portion was a lot of reading, I thought I would get in the (CDL) Program, and it would be hands-on right off. What kept me focused was our study groups before class. I might not have made it through had I not bonded with those brothers.

Furthermore, participants overwhelmingly described their social network of peers, specifically their cohort peers, as critical to their persistence through the program. Students shared that they did not feel alienated or ostracized and attributed this to most of their cohort peers being African American.
Two CTE advisor participants were interviewed and shared their perspectives about the academic support CTE students receive in making educational and career choices and how students obtain this information. Results demonstrate a variance in the perspectives of the student participants and Advisors. Findings from student interviews overwhelmingly suggest that participants do not consistently utilize advising services and that they rely heavily on their instructors for advice and mentorship and cohort classmates for support. One student knew their advisor by name and indicated she helped him develop an educational plan that mapped out his entire pathway. The other students indicated that they had not connected with an Advisor, nor had they utilized any of the college's other resources to assist with career decision making.

However, advisors told a different story. Issa noted that she has a caseload of close to 100 CTE students and that she enjoys hearing about the paths the students took before enrolling at OCC because their stories inform how she can best support them. Issa, a female advisor, asserted:

CTE students are very self-directed. They come with “life” issues. I have to go above and beyond to get them to connect - emails, phone calls, direct messages to their portal. If they meet with me, I immediately talk to them about career planning and other college resources. I usually have a short window of time with them, so I try to keep our sessions short and to the point. My African American men rarely make their appointments – they come for class and leave.

Hope, also a female advisor, was asked specifically about her experiences advising and providing support to African American men CTE students. She indicated that African American men were most of her caseload, thus, she supported them like her non-CTE students. However, she did express that the level and type of support varies based on the individual need of each student.
Another major finding that evolved from interviews with student participants is that race and culture played a role in their decision to pursue a CTE pathway. Participants spoke about how disconnected they felt in high school coupled with the pressure to contribute more significantly to their households. Consequently, after high school, most took “dead end” jobs to make ends meet. Additionally, two participants referenced their experience with racism at institutions they previously attended therefore, they intentionally explored opportunities at OCC because they believed the cultural barriers they encountered at the other institutions would not be prevalent at their neighborhood community college. Participants were asked about careers the men in their family pursued. Three of the seven participants have family members working in vocational fields. Two participants shared that at least one family member experienced racism on the job. Both participants indicated that their family’s experience had an underlying impact on their decision to pursue a CTE pathway. having men, close family members who work directly in CTE fields or in trades was not a deterrent, participants indicated that this allowed them to see themselves pursuing CTE as a viable option. Furthermore, participants expressed their concern about encountering discrimination in their pursuit of career opportunities in CTE, particularly in the programs they were pursuing because the programs offered at OCC have been historically dominated by White and Hispanic men. Earl (49, CDL) put things in perspective:

Putting these TDL programs on the southeast side of Chicago is the best thing y’all could have done for Black folks. Most of the CDL programs are on the southwest side or up north. OCC is in the “hood”. Black people feel like this is an option for them. Then, most of the instructors are Black. Other programs I have looked at were too expensive and in neighborhoods that just didn’t work for me.
Participants described the pathways they were pursuing as “traditional, white men’s jobs.” Specifically, Cannabis has inherently been identified as a field that lacks diversity. Adam, a 30-year-old, Cannabis Operations student, commented:

I took up Cannabis because it interests me. Admittedly, I smoke weed and one day I was talking to a friend about how now that it is legal recreationally, there are all types of job opportunities. Black people have been locked up for selling weed and now I can sell it and not be arrested? I was sold. I never wanted to work for “the man” and if I get in and learn the game, I can own my own dispensary. Most of these licenses go to white people, I can change that, I want a fair shot at all that money and becoming an entrepreneur. I know how to move in a room full of vultures.

Lofstrom and Raphael (2016) purport that educational challenges of African American men students begin earlier and eventually limit or remove employment opportunities and can even lead to increased incarceration; this was an unfortunate reality for one participant. Earl (CDL, 49), shared:

I’m an old head and made some bad decisions early on. I’ve been locked up and CDL is second chance friendly, so I knew walking in the door that I wanted to be a CDL driver. It pays good, I can work for myself but that’s going to take some time. A lot of old white men will be retiring because they have had these good, stable truck driving jobs for years. I’m going to have to start off doing over-the-road until I get some experience, save some money, and buy my own truck. Down the road I want to own my own trucking company.

Moreover, participants spoke indirectly to race and culture when they referred back to their lived experiences. They indicated if they knew more about CTE earlier on in their journey, perhaps they would not have had to struggle financially. They spoke to having children early, needing to get a job, and having to be the “man of the house”. Two of the participants self-disclosed that they were raised in a matriarchal-led household and now that they had families it was their personal expectation that they step up because they remember the financial void that was left due to the absence of their father.
Summary of Findings

Research question one (RQ1) findings indicate that participants’ self-efficacy played a role in their decision to pursue a CTE pathway. Lived experiences, the goal to gain financial freedom, and a social network of family and friends were identified as factors that led to participants reason for pursuing a CTE pathway. The participants made intentional decisions to pursue a CTE pathway that they were interested in, they felt passionate about, and one they believed they could be successful. RQI sub-question two findings revealed that race and culture, in an indirect and nuanced way, did have an impact on their CTE pathway decision making process.

Next, research question two (RQ2) focused on the type of support CTE students use or need and how they go about accessing those supports. Social networks of instructors and peers were identified as being critical to CTE decision making and for support once they enrolled in the respective program. Participants did not utilize advisors for assistance with CTE pathway choice nor did they engage this resource once enrolled. Participants noted that their instructors are the primary source for career-related information. Peers and instructors are leveraged for social support. These findings will be discussed, by theme, in the following section. A summary of the findings is found in Table 2.
Table 2
Summary of Findings

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESEARCH QUESTIONS</th>
<th>FINDINGS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1. What are the motivating factors that influence African American men CTE pathway choice?</td>
<td><strong>Lived experiences - CTE a Pathway to Success:</strong> – Current and past situations fuel the students to select a pathway to success. Prior failed attempts at college and dead-end jobs led students to research and/or connect with people working in the field prior to enrolling in a program. Their past experiences informed their decision to pursue a pathway they felt they would be good.</td>
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<td>• Sub-RQ1. What role does self-efficacy play in the CTE pathway decision-making process?</td>
<td><strong>Career Outcome Expectation – Financial Freedom</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Social Networks</strong> - The network of family and friends was positive and supportive.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Intrinsic motivation</strong> – Students were intrinsically motivated and driven by their “purpose” in selecting a CTE pathway. Participants were able to exercise agency within their decision making process. Ex.: Seeking out and obtaining grants/scholarship, work study, and other means to finance their education. Researching the pathway prior to deciding. Pursuing their passion</td>
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Table 2 (continued)

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<th>RESEARCH QUESTIONS</th>
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| • Sub-RQ1. Does culture/race play in African American men students’ views of CTE and their decision to pursue a CTE pathway? | **Race/culture was** a contributing factor that influenced CTE pathway pursuit. Participants felt the need to create opportunities for themselves and others (post program completion) due to the lack of opportunities afforded to them by society.  
  Participants cited racism as a reason for having a negative perception of higher education, particularly at PWI’s. Participants took intentional steps to identify an institution that provided the requisite support to be successful. |
| • Sub-RQ1. What role does outcome expectations play in the CTE pathway decision-making process? | **Career Outcome Expectations**  
  • **Earning a credential of economic value** - Each student interviewee expressed that obtaining a certificate/degree was a goal upon entering the CTE program. Participants desired to complete “something” as a sense of accomplishment  
  • **Economic mobility** – Improving one’s socioeconomic status and the prospect of increasing their current living wage was motivating factor of CTE pathway pursuit |
| RQ2. What academic and social support did participants receive in making educational and career choices? | **Instructors as Mentors** – Students rely on instructors for academic and career information.  
  **Social Network - Peers** - The cohort model implemented within the CTE courses serves as an added system of support. While many students displayed intrinsic motivation in selecting the CTE pathway, the comradery, networking, pseudo advising displayed by the cohort became a significant system of support. |
| • Sub RQ2. How did participants obtain academic and career information?            | **Instructors are key!** – Participants identified instructors as their primary source for career information.  
  **According to Advisors** – CTE students are supported just like other students. However, the advisors express that the level and type of support varies. Many CTE students do not connect with their advisor |
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of African American men pursuing a CTE pathway at an urban community college in Illinois. Employing a constructivist approach, grounded in Social Cognitive Career Theory, the study documents the perspectives of seven African American men pursuing a CTE pathway in order to better understand the career decision-making process of the student and the impact, if any, self-efficacy, career outcome expectations, or race/culture have on CTE pathway selection. Additionally, two CTE Advisors were interviewed to get their perspective on how students utilize college services/resources used in the career decision making process and how they obtained information on available support services.

The data, once analyzed and interpreted, were used to respond to research questions related to social cognitive career theory. Findings suggest that one’s level of self-efficacy and outcome expectations impact career decision making. According to Bandura (2010), self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to establish and execute a course of action required to produce given results. It is closely tied to an individual’s goals, interests, choices, performances, and experiences. For this study, self-efficacy was defined by participants’ feelings about their ability to achieve current and future goals. It was further demonstrated by responses that reflected motivation and confidence about the decision to pursue a CTE pathway. The responses were categorized by keyword descriptors applicable to SCCT. Career outcome expectation refers to one’s perception of a career based on the perceived financial, societal, and self-satisfaction effects (Lent et al., 2013). For the purposes of this study, career outcome expectations are exemplified by participant responses like, “My pathway/career choice will provide the income I
Pursuing this CTE program will allow me to have the lifestyle I desire.” As a result of this study, four themes emerged: Lived Experiences; Career Outcome Expectation: Financial Freedom; Social Networks Matter; and Race and Culture. The findings of this study present an opportunity for educators, scholars, and laypersons to hear the voices of African American men as they navigate the career decision making process and add to a limited body of empirical research on African American men in CTE.

Promoting CTE as a Pathway to Success

When asked why they chose to attend a community college, the majority of students commented that they are motivated to obtain a better life and completing a short-term program at OCC could make that a reality. Study participants viewed higher education as the means to improve their life status. Six of the seven participants talked about the cumulative “life experiences” that influenced their decision to pursue a CTE pathway, specifically citing the COVID-19 pandemic as a recent experience. The youngest participant, Fred, who is 19 years old, did not mention the pandemic in the same context as the other participants. He spoke about missing his senior year in high school due to COVID and wanting to continue his vocational studies at OCC. A recent study conducted by Jemini-Gash and Kadriu (2022), explored the impact the COVID 19 pandemic had on the career decision making process of young people and found that students were unsure about what their future held therefore they decided to stay close to home to attend community colleges.

SCCT posits that environmental variables are thought to promote or restrict choice options for individuals and provide a context for improving self-efficacy and outcome
expectations over time. The six older participants spoke of leveraging their lived experiences to “pursue their passion” while simultaneously increasing earning potential. Early exposure to CTE pathways in a student’s academic career could improve their ability to pursue their passion sooner and without the challenges of “life” getting in the way. Practitioners and administrators must continue to increase dual credit and dual enrollment opportunities in CTE. Secondary teachers and counselors must help to dispel the negative connotation associated with CTE and community colleges. This can be countered with student stories of success and data on the outcomes and earning potential of those completing CTE programs. Creating CTE pipelines from high school to community college not only addresses the critical skills shortage within the workforce but can also improve the economic mobility of students earlier in life.

Furthermore, findings reveal that the age of participants may have had some influence on the emergence of this theme. Community College students are inherently non-traditional aged students (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Wood and Palmer, 2015); six of the participants were 26 years of age or older. In a study conducted by Ferry, Fouad and Smith (2000), they found that age was a significant determinant of career-related choice behavior. Also, age was not explored as a part of this study; however, investigating whether age and other sociodemographic variables influence African American men’s decision to pursue a CTE pathway at a community college could be useful to practitioners and policy makers alike.

**CTE as a Vehicle to Social and Economic Mobility**

An early introduction to CTE can afford academia an opportunity to positively influence the career decision making process of African American men thus impacting their long-term
earning potential. Research suggests that choice of a college major has at least some effect on economic outcomes for students (Stone & Lewis, 2012). SCCT purports that individual career paths are developed based on one's interests and feelings about their capabilities and on outcomes based on their abilities to be successful in their career choice (Lent, 2005). Participants indicated they felt confident they could successfully complete their short-term program particularly considering the expected return on their investment.

The stigma associated with CTE and community colleges has interrupted the opportunity for African American men to explore CTE as a viable career path (Gauthier, 2020; Shucker, 2013). There is a disparity that exists between African Americans who enroll in college and subsequently complete as compared to their counterparts. Most discouraging are the completion rates of African American male students at two-year colleges (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2019). Just over one-third of first-year students at these colleges in 2012 completed a credential within six years, with nearly half of these students no longer enrolled (Shapiro et al., 2017). Research identifies limited financial resources, the perceived deteriorating “value” of higher education, and inadequate support, as major contributors to the abysmal success rates of African American men in community colleges (Anumba, 2015; Branch, 2017; Bush & Bush, 2005).

Underemployment and unemployment are a rising problem for college graduates (Carnevale et al., 2010). Thus, it is important for students to consider the return on investment of the certificate or degree they decide to pursue. CTE fields of study are workforce focused, more affordable than most four-year degrees, and many can be completed in a year or less time (Fletcher, 2013). Thus, CTE certificate and degree program enrollment and completion can be
improved if students are assured that their credentials are of value. Completing a credential of economic value resonated with the participants. This phenomenon, as expressed by participants, is a result of the time and commitment it takes to complete a degree. Community College students are of non-traditional age and juggle work, family, and school. Enrolling in and persisting through a two-year program may sound attainable as compared to attending a four-year university, but community college students come with a host of challenges that make persistence arduous (Gantt, 2010; Wood & Williams, 2013).

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) encourages the completion of a “recognized postsecondary credential”—a term that broadened the possibilities for training and support—because credentials have become imperative in order to enter the middle class (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014, p. 2). Community colleges can significantly contribute to shrinking the attainment gap between African American men and other races, if they prioritize the development of relevant, short-term, stackable, and industry-recognized credentials.

Participants lamented on their current socioeconomic status and the desire to improve their “place in society.” Looking at where they came from, their current status, and projecting where they could see themselves in the future was noted as a motivating factor participants identified for pursuing a CTE program at OCC. Additionally, the participants' socioeconomic status, though not ideal, served as an inspiration for a better future. They were intrinsically motivated and driven by their desire to change their socioeconomic status. Furthermore, participants demonstrated the ability to navigate the college and career search process, yet most had not attempted to enroll in, or complete college before, finding themselves in a lower
socioeconomic status than their parents and lower than they desired to be. Socioeconomic status (SES) is a cumulative measure of a person’s education, income, and occupation which establishes one’s economic access to resources and social position in relation to others (Diemer et al., 2013). Research suggests that SES, when correlated to social capital, has a direct impact on self-efficacy (Lent & Brown, 2002; Han et al., 2014).

All participants appeared to perceive a career in their respective pathway as economically very rewarding. Findings revealed that participants’ motivation and decision to pursue a CTE program reflected their desire to improve their financial situation. Nineteen year-old participant, Fred, who lives at home with his parents, indicated that earning money right away was not his primary motivation for pursuing a CTE program; he had attended a vocational high school and he felt like it was the next natural step up his career ladder. In addition, the other participants selected a CTE pathway that they found interesting and could improve their economic mobility. They spoke about the intentional steps that were taken to select a program that could lead to immediate employment and an increase in income.

Every participant was eligible for and utilized a form of financial aid to cover the cost of attendance. Hagedorn et al. (2007) insist that financial support should not be limited to traditional programs; sufficient allocations must be prioritized for vocational and occupational programs. The students exerted the agency and possessed the intrinsic motivation to identify a way to enroll. The impediment that prevails is the impact not having adequate finances has on persistence (Davis et al., 2013). Finally, participants shared that they felt that they made the best decision because their CTE pathways are short term yet still having to juggle work and attending class for that short amount of time made persistence a tough financial decision. This type of
financial stress can discourage students from enrolling. Moore et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study on the impact financial stress has on college students’ well-being and found that financial stress impedes one's ability to succeed academically.

Six of the participants work full time but all participants shared their desire to pursue relevant work-based employment opportunities while enrolled in their program. Colleges must be diligent in forging relationships and partnerships with workforce and industry to connect CTE students to paid work-based learning (WBL) opportunities. Research suggests that work-based learning opportunities have a far greater impact on career development, career, exploration and cultural capital if it is strategically integrated into a CTE program (Myer, 2016). As a result, institutions must be conscious of integrating WBL into the curriculum without increasing the program length. Students select CTE pathways because these programs are short term, lengthening the program could discourage pursuit.

A study conducted by Wickersham (2020) supports the finding of the importance improving economic mobility has on the career decision making process. He used The College Pathway (Re)Selection Model Among Beginning 2-Year College Students to examine the underlying process that drives 2-year college students into one or more pathways as they navigate higher education. The results found that community college students described the role of payoff of completion, fit, flexibility, ease of transfer, and improved economic mobility as key considerations in their decision-making process (Wickersham, 2020). Consequently, institutions must ensure that short term programs are relevant, in demand, and can help increase the economic mobility of students.
Who are Members of CTE Student’s Social Network?

Social networks emerged as a theme that resonated with all participants, specifically speaking to the influence the support family had on the decision to pursue their CTE pathway. Barbatis (2010) and Cerven (2013) emphasize the impact the support of family and friends have on helping students manage work, school, and “life” in general. Cuyjet (2006) and Hampton (2002) asserted that family serves as a key source of support particularly for African American male college students. They posited that when African American families create a positive identity for African American male students, students develop a sense of agency and, in turn, can determine their place in academia.

Thus, the finding affirms that contextual factors, like family support, influence the career decision-making process. SCCT posits that those from a culture characterized by collective decision-making are more inclined to choose a career path that is consistent with the preferences of their family members and with their self-efficacy beliefs rather than one that necessarily fit their personal interests (Lent et al, 2013). Participants from this study identified both family support and personal interest as contributing to their decision to pursue a CTE pathway. Additionally, participants noted that they had friends or family who have worked in vocational fields; thus, they saw it as a viable option for them to pursue. With respect to research question two, social networks (Academic-instructors/peers) emerged as a key support once students enrolled but did not impact their decision to pursue a CTE pathway.
Social

Related studies have yielded comparable results as this study regarding the impact of having the support of family and its influence on career decision making. Kocak et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study on the role family influence had on career-decision making self-efficacy (CDSE) and found that family had a positive impact on career decision making. Participants in the aforementioned study were white men and women from a 4-year institution. A phenomenological study of South African university STEM students, conducted by Abe and Chikoko (2020), found that all participants indicated that family influence and support played a significant role in career decision making. In addition, a more closely related study conducted by Hairston (2000) explored how parents influenced African American students' decisions to prepare for vocational teaching careers. The study found that family influence was a contributing factor to student career choice. These studies underscore that regardless of race/ethnicity, family support is critical to the career decision making process.

Academic

Research suggests that a critical component to African American men’s persistence and success in college is their ability to develop bonds and mentoring relationships with faculty that look like them (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Manzoni & Streib, 2019; Tinto, 2012). Cooper and Hawkins (2012) noted that African American men can benefit from academic support networks that engage college faculty. Positive student and faculty relationships are critical to the success of African American men (Billie & Carter, 2012). The CTE instructors of the participants are
predominately African American; there is one White, full time Supply Chain and Logistics faculty member. Tinto (1993) expressed that students of color need to have opportunities to be among faculty and staff who look like them. Students emphasized their reliance on their instructors for career advice and connections to potential employers. Therefore, it is important for colleges, particularly community colleges, where there are concentrated populations of African American men, to continue to have diverse representation amongst faculty and ensure that they are trained to support CTE students who inherently do not have the time to seek support resources outside the classroom.

Cohorts create a real sense of community and belonging amongst students, faculty, and staff, which helps retain students (Dixon et al., 2011). Participants collectively became a “community of learners” and developed critical friendships and formal networks of support. Cohort communities encourage academic and social engagement and serves as a means of invaluable support. Also, the participants noted that their peers motivate and encourage each other to persist. Formal networks like cohorts encourage peer mentoring relationships which have been found to build confidence, provide guidance, and connect African American men to resources critical to their success (Inzer and Crawford, 2005; Wiley, 1989).

Also, participants did not identify the support of their Advisors as a significant studentsupport. This contradicts Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) contention that regardless of institutional type or study body composition, academic advising has a major impact on student persistence. Furthermore, research suggests that African American men lack the agency to self-advocate and voluntarily seek out resources such as advising services (Flowers, 2006). Advisors at OCC are all women, and participants for this study are all men. Using advising services can be
a daunting experience for African American men which can be the result of them not being exposed to staff who represent intersections of race, gender, and identity (Deil-Amen, 2011). Consequently, the students may see the women advisors as unable to empathize with their lived experiences as African American men and do not seek their assistance. Institutions must be conscientious of organizational diversity in key student support departments to ensure all students feel included. Future research on advisor composition and advising practices which reflect the broader system to support African American men is recommended in order to further investigate the requisite support needed to support and retain this population.

The advisors and the students cite outside responsibilities, such as tending to family and working full time as reasons why they rarely made advising appointments. These reasons are not unique to community college CTE students and is most likely attributed to the participants being non-traditional age. Six of the seven participants fall into the category of “non-traditional” meaning a significant amount of time has lapsed from high school to college, they are over 22 years old, or they work and/or have a family to support (Bers and Schuetz, 2014). Also, advisors assert that CTE students miss being connected to key services and supports like CTE specific scholarships and employment opportunities when they fail to meet with them. The students consider their instructors a pseudo-advisor. As a result, advisors conduct in-service training with instructors to equip them with valuable information to better support their students.
It is important to note that early theorists did not consider the unique circumstances of racism that Black men face as they navigate post-secondary institutions. The social and cultural underpinnings of career and technical education versus a more liberal arts education are deeply rooted in the post-enslavement quest for equality (Ball, 2015). Unfortunately, academic persistence and completion for African American college students, is often interrupted by their inability to escape societal discrimination. Research studies prove that structural inequality has systematically disenfranchised African Americans pursuing post-secondary education (Arrington, 2015; Ball, 2015).

Accordingly, Lent et al. (1994) posited that race/ethnicity, culture, and gender, are believed to have an impact on career decision making and outcomes due to general learning experiences and existing opportunity structures. The findings of this study support this contention as participants frequently spoke about a long-standing desire to pursue CTE yet they did not feel as if their former educational experiences had supported or prepared them to take advantage of these opportunities. The incapacitating effects of racism and sexism have inherently influenced African American men to pursue careers that are “suited” for their race (Valencia, 2010). Unfortunately, these careers are not financially rewarding. Additionally, the history of deficit thinking in education has used racial prejudice to keep low-income, students of color, in their place (Valencia, 2010). Educators must be aware of the assumptions and implicit bias they possess about the race and ethnicity of their students which can result in negative outcomes for African American students (Takaki, 2008).
Historically, African American students have been more likely to experience microaggressions and censoring from peers while in college (Bush and Bush, 2005; Flowers, 2006). Additionally, extant literature and research conducted largely at PWI’s finds that African American men face racism and oppression in college more than any other race or ethnicity (E. Bush & Bush, 2010; Von Robertson & Chaney, 2015). OCC is a federally designated predominately Black institution (PBI) with over 70% of students being African American; social and cultural barriers that exist at PWI’s were not prevalent at the study site. The institutional context of OCC buffered the racism that is inherently experienced by African American men attending PWI’s. Additionally, OCC provides resources that speak to and support the unique needs of low-income students such as a food pantry, open educational resources (OER’s), and a Career Closet – a space where students can borrow job interview appropriate attire. These culturally and socially relevant services create a safe and welcoming environment for students of color.

In response to interview question number one about why student participants chose to attend a community college, they indicated that they selected a community college because they would not have the barriers they would experience at big universities. A number of studies (Aragon et al, 2013; Bragg & Durham, 2012; Castellano et al., 2012) indicate a pattern of cultural barriers African American men encounter in higher education and more specifically, at community colleges. These studies reveal the social and educational "harm" African American men encounter within a higher education context. It is the responsibility of higher education professionals and policymakers to educate and invest in programs, resources, and services that support African American men in their pursuit of CTE pathways.
Furthermore, SCCT posits that “people are more likely to implement their career choices if they perceive that their preferred options will be accompanied by minimal barriers and ample supports within the surrounding environment” (Lent, 2005, pg. 120). Thus, it can be speculated that the cultural and social barriers that African American men face at predominately white institutions are not experienced at PBI’s. Participants indicated that the faculty and staff at OCC “look like them”. Consequently, the participants were able to build rapport that encouraged a sense of belonging within their cohorts. Research suggests that student persistence is increased when students have consistent access to staff and students that are like them (Deil-Amen, 2011). Participants were able to thrive and feel supported because they were the dominant culture in the classroom and not made to feel as if they were intellectually inferior compared to their white counterparts who have been viewed as intellectually superior (Takaki, 2008).

Results from several studies (Aragon et al, 2013; Bragg & Durham, 2012; Castellano et al., 2012) demonstrate that intentional steps toward improving racial equity can aid in improving African American men’s access to and participation in CTE programs. Improving access and participation precipitates improved academic and workforce outcomes, thus narrowing the substantial opportunity gaps that exist along racial lines. Therefore, further research on the experiences of African American men at community colleges and identifying ways to best support them is critical in order to improve retention, persistence and completion rates of students.
Policy Considerations

Thus, this study underscores the need to strengthen CTE pipeline partnerships between high schools and community colleges to encourage early pursuit of these pathways. Across the state of Illinois, there are over 170,000 community college students enrolled in CTE programs (Association for Career & Technical Education (ACTE), 2016). The ACTE (2016) reports that, 12.9% of Illinois CTE students are Black and over half are men. Consequently, the state of Illinois is poised to make a significant impact on filling the skills gap that exists if there is intentionality around progressive CTE reform. Current policy on CTE in Illinois centers on student preparedness and success at the secondary level with a focus on STEM. However, policy makers must broaden the scope and focus attention on all vocational disciplines.

Special attention should be paid to those industries that are expected to face a shortage of qualified workers for vacant positions due to mass retirements, the “great resignation,” and on the ageing workforce. The direst need is for employers who need workers with more than a high school education, but less than a bachelor’s degree. Thus, there is a significant gap between the workforce demands and the pool of qualified, low-income students. Hence, community colleges play a critical role in filling the skills gap. Therefore, educators must continue to dispel the stigma associated with CTE pathway pursuit and community college attendance.

A study conducted by Fletcher and Zirkle (2009) revealed that the Perkins Act of 1990 was not meeting the goal of ensuring students enrolled in CTE programs earned a post-secondary degree. The study did show that post-secondary earnings of students enrolled in CTE programs were greater than those of students enrolled in other programs. In Illinois, 80% of jobs within the state require some form of postsecondary training yet only 41% of adults have attained industry
credentials or earned postsecondary degrees (Advance Illinois, 2017). In July of 2020, the ISBE and the ICCB created a joint State Plan Illinois for the administration of the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act - Perkins V. The vision and mission of the plan is centered around developing high quality pathways that promote student success. Developing metrics to track progress of the plan objectives is critical to CTE reform in Illinois. The federal legislation regulates CTE pertaining to the Carl Perkins legislation and related CTE funding, yet very few states have conducted outcomes studies, thus “It may be difficult for policy makers, educators, and teachers to see how CTE courses contribute to the goals of the legislation” (Blowe & Price, 2012, p. 2).

State legislators must continue to prioritize funding CTE to encourage and support enrollment of African American men into CTE pathways. Participants identified that they were able to enroll in the CTE program due to special funding, specifically the Workforce Equity Initiative grant through ICCB and supported by the Illinois Black Caucus. In addition, increases in MAP/Pell must be prioritized to help defer the rising cost of tuition. Lastly, institutions must develop CTE certificate programs that are the requisite credit hours to qualify them to be covered by Title IV funds so that students are not forced to rely on loans. Historically, first generation/low income students are affected most from a shift from grants to loans (Seidman, 2005).

Conclusion

The present study drew upon Social Cognitive Career Theory to understand what impacted the decision-making process of African American men pursuing CTE programs at a
community college. SCCT was an appropriate tool for this study because it aided in gaining a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences of African American men who have successfully enrolled in and are pursuing a CTE pathway. In addition, the study explored the interplay between two components of SCCT, self-efficacy and outcome expectations, and their role in the career decision-making process and sought to garner the perspective of the participants regarding whether culture/race influenced their decision to pursue a CTE pathway. Lastly, the study investigated the types of support sought out and used to persist to completion.

Consequently, findings from the study identify lived experiences, financial freedom, social networks, and race and culture had some influence on African American men’s pursuit of a CTE pathway at a community college. Despite a number of personal challenges and because of financial goals they established, participants were intrinsically motivated to pursue a CTE pathway. The majority of participants were over 26 years old, and all were men; future qualitative research may seek to further explore the impact sociodemographic variables like age and gender have on students’ pursuit of CTE. Additionally, participants leveraged CTE faculty to serve in a pseudo-advising capacity and counted on peers within their cohorts for support. Thus, further research on the impact academic and social supports has on African American CTE student persistence could improve outcomes for students.
CHAPTER 3 SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

TRADE VERSUS TRADITIONAL: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF THE PERSPECTIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN STUDENTS PURSUING A CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION PATHWAY AT AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN ILLINOIS

This chapter is a summative account of my dissertation journey from inception to completion of the study, *Trade vs Traditional: "An exploratory case study of the perspectives of African American men’s perspective on pursuing a Career Technical Education (CTE) pathway at an urban community college in Illinois."

The dissertation aimed to add to the limited body of knowledge on the perspectives of African American men regarding their pursuit of a career and technical education program at a community college. The findings contradicted initial expectations regarding why African American men decide to pursue CTE. The research has implications for practitioners in higher education underscoring the need to further explore the career decision-making process earlier in the academic career of African American men. This section presents the dissertation process from a personal perspective and consists of a reflection of the process, application to my own personal practice, and application to research.

Reflection on the Dissertation Process

Throughout the dissertation journey, reflective practice has been critical to my learning process. The methodical process of constantly thinking about how I did things, why I performed
certain tasks, and figuring out what I could do better was paramount to completing the project. Admittedly, this process was exhausting. Working full-time as a college President by day and a devoted doctoral student by night and weekend was no easy task. From the inception, I knew that I wanted to focus my research on African American men who 1) attended a community college and 2) pursued non-liberal arts pathways. Not only would research on this population be relevant to my current role as a higher education administrator, but it also personally resonated with me.

My own brother, an African American man, was encouraged either to attend the local community college or to enlist in a branch of the military. Conversely, it was understood that I would attend a four-year institution. For years, this double standard and the variance in education and career outcome expectations perplexed me. My lived experiences attributed to my assumptions about why African American men attend community college and why they choose academic pathways and subsequently careers that are vocational in nature. The “why” was the driving force behind my research interests, which resulted in my dissertation study: *Trade vs Traditional: “An exploratory case study of African American men student’s perspective on pursuing a Career Technical Education (CTE) pathway at an urban community college in Illinois.”* 

I learned a great deal about the highly nuanced and misunderstood experiences of African American CTE students. My research compelled me to consider the unique experiences and perspectives of the participants and the significance their diverse experiences bring to the learning environment. As rewarding as this experience has been, there are things I would have done differently. I initially fell victim to the proverbial “biting off more than you can chew.”
Conceptually, I had an approach in mind. However, this approach did not translate to a plan. In hindsight, I realize how important developing a personal timeline, at the onset of the program, would have been. Demarking milestones and building deadlines would have mitigated gaps in progress. A timeline was required in HESA 799; I would encourage future students to build a similar timeline during the proposal-writing course.

I also learned not to underestimate the time required for Internal Review Board approval at the case site. NIU approval was received within nine days, whereas CCC IRB approval took a month. It is also important to note, case studies are time consuming; data collection and analysis can be very intensive and long and you can find yourself so immersed in the “case” that you lose track of time. Trying to schedule the interviews was a challenge; CTE students are working adults with families, coordinating a time that fit their schedule was no easy task. I also elected to utilize the zoom platform for audio recording and transcription. Transcription was poor and I was forced to code the participant feedback.

I relied heavily on the institutional researcher to ensure that I was coding correctly. Her extra set of eyes assisted in the validation of my process. Coding took more time than expected – I continually overthought my themes. Consistently reading literature that reported “there is no right or wrong answer to coding/themes” did not help. Admittedly, slowing the process down and taking time to really digest the data helped tremendously. Additionally, the personal nature of hearing the stories and learning about the lived experiences of participants is a very personal and emotional process. My connection to the site left me with a sense of pride because of the impact being made on African American men but I was overwhelmed wading through the transcripts and having to hear stories that were not always positive.
Until embarking upon this process, I did not recognize the influence my positionality had on my research pursuit. At the onset of this journey, I viewed my lived experiences, relative to the research study, from a deficit model lens. I thought it was best that I suppress my views on African American men and my assumptions about why they attended community college or why they pursued vocational programs. As the dissertation process evolved, I realized that the academic and racial context of the study would require me to acknowledge my own experiences and that I should leverage them as an asset. This was particularly helpful for building rapport and making a connection with the participants during the interview process. I was able to navigate the semi-structured interview process without losing my perspective as an outsider.

Conducting case study research was of particular interest because a case study is one of the best ways to stimulate new research. My intention is to continue to explore the research topic; the beauty of a case study is that once it is completed, and the findings are valuable, it can lead to new and advanced research in the field. Due to the lack of qualitative data related to my research study, there is tremendous opportunity to continue the research and to approach the study from different theoretical perspectives. I will reflect on a number of key areas along the journey that were notable reflection points throughout the process.

Connecting Current Literature and Theory to CTE Practices

One of the most critical sections of the dissertation is the literature review. Constructing a reliable and well-organized literature review helped to promote intellectual comfortability with the research topic. The literature review process allowed me to assess the current state of existing research on my topic, identify experts on my topic, identify key questions about the topic that
need further research, and determine methodologies used in past studies that were similar to my study. This literature helped to diminish some of my angst regarding the legitimacy of my study, since it developed a picture amiable to my research objectives. As a novice researcher, I now realize that as I progressed through the process, post-literature review, that I was not as much of an “expert” on the topic as I needed to be. I found myself referring to the literature review to validate my assumptions and findings. Although I read hundreds of articles and studies, I continuously found increasingly to support my research questions. Knowing when to say “when” was something I grappled with on a continuum.

There are several postulated theoretical models on CTE pathway selection (person-environment fit, career integration, career development theory, Community College Taxonomy). Research suggests that traditional career theory has menial relevance for African American men because these theories are overwhelmingly based on experiences of White men who attend four-year universities (Brown, 2002; Walsh et al., 2001). The research site for my study is a two-year, predominately black institution (PBI). After reviewing many of the theoretical models and based on the research questions I was seeking answers to, social cognitive career theory (SCCT) prevailed as the most suitable lens to view my research.

A pivotal point of reflection for me centers around personal interests. According to Lent (2013), career choices are influenced by one’s interests and not just entirely by one’s culture or their self-efficacy. Two of the seven participants selected their CTE program because they found the pathway to be “interesting;” both are pursuing a cannabis dispensary operation. Ironically, they both emphasized their goal to become entrepreneurs and not desiring to work for “the man.” Could these participant’s interests have been influenced by their experience with
racism or influenced by culture? Particularly, because black and brown individuals have been most disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs. I could not ignore the possible connection between their interest in Cannabis and their references to not wanting to work for a specific racial group.

The age of the participants resulted in a stark contrast in responses and experiences. Community Colleges inherently host “non-traditional” aged students so the variance in age of the participants was not unusual. The two participants under thirty years old did not correlate their career decision making to their race or culture. Conversely, the two participants over thirty years old consistently referred to not wanting to work for “the man” and asserting that much of their misfortune in life was attributed to racism. Additionally, the under thirty participants had more friends and family than had attended college: not as common for the over thirty participants. SCCT assumes that environmental and cultural influences are important as recent research suggests that interests play a smaller role in the choice-making process of young adults from particular cultures. Specifically, those from a culture characterized by collective decision-making are more inclined to choose a career path that is consistent with the preferences of their family members and with their self-efficacy beliefs rather than one that necessarily fit their personal interests (Lent et al, 2013).

Reflection on Research Design and Analysis

A constructivist approach to the research was ideal because I was able to value the theory to support the interpretation of the data collected and not utilize it to validate a hypothesis. Constructivism allowed me to be subjective and to co-construct understanding with the
participants. The 60-minute, semi-structured interviews were more than adequate to get through the discovery phase. I proposed interviewing 8-10 participants; the semester was ending and had to come to terms that 7 students would be sufficient. I would have liked to interview more participants to add to the richness of the data. There were only sixty-three African American men CTE students enrolled during the Spring of 2022. Soliciting volunteers from such a small sample was difficult. Most of the participants were working adults, with children so their time was a premium; much of my time was spent coordinating interviews that did not disrupt the participants' day. Securing seven students out of 63 (11%) is statistically significant thus I was satisfied with my intentional recruitment efforts.

All participant interviews were conducted via zoom; this allowed a face-to-face experience without being in person. Participants were comfortable and very forthcoming about their experience at the research site and about what motivating factors attributed to their pursuit of a CTE program. Admittedly, there was a steep learning curve but as I conducted more interviews, the more smoothly things progressed. I believe that offering compensation for an hour of their time was a contributing factor to the participant’s willingness to participate. I was determined to take the men I was interviewing at face value and not carry any preconceptions into the interview; this was easier said than done.

Economic mobility and financial stability were significant concerns for all participants. Participants frequently discussed the need to secure a stable income to support themselves and their families. Although humbled by their willingness to share their stories, I also felt conflicted and began to question my own motivations. Was I capitalizing off the participant’s economic status (or lack thereof)? I tried hard to temper my trepidation so that I would not taint any of the
interviewees’ responses with my own ideas. My ability to build rapport, acknowledging and validating participants' lived experiences, along with being my own authentic self, aided in gradually diminishing the thoughts.

One unexpected occurrence was having to pivot and switch from NVivo coding (as indicated in my proposal) to coding results manually. Participants all elected to conduct their interviews via zoom. Thus, I used the zoom platform and the transcribe functionality to transcribe the interviews. Unfortunately, the transcription was not clear, and I found myself re-listening to the recordings and manually notating responses. This was tedious and put me in a frenzy. I had the good fortune of meeting with the institutional research at the college who was able to assist me through the coding process. Although I encountered a minor snafu, the rich information gathered from the interviews was invaluable. In hindsight, it would have been interesting to conduct a second round of interviews. Two interviews would have allowed for further clarification of information gathered during the first interview. As the interviews persisted, more questions surfaced, and existing questions evolved during the discovery phase. Follow up questions were generally off the cuff and fed off the responses of the participant. I could not deviate from the IRB approved protocol; luckily, semi-structured interviews allowed for follow-up questions but there were some questions not originally articulated that could have been a value-add.

The document analysis was something I looked forward to. I had this lofty idea to review the documents that Advisors use to advise new and returning students and determine if they were useful or if there was a need to strengthen the tool. During the pandemic, the advising department did not collect the two documents I was planning to review. This resulted in my need
to pivot and review the same documents, but they were not connected to the students being interviewed. Triangulation of the data could have increased the credibility and reliability of the results. I was able to review documents from previous years and analyzed the document by looking for gaps that could be strengthened to serve as a better tool for advising support.

For the most part, the findings were not surprising. One result that was most interesting to me centered around race and culture. Historically, CTE was considered an opportunity afforded mostly to low-performing Black students. To find that the major finding of research sub-question one, was that race/culture had no impact on CTE career decision making, was eye-opening. Yet, overwhelmingly, race/culture was alluded to relative to opportunities in the chosen field once the participant completes. I intentionally grounded my study in SCCT because it considers the influence race, gender, and cultural and economic environments have on career choice. SCCT is purported to be an ideal theory to explore self-efficacy and outcome expectations of African American men. I did not consider the social and environmental construct of the institution and the impact it could have on the responses of the participants. I was expecting life changing and practice informing results. What I learned, as it relates to the participants in my study, is that race and culture had absolutely no bearing on their decision to pursue a CTE pathway.

Application to Professional Practice

A dissertation in practice was an attractive option because of its practicality to the workplace. This was of interest because of my long-standing tenure within higher education, with most of my work experience occurring at a community college. The dissertation of practice
process afforded me an opportunity to address specific educational challenges that students encounter at my college. The findings from this study will inform my practice moving forward and have already manifested at my college.

As discussed in the findings, participants spoke candidly about their support system at the College. Overwhelming, participants identified their program instructors as the primary person that they trust, confided in, and from whom they sought advice. As a result, the Dean of the CTE programs will partner with Student Services to train instructors on the support services offered across the College. Additionally, each instructor will include all support services in the course syllabus to ensure that students have key information readily available. As indicated by the results, CTE students do not have the time to meet with their Advisors. Students navigate their pathway via self-advising and figuring things out along the way. To mitigate missteps in the process, CTE Advisors will visit the CTE classroom twice a semester; once at the beginning of the semester and again at the midpoint – before the next registration period. These very intentional efforts will provide all CTE students with access to support services they inherently do not have time to utilize.

An unfortunate reality is that many of the students are in dire financial need as they pursue their CTE pathways. Most of the participants from the study were over 30 years old and working jobs where they earn minimum wage. Connecting students with jobs and experiences that can improve their economic mobility is critical. Participants spoke about not wanting to “work for the man” yet they lacked the experience and skills required to be the entrepreneurs they aspire to be. My college will proactively have the Director of Workforce Programs reach out to each student immediately following enrollment. The caseload is manageable enough for
the Director to personally connect with each student to review their work history and discuss their career goals. The Director will match students with work-based learning opportunities—either an apprenticeship or paid internship to help relieve financial angst while simultaneously affording the students valuable and practical work experience.

**Reflection as Practitioner Researcher**

Writing the journal article was a transformative scholarly process. Prior to drafting the article, I investigated journals that were relevant to my research study. There are a number of revered journals that are CTE focused. After reviewing several journals, I narrowed my selection down to the top three: 1) Journal of Career and Technical Education; 2) Career and Technical Education Research (CTER); 3) Journal of Vocational Education Research. My goal is to publish the article therefore I tailored my writing to the journal’s requirements to increase my chances of acceptance. I took time to read several articles already published, specifically those that were relevant to my own research. Understanding what the editors are looking for helped to guide my writing strategy.

As I began my writing, I was very intentional about understanding the aim and scope of the journals I selected; thus, I sought to identify journals with a specific focus on CTE programming or CTE research. Although the journals identified are specific to CTE, it was important to write for a diverse audience to increase the breadth of readership. It was a balancing act to ensure that my writing was academic yet presented in a way that can be understood by any reader regardless of their field or whether English is their first language. Also, critically important was making a connection between my study and previous research already published.
There is limited research on my research topic and as a novice researcher I want to demonstrate confidence to the reader to increase certainty in my research.

As a result of this experience, I learned a great deal about conducting and publishing research. The most significant lesson learned is that research is a skill. Research is something that you must be adequately prepared to conduct. Admittedly, although I excelled in the doctoral coursework and have had a successful career in higher education, I inevitably fell victim to the Imposter Phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978). I was constantly doubting my intellectual abilities despite evidence of being competent. Dealing with the death of my brother and contracting COVID took a toll, physically and emotionally. A dedicated support system was instrumental in reassuring me that I was prepared and armed with the requisite skills to conduct research.

The research proposal was the primer, laying the foundation. I now realize how important it is to have well-crafted research questions and how fundamental they are to good research. They serve as a guide to what it is that you want to answer and define the topic and appropriate approach towards investigating it. Throughout my research, I continually asked myself – “am I addressing the question(s)”? I began to question the efficacy of my questions with respect to the theoretical lens I viewed my research. This was a natural inclination because some of the expectations and assumptions made prior to my research were proven to be inaccurate based on the lens I was viewing it from.

Quality research is time-consuming; cutting corners compromises the validity and credibility of the research. Carving out dedicated time to do research was difficult considering my schedule. My time-management skills, honed from years of administrative experience, were
critically important to my success. I recall reading somewhere that “research is a decision-making” journey. I could not agree more. Research is a logical and methodical process that is only as good as the decisions you make. This revelation did not occur to me until I got to the publishable paper chapter of the dissertation. It finally clicked that I embarked upon a process that was simply a logical set of well thought out steps taken to investigate a problem. In theory, I understood what research was; putting it into practice, “conducting” the research, is where the rubber meets the road.

I learned the importance of celebrating small milestones. From submitting the proposal, to securing IRB approval, scheduling my first interview, conducting my final interview, and developing themes from coding – every step was a small win. These accomplishments kept me grounded and eager to address the next step in the process. The publishable paper was challenging to navigate. I was poised to author a traditional dissertation. However, writing to a specific criterion, established by the CTE research journals, guided my writing to be more succinct and my approach to be more structured.

Now that the research project is completed, I find myself wanting to continue to sharpen my research skills. In the workplace, I have begun to unconsciously view every challenge or problem as a research project. It is common for my team to say, in jest, “you sound like a researcher.” A research mindset is an invaluable attribute to possess in higher education. As a result of this process, I am very conscientious of data and data quality. It is meaningless to collect data and not analyze it for consumption and use. Even with several disadvantages (time consuming, not typically replicable, lacks rigidity) associated with qualitative research, it has been undervalued in higher education. Facts and statistics are important, but the human
experience should not be ignored. The creativity mined in qualitative research mitigates the bias that tends to develop through collected data as respondents try to answer questions the way they think the researcher wants them to answer.

This dissertation will not be archived and never looked at again. I plan to use this as a springboard for future research on CTE students. The interviews with participants underscored the impact of mentor-mentee relationships between student and instructor within a CTE cohort. As identified in the findings, participants trusted and respected their instructors because they were: 1) practitioners in fields they were interested in; 2) accessible due to small student-teacher ratios in their CTE program; and 3) supportive of their goals. Further investigating the impact these relationships have on persistence and completion is of keen interest.
REFERENCES


Drake, J. K. (2011). The role of academic advising in student retention and persistence.


APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT FLYER
RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!

- ARE YOU 18 OR OLDER?
- BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN MAN?
- PURSUING A TDL* PATHWAY?

IF YOU ANSWERED YES TO ALL OF THE ABOVE, YOU MAY QUALIFY FOR $25.00 GIFT CARD BY PARTICIPATING IN A BRIEF STUDY.

LEARN MORE BY CONTACTING:

312-320-7810

OR

Z1562134@STUDENTS.NIU.EDU

*TRANSPORTATION, DISTRIBUTION, LOGISTICS
APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO DEPARTMENT
Dear Colleagues:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you of a study I will be conducting at the college. The study is titled, *Trade vs Traditional: "An exploratory case study of African American men student’s perspective on pursuing a Career Technical Education (CTE) pathway at an urban community college in Illinois."*

Over the last ten years, career, and technical education (CTE) has gained tremendous popularity in post-secondary education, remodeling itself from a “college alternative” into a viable college pathway. Promising outcomes in CTE such as employment outlook and competitive salary make this a viable career choice for students, specifically for African American men who make up over 21% of CTE enrollees at community colleges.

Drawing upon Social Cognitive Career Theory, the purpose of this case study is to understand the decision-making process of African American men pursuing CTE programs at Olive-Harvey College. The study will explore the motivating factors that influence CTE pathway selection for African American men students and will investigate the interplay among the three components of SCCT (self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal setting) and their role in the career decision-making process. This study further seeks to understand whether culture/race shapes the perspectives of African American men students and their decision to pursue a CTE pathway. Lastly, the study will investigate the types of supports this population uses and needs to persist to completion.

**Career and technical education (CTE)** are defined as classes that are designed to prepare students for work (Fletcher, 2013; Gewertz, 2018). These courses prepare students for jobs that do not typically require college degrees.

You are receiving this letter because you may encounter African American men students who are pursuing a CTE pathway and potentially eligible and interested in participating. I hope you are willing to assist with recruitment efforts by referring potential participants to take part in the study. Research criteria for participation include the following:

- 18 years or older
- Black/African American
- Currently pursuing a CTE pathway (certificate or degree)

If you know students who meet the criteria, I greatly appreciate your help by referring to me for additional information, you can make referrals two ways:

1. Direct students to the following eligibility questionnaire [Insert survey link here to participant eligibility questionnaire]
2. Students can contact me at [Insert Email] or [Insert Anonymous Mobile]

Feel free to contact me if you would like to learn more about the study and how to refer potential participants.

Kindly,

Kimberly K. Hollingsworth
E-Mail Communication (Student)

Dear [research site] Student:

Are you an African American man? Are you 18 years of age or older? Are you currently pursuing a CTE pathway/program (CDL, Forklift, Cannabis, Aviation Tech, Auto/Diesel Tech, and Supply Chain Management and Logistics) at OHC? If you can answer yes to each of these questions, I am in need of your help. I am currently conducting a research study that garners the perspectives of African American men students and their career decision-making process relative to CTE pathway/program pursuit.

The best way we have of learning about our students is by asking students similar to you to share their thoughts and opinions regarding their experiences. You are cordially invited to participate in an interview with me. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will take place in the TDL Center. Your participation is voluntary. If you consent to participation, you do not have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable and you can withdraw at any time. Information you share will be kept confidential and your identity will remain anonymous. At the conclusion of the interview, you will have an opportunity to review the transcripts for clarity. You will also receive a $25.00 gift card (a variety to choose from) for participating in this study.

Please respond via [insert eligibility questionnaire link] to determine if you qualify. Please feel free to call me on (312) 320-7810 and I can answer any questions you may have. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Hollingsworth
Doctoral Candidate
Dear [research site] student:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study to garner the perspectives of African American men students and their decision-making process relative to CTE pathway/program pursuit. The insight you share regarding your experiences is sure to provide information that will assist the African American CTE student population in the future.

Your interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will take place in the TDL Center Room 100 or via zoom, whichever is most comfortable and accommodating to you. Your interview will be held at ________ a.m./p.m. on (date). Upon your arrival, we will spend 10 to 15 minutes discussing the purpose of the study, the interview protocol, and signing and completing the demographic and consent forms. Remember, your participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable and can withdraw at any time.

At the conclusion of the interview, you will also receive a $25.00 gift card. Once the data from the interview is transcribed, you will have an opportunity to review it for clarification. You will also have an opportunity to meet with me to further discuss your career goals and establish a career action plan if you have not done so. Thanks again for volunteering to participate in this study. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me via this email address or call me at (312) 320-7810. I look forward to meeting with you.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Hollingsworth
Doctoral Student
APPENDIX D

RECRUITMENT EMAIL ADVISORS
Dear OHC CTE Advisor:

I am currently conducting a research study that garners the perspectives of African American men students and their career decision-making process relative to CTE pathway/program pursuit. I am in need of your assistance. I am requesting a 60-minute interview with you to discuss your experience working with African American men students pursuing a CTE pathway/program.

The interview will be conducted via zoom. Your participation is voluntary. If you consent to participation, you do not have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable and you can withdraw at any time. Information you share will be kept confidential and your identity will remain anonymous.

Please respond to this email by April xxx if you are interested in participating. Please feel free to call me on (312) 320-7810 and I can answer any questions you may have. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Hollingsworth
Doctoral Candidate
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Initial Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for CTE Students

Introduction:
Thank you for agreeing to an interview with me today. This study is on the perspectives of African American male students pursuing a CTE pathway at an urban community college. The intended purpose is to garner a better understanding of the CTE career-decision making process. I am particularly interested in learning if self-efficacy, career outcome expectations, or whether race/culture influenced your pursuit of a CTE pathway/program.

I have provided you with a copy of the consent form, do you have any questions? If not, let us get started.

Pre-Interview Checklist:
- [ ] Purpose of Study
- [ ] Confidentiality
- [ ] Length of Interview
- [ ] Review Consent Forms
- [ ] Signature on Consent Forms

Interview Questions:

Possible Introductory Questions (Intended to build a rapport with participants): Tell me a little about yourself.

- Please tell me your age
- Are you the first in your family to attend college?
- Do you have children/dependents you care for?
- Do you consider yourself financial independent, meaning solely provide for yourself?
- Tell me about your background and your interest in this study.
- What CTE program are you pursuing?
- At what stage are you in the pursuit of your certificate or degree?

1. What made you decide to attend a community college? *(Outcome expectations)*

2. How did your family feel about you going to college? How did your friends feel about your decision to attend college? *(Self-efficacy)*

3. When you enrolled at the College, was your intent to graduate with a degree/certificate or did you enroll as undecided? *(Outcome expectations)*

4. Have peers, family, or college officials discouraged you from pursuing certain careers, majors or opportunities? If yes, please explain the situation and why you believe you were discouraged. *(Self-efficacy)*
5. Why did you choose a CTE pathway at Open Community College (OCC)? (*Self-efficacy*)
   a. What experiences (positive or negative) influenced your decision?
   b. Who, if anyone, did you confer with about your pathway selection?
   c. Did your academic ability play any role in your pathway selection decision?
   d. Did your socio-economic status influence your decision to pursue a CTE program?
   e. Have any of your friends or family pursued a similar program?

6. How do you think your race/culture influenced your decision to pursue a CTE pathway? (*Race/Culture*)

7. Do you think your gender influenced your decision to pursue a CTE pathway? (*Self-efficacy*)

8. Share with me a little about the career paths of some of the men in your family, what careers are they in? (*Race/Culture*)

9. Who has been supportive of you, as an African American man community college student, completing a CTE certificate or degree? (*Race/culture; Student support*)

10. Student engagement is an important aspect of the college experience, can you describe your connectedness to the college? In other words, do you feel like you belong at college? (*Self-efficacy/Student Support*)

11. What was your perception of Career and Technical Education prior to enrolling at OCC? How has that changed? (*Outcome expectations*)
   a. Do you feel like you selected a program that is consistent with your values, interests, personality, and skills

12. How have you been able to integrate academically and socially? (*Self-efficacy*):
   a. Was it something that you did, something done by the school, or a combination of both? If so, what was done?

13. What College services or programs, if any, did you utilize in deciding your career pathway? (*Student support*)
   a. How meaningful are appointments with your CTE Advisor?
   b. What tools and/or resources provided by Advisors are most useful?
   c. If you answered no/none, why haven’t you sought out college services?

14. The CTE pathways at OCC are cohort based (group of students taking the same courses together), how, if at all, did this influence your decision to pursue the pathway?
15. Tell me about your thoughts on financial aid, student loans, and your ability to pay for school and survive financially while enrolled in school? *(Self-efficacy)*
   a. What was your understanding of grants, WIOA, and student loans when deciding to pursue a CTE pathway?
   b. How, if at all, did this influence your decision to pursue a CTE pathway?
15. How important was economic mobility and job outlook when you selected your CTE pathway? *(Outcome expectations)*

16. What are your plans once you complete your CTE program? *(Outcome expectations)*
   a. Do you believe completing your degree/certificate will improve your chances of obtaining employment?

Closing:

Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not touched on yet but that you think would be important for me to know?

Thank you for participating in this interview with me. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today.
Initial Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (CTE Advisors)

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to an interview with me today. This study is on the perspectives of African American male students pursuing a CTE pathway at an urban community college. I am soliciting your feedback about the CTE students you advise and to learn what, if anything, differentiates them from a student pursuing a different pathway. I am particularly interested in understanding the career-decision making process of the CTE students and how the college supports their academic/career success.

I have provided you with a copy of the consent form, do you have any questions? If not, let us get started.

Interview Questions:

Possible Introductory Questions (Intended to build a rapport with participants): How long have you been an Advisor at OCC and how did you come to work exclusively with CTE students?

1. How many CTE students are a part of your caseload and how are they assigned?

2. What is your role in helping students decide their career pathway? How do students react if/when you suggest a CTE focus? (Student Support)

3. Please describe what an advising session with a CTE student looks like? (Career Outcome Expectation)

4. Can you share some overarching issues or concerns, if any, that African American men CTE students have identified as they progress through the program? (Race/Culture)

5. In your opinion what resources or support services are most needed for and utilized by African American men CTE students? (Student support)

6. What resources (print, electronic, special services, etc.) do you use to assist with advising African American men CTE pathway students? (Race/culture)

7. How do you keep the CTE students engaged? (Student support)

8. What do you do differently, if anything, with CTE program students than other programs here at the college? (Student Support)

9. Have the students shared with you their perspective on or perception of the CTE programs? If yes, please share. (Student Self Efficacy)

Closing:

Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not touched on yet but that you think would be important for me to know?

Thank you for participating in this interview with me. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today.
APPENDIX F

INFORMED CONSENT
STUDENT INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: Trade vs Traditional: "An exploratory case study of African American men student’s perspective on pursuing a Career Technical Education (CTE) pathway at an urban community college in Illinois"

Investigators: Kimberly K. Hollingsworth

This document describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who choose to take part – your participation is voluntary. Please feel free to pose any questions you have about this document with the Investigator before deciding to participate.

Key Information

- This is a voluntary research study designed to get the perspectives of CTE community college students on their decision to pursue a career-focused pathway.
- This study will be used to complete the requirements of a dissertation project
- This two-month study involves participants, who meet the research criteria, to participate in a semi-structured, recorded interview to respond to questions designed to explore their experiences. 
- Participants may also be asked to participate in a 20-minute recorded debrief to review and comment on a summary of their interview and coded results.
- The benefits include an opportunity to garner a better understanding of the career决策-making process of African American CTE students, which will assist higher education practitioners to identify key supports for this population. The risk of the study is student’s discomfort with sharing personal life experiences.

Introduction

Drawing upon Social Cognitive Career Theory, the purpose of this case study is to understand the decision-making process of African American men pursuing CTE programs at Our Community College (OCC) in Illinois. The study will explore the motivating factors that influence CTE pathway selection for African American men students and will investigate the interplay among the three components of SCCT (self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal setting) and their role in the career decision-making process. This study further seeks to understand whether culture/race shapes the perspectives of African American men students and their decision to pursue a CTE pathway. Lastly, the study will investigate the types of supports this population uses and needs to persist to completion. Your participation will provide insight about why African American men select a CTE pathway and what influences the decision-making process. Your feedback may lead to greater awareness around the types of support, services, and resources you need to be a successful CTE student.

Description of Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a 60-minute interview. The interview will occur either on campus at the [research site] in a confidential space and will be recorded or via zoom (recorded); participants have autonomy to select. Additionally, participants will be invited to participate in a 20
minute debrief after the first interview has been conducted. The purpose of the debrief is to ensure your experiences are accurately documented and represented in the study.

**Risks or Discomforts**

Although there are no reasonably foreseeable risks, there could potentially be moments throughout the interview when you may feel uncomfortable discussing your experiences. As such, you can stop participation at any time.

**Benefits**

Your participation and sharing may lead to greater awareness around the types of support, services, and resources African American men need to be a successful CTE student.

**Costs and Compensation**

You will receive a $25.00 gift card at the conclusion of the interview. No compensation will be provided for the debrief.

**Participant Rights**

Participating in this study is voluntary. At any time and for any reason, you may choose not to take part in the study without consequence or penalty. There will be no negative academic consequences if you elect not to participate.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, [name] at [email] or by telephone at [phone number]. You can also contact the researcher’s faculty mentor [name] at [email]. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur because of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at (815)753-8588.

**Future Use of the Research Data**

Information you share as a part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research, even if all identifiers are removed.

**Confidentiality**

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential, to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations, and will not be made publicly available. The data collected from you will be anonymous.

All information collected will be stored on a password-protected external hard drive/laptop computer. Qualitative data (transcribed interview to paper) and audio files will be saved and organized on an access controlled, centrally managed, SharePoint site; access will be restricted and only accessible by the researcher. Both the hard drive and the computer will be kept in a locked storage unit in a locked office between interviews and thereafter. Only the primary investigator will have access to data collected in this study and will follow precautions to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.
Secure data destruction is paramount to ensuring that confidentiality and anonymity is never compromised. Following the completion of the research project, "clearing" will occur whereas data is removed in such a way that prevents an end-user from easily recovering it from a hard drive. Data stored to SharePoint will also be permanently deleted, wiped, or overwritten by the researcher. Hard copy documents will be shredded and disposed of by the researcher.

Please note:

This signed informed consent document must be maintained for 3 years following completion of data collection.

Questions

You are encouraged to ask questions throughout the study. For more information about the study, contact Kimberly Hollingsworth, at z1562134@student.niu.edu.

Consent and Authorization Provisions

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, that you are 18 years or older, and your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

1. Your signature below indicates agreement to participate in this study.

   Participant’s Name (printed) ____________________________________________

   ______________________________________  ______________________________
   Participant’s Signature                      Date

2. Your signature below indicates agreement that your interviews will be audio recorded.

   ______________________________________  ______________________________
   Participant’s Signature                      Date
APPENDIX G

INTERNAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL(S)
Memorandum

DATE: April 28th, 2022

TO: Kimberly Hollingsworth

FROM: Chiju Chen

RE: Trade vs Traditional: An exploratory case study of African American men student’s perspective on pursuing a Career Technical Education (CTE) pathway at an urban community college in Illinois

CCC IRB #: IRB2022005

RENEWAL ON OR BEFORE: 4/28/2025

On April 28th, 2022, the City Colleges of Chicago Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed the research proposal entitled, "Trade vs Traditional: An exploratory case study of African American men student’s perspective on pursuing a Career Technical Education (CTE) pathway at an urban community college in Illinois". The CCC IRB approves your research protocol in accordance with the Expedited (VII) criteria. This approval is limited to the activities described in the research protocol and extends to the performance of these activities at all CCC campuses. Please include your CCC IRB protocol number (see above) and CCC IRB contact info in all materials, including the Informed Consent and recruitment flyers, that you disseminate to the CCC community.

Work on this project may begin upon receipt of this notice. This approval is for a period of three years from the date of this letter and will require resubmission if the research project extends beyond the approved period. Requests for extension need to be submitted to the CCC IRB three months prior to the expiration date of the current approval.

The research design, data collection instruments, and the informed consent form for your project cannot change until you petition and receive written approval from the CCC IRB. This includes the use of any new surveys or interview questions. You must also submit a Project Completion form upon completion of your protocol to the IRB (Form 190). An adverse/Unanticipated Event Report (Form 180) must be filed within two working days should any serious event occur.

We appreciate your interest in conducting research at the City Colleges of Chicago and wish you success in the implementation of your research project. If you have any questions regarding the IRB’s decision, please contact us.

Sincerely,

Chiju Chen
Assistant Professor, Life Sciences
IRB Chair

cc: Deputy Provost, Stacia Edwards
CCC IRB
Approval Notice
Initial Review

07-Apr-2022

TO: Kimberly Hollingsworth (Z1562134)
Counseling, Adult and Higher Education


In a preliminary review, the Initial Submission of the above named research protocol was determined to meet the definition of human subjects research according to the federal regulations. The submission was then reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board through the expedited review process [45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) category 6, 7] under Member Review procedures on 07-Apr-2022. Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

Protocol Approval period: 07-Apr-2022 - 06-Apr-2023

It is important for you to note that as an investigator conducting research that involves human participants, you are responsible for ensuring that this project has current IRB approval at all times. If your project will continue beyond the above date, or if you intend to make modifications to the study, you will need additional approval and should contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety for assistance. In addition, you are required to promptly report to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems or risks to subjects or others.

Please note that the IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

Informed Consent:

Unless you have been approved for a waiver of the written signature of informed consent, this
notice includes a date-stamped copy of the approved consent form for your use. NIU policy requires that informed consent documents given to subjects participating in non-exempt research bear the approval stamp of the NIU IRB. This stamped document is the only consent form that may be photocopied for distribution to study participants.

If consent for the study is being given by proxy (guardian, etc.), it is your responsibility to document the authority of that person to consent for the subject. Also, the committee recommends that you include an acknowledgment by the subject, or the subject’s representative, that he or she has received a copy of the consent form.

You are responsible for retaining the signed consent forms obtained from your subjects for a minimum of three years after the study is concluded.

Continuing Review:

Continuing review of the project, conducted at least annually, will be necessary until data collection is complete and you no longer retain any identifiers that could link the subjects to the data collected. Please remember to use your protocol number (HS22-0362) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

Closing the Study:

Please note that a final report submission should be created in the record in lieu of an annual continuation form if data collection has ended and the data are free of identifiers. The final report is a separate submission form in the list of options in the InfoEd record, and it may be submitted prior to the annual review deadline.

With all of this said, the IRB extends best wishes for success in your research endeavors!

Please see the RIPS website for guidance on the impact of COVID-19 on research (including face-to-face data collection) https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/covid/index.shtml
APPENDIX H

THEMES AND CODES PROCESS
### Themes and Coding Structure

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<th>Description</th>
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**Level 1:** Open coding was used to identify major and minor codes related to the themes. Major themes are those shared by more than half of the interviewees.

**Level 2:** Specific codes were noted by participants as aligned with interview questions.

**Level 3:** More detailed or connecting themes that emerged from the data and mapped back to research questions.