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## Does the Degree Matter? Understanding Employer Hiring Perspectives on Community College Health Information Technology Program Graduates

Tricia L. Broughton  
tlbro@me.com

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## ABSTRACT

### DOES THE DEGREE MATTER? UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYER HIRING PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY COLLEGE HEALTH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM GRADUATES

Tricia Broughton, Ed.D.  
Department of Counseling and Higher Education  
Northern Illinois University, 2023  
Dr. Carrie Kortegast, Director

Health Information Technology (HIT) is an in-demand occupation across Illinois and as such community colleges offer related preparation programs in the form of one-two semester Career and Technical Education (CTE) Certificates and Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.) degrees. Community college applied programs aim to meet the needs of local employers and the interest of students to obtain employment within their communities. Research suggests that employability as perceived by employers goes beyond the technical skill requirements of the job. This dissertation project aimed to better understand employer's hiring perspectives on community college health information technology (HIT) program graduates and ultimately whether applicants having a degree influenced those hiring practices. Key findings included 1) employers' perception that soft skills are as important as technical skills to be a successful employee; 2) employers' perception that new community college-educated HIT hires, particularly those with a degree, were well prepared to be successful employees; 3) employers' perception that having a community college education, particularly an HIT degree, was a benefit in hiring and to the organization overall; and 4) hiring practices for HIT positions were consistent across the State and size of employer.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
DEKALB, ILLINOIS

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**DOES THE DEGREE MATTER? UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYER  
HIRING PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY COLLEGE HEALTH  
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM GRADUATES**

**BY**

TRICIA L. BROUGHTON  
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE  
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Dissertation Director:

Dr. Carrie Kortegast

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	iv
LIST OF APPENDICES .....	v
PREFACE .....	vi
CHAPTER 1. DISSERTATION PROPOSAL .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Does the Degree Matter? .....	3
Problem of Practice .....	4
Purpose Statement .....	5
Review of Literature .....	6
Theoretical Framework .....	14
Description of the Case .....	17
Research Design .....	19
Significance .....	27
2. DOES A DEGREE MATTER? .....	29
Introduction .....	29
Literature Review .....	30
Theoretical Framework .....	35
Methodology .....	36
Findings .....	40
Discussion .....	51
Recommendations .....	54
Conclusion .....	57
3. SCHOLARLY REFLECTION .....	58
Reflection on the Dissertation Process .....	58
Application to Professional Practice .....	60
Application to Research .....	62
REFERENCES .....	65
APPENDICES .....	69

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Characteristics of Participants .....	38
2. Example Job Titles by Qualification Requirements .....	41

## LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix	Page
A. PARTICIPANT EMAILS .....	69
B. PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM .....	72
C. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL .....	75
D. RELATED HIRING DOCUMENTS .....	82
E. CONTACT SUMMARY FORM .....	84

## **PREFACE**

The purpose of this dissertation project was to better understand employer's hiring perspectives on community college health information technology (HIT) program graduates and ultimately whether applicants having a degree influenced those hiring practices. Using a multi-site case study approach, the experiences of twelve (12) unique employers from eleven (11) community college districts across the state of Illinois were investigated. The following chapters describe the project from proposal to a summary of the research process and findings to scholarly reflection on this journey.

Chapter One represents the initial dissertation proposal: a description of my plan for conducting this research study and why health information technology is an occupational field worth studying. The proposal was defended in October 2022. Overall, this Chapter reflects the framework for this qualitative research project utilizing Pryor and Reeder's Expanded Model of Social Stigma (2011) to better understand the employers' perspectives on structural stigma within their organizations and how it influences their hiring of community college graduates.

Chapter Two, in the format of a journal article, presents a summary of the proposal and findings. The research revealed four findings: 1) employers perceived soft skills as important to be a successful employee in the workplace; 2) employers perceived new HIT hires, particularly those with a college degree, to be well prepared both with the technical and soft skills necessary to be a successful employee; 3) employers perceived having a community college education, particularly an HIT degree, as a benefit in hiring and to the organization overall; and 4) hiring practices for HIT positions were consistent across the State and size of employer.



Chapter Three is a scholarly reflection. This chapter briefly describes my thoughts on the research process journey, applications of this research to my current professional practice, and application to research in the future.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **DISSERTATION PROPOSAL**

### **Introduction**

Community colleges play a key role in the economy within their local communities, which requires the institution to develop and offer relevant curricula and courses that meet the needs of local employers and serve student interests (Gauthier, 2020). One industry of consistent relevance for educational program development is Health Care. Community colleges in Illinois strive to meet the demands of local business and industry by responding to changes in workforce needs (ICCB & NIU-CGS, 2021). This includes developing Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs that meet the constantly evolving needs of one of the largest industries in Illinois, Health Care (IDES, 2021).

As Illinois' community colleges aim to meet those needs by requesting to offer new CTE degrees and certificate programs, institutions must first demonstrate the need for those programs through an application for approval to the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB). Program needs are typically evidenced through local employer job openings, state-level interest in program initiatives, and/or through local and state labor market projections data. Providing such evidence of labor market demand confirms support from their stakeholders, which include community members, educators, local employers, and political leaders; and helps to confirm that a community college credential will lead to employment. Health Care as an industry encompasses multiple occupations. Occupations range from requiring a short-term educational credential, such as a Nursing Assistant, to requiring an applied education, such as Health Information Technologist, or to requiring professional educational credentials such as a Medical

Doctor. Community college health care programs aim to meet the needs of those individuals who primarily seek to earn applied educational credentials, such as a certificate or A.A.S. degree, that will prepare them for employment within their local communities.

According to the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB)'s *Economic Impact and Student Employment Outcomes* report (2021), more than 84 percent of community college certificate and Associate in Applied Science (A.A.S.) degree completers have acquired employment in their chosen field within one year of graduation. While graduates are employed, the question of whether their credentials directly influenced that employment persists. A study on *Essential Employability Skills* (2020) conducted by the Illinois Center for Specialized Professional Support (ICSPS) found that employer partners across the state consistently articulated a skills gap between what CTE programs prepared students to do and what employers need in the workplace. Employers want more than the technical skills competencies the community college CTE program has provided (Gauthier, 2020b). Employers are looking for graduates who have the specific technical knowledge required for the job, such as those gained through completion of an A.A.S. degree program. Employers expect graduates to apply that knowledge to employers' specific needs while making the transition from an educational setting to a workplace setting (Gauthier, 2020b).

Educational programs fill the gap between what local employers want and need in the workplace and what community college students must learn to gain and be successful in employment. The Administrative Rules of the Illinois Community College Board (2021) define a community college A.A.S. degree as a career and technical education curriculum that prepares a student for employment in a specific field. Further specificity on content included in that CTE curriculum is limited to the number of total credit hours and the number of general education

credit hours. Content decisions related to the specific CTE content, or the inclusion of workplace skills, are not defined by the ICCB but instead left up to individual community colleges to determine based on the needs of local employers.

Studies on the perception of the usefulness of community college transfer and CTE programs exist, although limited. Research that does exist relates primarily to how well these programs prepare students for further education, as seen through the lens of higher education administrators and students; or for employment as seen through the lens of employers with existing CTE program alumni employees (Gauthier, 2020). Collectively, current literature provides a broad view of employer perspectives across industries. What is missing from current literature is a better understanding of employers' perspectives on hiring practices of community college CTE program graduate applicants, and whether the educational credential influenced their being hired, within a specific industry where educational requirements may vary.

### **Does the Degree Matter?**

For decades higher education has marketed its services and products as a pathway for individuals to make a better life for themselves. Community colleges are no different. Community colleges cater to their local job markets and serve some of the most marginalized student groups. Community colleges in Illinois work with local employers to develop CTE curricula that meet their employment needs. This includes creating programs that prepare individuals for entry-level employment and advancement opportunities. There is no question employer hiring decisions are complex and contextually driven. Research suggests that a community college CTE degree may likely earn applicants an interview, but technical competence alone does not always guarantee employment (Gauthier, 2020b). While technical/job-related skills are valuable, it is the soft skills/workplace competencies that have

more impact on employer hiring decisions (Gauthier, 2020b). What research supports is that once hired technical competence must be combined with soft skills, for community college CTE program graduates to be successful (Cai, 2021; Gauthier, 2020a).

Much of the current literature contradicts traditional beliefs on student employability, which has for decades asserted that investing in higher education and obtaining credentials will lead to employment (Hora, 2019). This study will add to and extend existing research using a different theoretical framework from existing studies to better understand how employers in Illinois perceive community college program graduates, within a specific field of study, in the hiring moment, whether a degree provides a hiring advantage, and whether a degree is seen as good indicator of student success.

### **Problem of Practice**

Community colleges in Illinois often justify their program requests by suggesting that local employers want degreed individuals; graduates with a degree have an employability advantage for entry-level and advancement opportunities within their field. As such, there must be a connection between CTE program content and employer needs so that community college students are assured their training will lead to employment and/or advancement. The Illinois Career Pathways Initiative, supported by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) as well as other educational and workforce partner agencies, also serves as encouragement for colleges to engage employers in program development (ICSPS, 2018). However, as our nation faces rising costs of higher education and growing student debt, employability of college graduates is a predominant narrative surrounding postsecondary education (Hora, 2019). The return on investment for Illinois' students of higher education is of equal concern.

Completion of a degree is generally expected to lead to employment or advancement. In the world of healthcare, there are multiple options for credentialing through which students may pursue to achieve employment or advancement. Options for obtaining credentials in the healthcare field range from industry certifications, such as micro-credentials, short-term CTE certificates to Associates degrees to Baccalaureate degrees and beyond. For individuals interested in health information technology, all these options exist to prepare students for entry-level employment and advancement. A recent study on employability skills in Illinois reveals, however, that employers are not satisfied with how new graduates perform in the workplace (ICSPS, 2020). As suggested previously it is the role of higher education to fill the gap between what students need to gain employment and what employers need from employees. Employers may use holding an educational credential, such as an A.A.S. degree, as a means of predicting employability, but literature supports the idea that a degree is not always a good predictor. By utilizing social stigmatization theory as a framework, this study hopes to better understand how employers view potential employees' education as an indicator of their success on the job.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative case study will be to conduct an exploration of how employers perceive community college Health Information Technology (HIT) program graduates when hiring. Specifically, the guiding research questions for this project are:

- What attributes do employers identify as important when hiring HIT employees?
- How do employers perceive HIT programs preparing students for the workplace?
- What are employers' perceptions of HIT program graduates in the workplace?
- How do regional needs and differences shape HIT employer hiring practices?

This study aims to better inform community college faculty and administrators responsible for CTE program and course content development, employer engagement, and career preparation. There could be further implications for community college faculty and administrators preparing to submit CTE program approval applications to the Illinois Community College Board, and for the review of existing programs through institutional and/or State-level evaluative processes, such as Program Review, for improved relevancy.

### **Review of Literature**

Stakeholder perspectives on the quality of community college programs have been studied using both qualitative and quantitative methods in the last 10 years. This review of literature aims to explore scholarly research related to employer perspectives on community college CTE program graduates. Specifically, the review will cover existing research and summarize five (5) common themes regarding the skills gap: employability skills defined, the importance of soft skills, the lack of satisfaction with soft skills, the myth of the micro-credential, and the efficacy of CTE programs.

#### **Defining Employability Skills**

Much of the literature studied for this review describes employability skills as a combination of technical skills/competencies and soft skills as needed to successfully acquire entry-level employment (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Gauthier, 2020a; Hart Research Associates, 2013). The U.S. Department of Education defines employability skills as “general skills needed for success in the labor market at all employment levels and for all industries” (USDOE, N.D.). Similarly, Illinois defines essential employability skills as, “those general skills that are required to be successful in all sectors of the labor market and separate from the technical skills attained in career pathways or academic skills such as reading or math.”

(ICSPS, 2020, p.1). The technical skills referenced are those specifically needed to perform a job, regardless of industry. The general skills, also known as soft skills, are those skills characterized as workplace navigation competencies, including work ethics, oral and written communication skills, problem-solving, and working well with others (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Gauthier, 2020a; Hart Research Associates, 2013). It is these general/soft skills current research identifies as significant for employability of community college CTE program graduates. It is also these general/soft skills that may be included within a career preparation course, but are not always integrated throughout a CTE program, and are less likely to be assessed by CTE program faculty prior to completion of the educational program.

Yuzhuo Cai (2012) and Cheng, et al. (2021) studied employability from various stakeholders' perspectives. Cai (2012) looked at employability through the perspectives of higher education, students, government, and employers. Their study found that institutions of higher education need to have close interactions with employers in order to influence their beliefs on employability of their students (2012). Employers need to believe their needs are being heard by educators developing programs, so that they trust graduates of the programs will live up to their employment needs on the job. Cai (2012) also argues for establishing a common definition of "employability" between educational institutions and employers in order to better achieve the defined level of employability.

More recently Cheng et al. (2021) looked at employability of international higher education graduates through a variety of theoretical frameworks including human capital theory, screening theory, and Bailey's model of employer's beliefs. Using Bailey's model Cheng et al (2021) found that employers' beliefs are built through a trial-and-error process which begins with employers making decisions on what they know about an applicant based on their



educational credentials. As employees succeed or not along their employment path, employers adjust their beliefs and view future applicants according to those adjustments. Cai and Cheng's findings are key to understanding how employability skills are understood: whether employers believe educational institutions are addressing their workforce needs with educational programs; why employers perceive that an educational credential holds value; and if the employer perceives the value of that credential to predict whether an applicant will be able to meet their needs on the job. Defining employability skills helps to distinguish between the technical knowledge skills required to perform tasks of a specific job and the general/soft skills necessary to be a successful employee in that position.

### **The Importance of Soft Skills**

Research supports the notion that in the last 10 years employers acknowledge community college CTE program graduates present as qualified, particularly in technical competencies (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Benbow & Hora, 2018; Cai, 2012; Gauthier, 2020a). Research in this time period also suggests the students' soft skills play a vital role in their employability (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Benbow & Hora, 2018; Cai, 2012; Gauthier, 2020a). According to a study conducted for the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2013), employers believed that graduates' ability to "demonstrate their capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their college major" (Hart Research Associates, 2013, p. 1). Essentially, employability skills seem to be more influential in being hired and in future employment success, than career and technical skills. Understanding the importance of employability skills content in a career and technical education program is critical to the success of educational institutions' ability to supply workers to the labor market within their district.

Research also shows that employers focus on general/soft skills when interviewing job candidates (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Benbow & Hora, 2018; Gauthier, 2020a; Hart and Associates, 2013; ICSPS, 2020). The soft skills that employers focus on when interviewing candidates include written/oral interpersonal skills, problem-solving/critical thinking skills, workplace readiness/work ethic, ability/willingness to learn, and acclimating to the workplace culture (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Benbow & Hora, 2018; Gauthier, 2020a; Hart and Associates, 2013; ICSPS, 2020). Baird & Parayitam's study on the rating of important skills new graduates need to get hired found that problem-solving/critical/analytical skills were identified as significantly more important in making hiring decisions by employers than educational credentials (2019). When an applicant portrayed appropriate soft skills in an interview situation, it resulted in employers having a more positive perception of a candidate's employability (Baird & Parayitam, 2019). Further, Gauthier (2020b) found employers articulated the need for employees who integrated into the workplace easily, noting that hiring was more related to the applicant's social competency and less about their specific technical ability. If employers see an educational credential as evidence an applicant has the necessary technical skills for the job, then hiring may be influenced by the applicant's demonstration of soft skills during the interview. Thus, understanding how employers view CTE program graduates in the hiring process may help educators and administrators better intertwine soft skills content with technical skills training in community college CTE programs.

### **The Lack of Satisfaction with Soft Skills**

Employers place a high level of importance on soft skills, however, employers' overall satisfaction with the soft skills of new hires who held community college CTE educational credentials is low. Researchers have studied the satisfaction of employers with college graduates'

skills in the workplace through empirical research. Baird and Parayitam (2017) examined survey data on what skills/competencies employers rated as important for college graduates seeking employment. Data revealed that employers acknowledged some skills, such as attitude and work experience, play a significant role in hiring decisions (Baird & Parayitam, 2017). However, employer's responses also show an empirical gap between what they perceive are important skills/what they want in a new hire and what employers perceive new college graduates have to offer/are capable of as a new employee (Baird & Parayitam, 2017).

Baird and Parayitam (2019) further examined ratings of skills and competencies by employers in hiring college graduates. The highest ranked skills were interpersonal/works well with others, critical thinking/problem solving, listening, oral communication, professionalism, and personal motivation (Baird & Parayitam, 2019). However, findings indicated that while employers made hiring decisions based on applicants' demonstration of soft skills, they were generally dissatisfied with new hires' abilities to apply those skills in the workplace (Baird & Parayitam, 2019).

Hora (2019) and Benbow and Hora (2018) both examined the cultural fit of prospective employees. Hora (2019) found hiring decisions were made primarily on cultural fit with their organization versus educational credentials or technical skills. Benbow and Hora (2018) found that employers' perceptions were strongly tied to contextual factors such as organizational culture and geographic location. In both studies, the perception of an applicant and new employee's soft skills was a major factor in an employer labeling the individual as being able to successfully fit in to the workplace culture (Benbow & Hora, 2018; Hora, 2019). While employers are found to be unhappy with the soft skills of new hires, research supports the high value employers assign a job candidate's soft skills when making hiring decisions. The

disconnect between employers' perceived importance of soft skills and their lack of satisfaction with the soft skills of new hires can be addressed by educators through their CTE program design.

### **The Myth About Micro-credentials**

Micro-credentials have received attention in recent years for providing a faster path into employment and thus more student success. Micro-credentials are typically described as awards given to students who complete a rigorous subcomponent of a larger program (Gauthier, 2020c). The micro-credential award itself may be educational in nature, such as through short-term CTE certificates, or industry-based leading to a specific vendor certification. Typically, micro-credentials are competency-based programs which focus more on specific skills acquisition than developing a broader knowledge base (Gauthier, 2020c). As such, micro-credentialing programs seem to focus more on technical knowledge and skills preparation than on employability or soft skills needed in the workplace. Micro-credentials have further been promoted as a more affordable and more flexible path for students' gaining employment over degrees, which may not be a reliable indicator of employability or workplace readiness (Boud & Jorre de St. Jorre, 2021). However, as Gauthier (2020c) found micro-credentials are viewed by some employers as a proxy for an applicant's employability.

Micro-credentials typically offer students multiple points of completion. From an employer's perspective, these increments indicate a student's achievement of course/program objectives in more focused segments of content knowledge (Gauthier, 2020c). In developing CTE programs at the micro-credential level, community colleges offer students a way to document their competencies at more frequent intervals than with a traditional two-year degree program (Gauthier, 2020c). Findings across several studies indicated that the possession of

micro-credentials alone does not guarantee employment, but that in addition to credentials, being able to communicate those achievements clearly and their applicability to the workplace is key to successfully being hiring (Boud & Jorre de St. Jorre, 2021; Gauthier, 2020c).

The myth in the micro-credential phenomenon is that quicker attainment of skills will lead to employment success; but success for the individual and the employer in terms of long-term employability can be different things. Employers want individuals who can perform technically and fit in socially with their working environment (Gauthier, 2020c). However, micro-credentials are by design intended to lead to faster employment rather than broadening and developing a person's knowledge and skills through the educational process of degree attainment. Micro-credentials are currently a popular trend in fields with a variety of levels of educational attainment, such as information technology and health care. Having a better understanding of how employers perceive micro-credentials within a given field can better inform the content educators include in short-term preparation programs.

### **The Efficacy of Higher Education Programming**

Community colleges are known for their connection with the communities they serve. This includes working with local business and industry to design and offer educational programs that meet their specific needs. In Illinois, one of the three main goals of Illinois' Community College System is to, "Contribute to economic development by supporting the Illinois community college system's effort to provide robust workforce training, to expand apprenticeships, to increase credential attainment, to build quality career pathways, and to address the future needs of the Illinois workforce." (ICCB, n.d.). Providing training for current and future workforce needs demands that colleges regularly engage with employers to remain responsive to the changing demands of local business and industry (ICCB, n.d.). In 2020,

Illinois' community colleges engaged with nearly 9,800 unique local employers (ICCB Economic Impact Report, 2021). Research indicates that the efficacy of community college CTE programs is often measured by those employers according to the abilities of the students completing their programs whom they hire for local positions (Gauthier, 2020b). With 39 community college districts which represent both urban, suburban, and rural communities, it is expected that the workforce and local employment needs of employers is diverse and will vary across the state and within regions. As such, there may be regional differences in employer hiring needs, preferences, and practices. Having a better understanding of employer needs regionally and/or across regions can help community college design new and modify existing programs to better meet local workforce needs.

Globally, two-year colleges are challenged with developing curricula that not only meet the needs of local employers but that are also of interest to prospective students (Cai, 2021). This is also true for Illinois' community colleges. Students of CTE programs are primarily interested in employability, entry-level employment, or advancement within their field. Much of the research on employability of CTE graduates focuses on how students are being prepared. In other words, research focuses on the type of educational content necessary to increase a student's employability. Baird and Parayitam (2019) found that employers want to see integration of soft skills across all curricula and institutionalizing a career preparation seminar for students entering their major course of study to better prepare them for employer expectations. Findings in several studies suggest employers want these soft skills developed in their educational program prior to graduates being employed (Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Benbow & Hora, 2018; Cheng, et al., 2021; Gauthier, 2020b; Hora, 2019). Further, the AACU (American Colleges and Universities) *Employer Priorities* study (2013) found that employers endorsed several applied practices as

ways to integrate soft and workplace skills into their curriculum. Those practices included: assignments/projects that require team building, use of oral communication skills, problem solving projects, applying both technical and workplace knowledge to real-world work settings, and internships that allow students to rehearse use of technical skills and workplace readiness skills (AACU, 2013). In Illinois, employability skills and career preparation must be addressed in a college's application to offer a new program. How this content is integrated into the program, such as through applied techniques previously discussed, varies across programs within institutions and across institutions statewide. This is expected, however, because the local needs of employers varies. As the literature indicates, employers expect community college CTE program graduates to hold those employability skills prior to obtaining their first job in the workforce. To this end, there seems to be a gap between how well community college CTE programs prepare individuals for real-world workplace settings prior to entering the workforce.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study will utilize Pryor and Reeder's Model of Social Stigma (2011) as a framework. Social stigmatization theory, originally developed by Erving Goffman in 1963, defined stigma as an attribute that results in a discrediting social difference which yields a spoiled social identity (Bos et al., 2013). Stigma exists in the social context rather than within a person, however, individual views of stigma are affected by public perceptions. Negative public perception often results in widespread social disapproval. Pryor and Reeder (2011) expanded Goffman's theory to suggest stigma manifests itself through four (4) broad capacities: public stigma, self-stigma, stigma by association, and structural stigma.

Public stigma represents people's social and psychological reactions to someone they perceive to have a stigmatized condition (Bos et al., 2013). For example, in an educational

setting such as community colleges and in particular CTE programs, are often perceived by society as being less reputable and therefore of less quality than more prestigious baccalaureate institutions (Gauthier, 2020a). Self-stigma results from an awareness of public stigma, as individuals with stigmatized conditions are typically aware of the social devaluation of their stigmatized condition (Bos et al., 2013). An example of self-stigma might be a community college student's feelings of inadequacy about their educational achievements because of the public stigma associated with attending a community college. Stigma by association results when those who are associated with a stigmatized individual, such as family and friends, are devalued because of their connection (Bos et al., 2013). An example of stigma by association might be faculty at a community college being perceived as less qualified or less of an expert in the field by others because they work for a community college rather than a research institution. Structural stigma represents the legitimized and perpetuated status by society's institutions and ideological systems of those perceived to hold a stigmatized condition (Bos et al., 2013). Structural stigma manifests itself through the criteria and processes put in place by those in positions of power and is perpetuated in social inequalities (Bos et al., 2013) such as access to education. An example of structural stigma might be an organization which predominantly hires the graduates of a specific program, or those with a specific credential, or those from a certain type of educational institution. Understanding if and how stigma may influence others' perception(s) of community college CTE graduates can better inform educators and administrators as they work with local employers to develop educational programs within their districts.

Community colleges, while known for their affordability and broad array of programs, are nonetheless the subject of constant criticism, much of which is typically focused on CTE



programs (Gauthier, 2020b). This criticism over time has developed into a stigma of not only community colleges in general, but more specifically CTE programs and the students who enroll in them (Gauthier, 2020b). Within the realm of higher education, community colleges are not typically perceived as being selective, elite institutions, therefore community college students are similarly perceived. Pryor and Reeder's (2011) expanded model of social stigma lends itself to both educators working with employers, and employers looking to hire community college CTE program graduates, serving as a lens through which a deeper understanding of how employers view their applicants can be studied.

Using Pryor and Reeder's (2011) expanded theory of social stigmatization, Gauthier (2020a) studied the public stigma associated with community college career and technical education programs. Findings revealed that CTE programs are perceived as being for the less able and that perception is perpetuated by parents, college administrators, government, and the workforce (Gauthier, 2020a). One specific finding implied that community college CTE graduates were perceived and treated differently than their workplace colleagues with an academic degree amongst their peers (Gauthier, 2020a). The present study differs from existing research in that it aims to use Pryor and Reeder's (2011) social stigmatization theory, specifically structural stigma, to frame an exploration of employers' perceptions of community college CTE graduates when making hiring decisions.

Prior research on social stigma acknowledges that this construct perpetuates social inequities through power in social, economic, and political ideologies and actions (Bos et al., 2013). Societal structures including educational institutions and employers promote stigma, whether or not unintentionally, through historical traditions and practices, and workplace culture and expectations (Bos et al., 2013). As such, an exploration into the influence of structural

stigma on employer hiring practices must examine the local, social context in which stigma occurs and perpetuates itself in an employer's workplace operational systems. Looking at employers' perspectives on hiring through this lens will help to 1) identify whether stigma plays a role in hiring regardless of technical skills; and 2) better understand whether having an HIT A.A.S. degree provides any advantage to new community college program graduates. This framework informs the design, data collection and data analysis to be utilized in the study and will be detailed later in this proposal.

### **Description of the Case**

The Health Care and Social Assistance Industry is the second largest industry in Illinois (IDES, 2021). Currently, there are approximately 826,000 individuals employed in this industry statewide (IDES, 2021). Health Care is also one of the Top Five Industries seeking new employees in Illinois, with an expected average annual growth rate well above the average for all industries through 2028 (IDES, 2021). Health Care as an industry includes a variety of employers and occupations. Employers such as hospitals, offices of physicians, outpatient and urgent care facilities, and mobile health services. Occupations in Health Care include physicians, nurses, respiratory therapists, phlebotomists, and health information technologists to name a few. Healthcare employers exist in rural, small to medium suburban cities, and large metropolitan areas across Illinois.

Health Information Technology refers to the electronic information systems used by health care providers and practitioners to track, store, share, and analyze health data (The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, n.d.). Employees responsible for using and managing these systems are referred to as Health Information Technicians/Technologists (HITs). Approximately 8,400 HITs are employed in Illinois with 529

new job openings expected annually (IDES, 2021). While most HITs are employed within the Health Care industry by health care providers, some are employed in other industries such as in Business Services (IDES, 2021). For the scope of this study, the focus will be on health care providers.

Health Information Technology (HIT) was selected for this project for several reasons. First, because this is a sizable occupation within a large, growth industry projected to add jobs statewide over the next several years. This means there are a suitable number of employers expected to hire HITs. Second, forty percent (40%) of community colleges in Illinois offer related programs. Sixteen (16) community college districts in Illinois offer an educational program in HIT (ICCB, 2022). Districts offering related programs are located across Illinois. There were nearly 1,500 students enrolled in HIT programs statewide, and just over 500 graduates of HIT programs in 2021 (ICCB, 2022). This means HIT is considered an in-demand educational program by educational agencies, colleges, employers, and students in most regions of the state.

Lastly, entry-level employment requirements for HITs can vary. HIT positions may require a CTE Certificate-level education, including such short-term certificates as micro-credentials, an Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.) degree, or a Bachelor of Science (B.S.) degree. HIT as an occupational field does not have a specified educational level or licensure/credential requirement for entry-level employment as do other areas of health care, such as Nursing. Thus, the field of HIT lends itself to a variety of employer entry-level educational requirements in hiring practices.

According to Indeed.com (2022), there are over 6,100 open positions in health information technology across Illinois as of the date of this study. Meaning, graduates of

community college HIT programs should be considered in-demand and expected to be prepared for local employment. Further, local employers should have experience interviewing and hiring community college CTE program graduates for HIT-related job openings. Prior research indicates the existence of stigma associated with community colleges as institutions of higher education, the students they serve, and the graduates of their CTE programs (Gauthier, 2020a). This study aims to investigate and better understand whether a stigma towards community college CTE graduates exists within the healthcare industry, specifically as perceived within employers of community college HIT program graduates.

### **Research Design**

This research study is guided by constructivist epistemology. Constructivism is grounded in the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed by people actively involved in the research process, acquiring knowledge, and making meaning from it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Constructivism seeks to understand the problem and/or situation from the point of view of those who have lived it (Crotty, 1998). The goal of this study is to better understand employer perspectives of community college HIT program graduates when hiring. A constructivist approach to this study will allow for a better understanding of how structural stigma may or may not exemplify itself through employer's hiring practices, because each employer's perspective is constructed through the organization's hiring requirements and the employer's own unique, contextual lens.

The design of this research study will be qualitative, and the specific approach will be case study. A case study is an in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon in the form of a clearly bounded system, or case, within its real-world context (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). In the proposed study, the phenomenon being examined is employer perspectives on CTE

program graduates. The phenomenon will be bounded by industry and position: employers within the healthcare industry, whom employee HITs, and individuals who have a specific role in hiring employees. Case study design is also useful as a method in developing an understanding of individual lived experiences (Algozzine & Hancock, 2016; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). This qualitative research study will include in-depth interviews and analysis of up to sixteen (16) employers in the healthcare industry with specific responsibilities in hiring new employees. Case study design further requires the use of a minimum of two data sources (Algozzine & Hancock, 2016; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). In addition to the interviews, document analysis of such employment hiring information as job postings, job descriptions, interview questions, and hiring protocols will be reviewed. This study meets the criteria for case study methodology by focusing on developing a deeper understanding of the employers' perception, in context, of their local community college's program graduates, and the potential influence of structural stigma on those hiring practices.

### **Participants**

This study will use mixed purposeful sampling to identify participants. Mixed purposeful sampling allows for a combination of sampling measures to identify participants and aligns with triangulation of data (Suri, 2011). Healthcare employers from sixteen (16) community college districts across the state will be targeted. Using IDES (Illinois Department of Employment Security) employer information derived from cross-referencing occupational and industry data, a list of employers will be developed by community college district. This information will be cross-referenced with a list of community colleges who offer an HIT program. At least one employer from each district will be selected to participate in interviews. If not enough participants from those districts are available, invitations will be sent to the districts where there

are HIT employers, but no HIT programs. Employer size was not used to limit the participants to allow for any regional differences between employer's hiring practices to be revealed. Emails will be sent to the employers with a brief description of the study and collection methods to be used, asking for their participation. A copy of the Participant Email can be found in Appendix A of this document. The individuals of interest to be interviewed will be selected from a pool of human resource staff, hiring managers and other staff involved in the screening and interviewing of new employees. Once the list of participants is compiled, individuals will be contacted via email and provided with a brief description of the study, what their participation would entail, and the appropriate consent forms. Copies of the Participant Email and the Adult Consent Form to participate can be found in Appendices A and B of this document. After having received agreement from individuals to participate and providing the appropriate consent form, interviews with individuals will be scheduled.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection will be conducted utilizing a variety of methods, including in-depth interviews and document analysis. The first step of data collection will include semi-structured interviews. Interviews as a data collection method are common for case study research design. Interviews allow the researcher to obtain rich, personalized information in context from participants (Algozzine & Hancock, 2016). Individuals to be interviewed will include those who have a role in hiring employees. Examples of individuals in those roles to be targeted for participation include human resource staff and managers responsible for interviewing/hiring employees for their specific area/department, or anyone else related to the screening and hiring of employees. One to three participants from each employer will be targeted. Semi-structured interviews will be used to allow individuals the opportunity to provide dynamic responses freely

and from their own perspectives (Algozzine & Hancock, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Interviews will be scheduled for approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted remotely at the convenience of the participant.

Questions will be open-ended in nature and situated using the theoretical framework, aimed at collecting information specific to the research questions (Algozzine & Hancock, 2016). Broad questions aimed at situating the participant within the hiring role for their employer will begin the interview, followed by questions which aim to gather data and gain insight on each participant's perception of community college CTE program graduates and the role of education in organizational culture. Specifically, I will explore topics related to structural stigma as it relates to hiring practices. Interviews will be recorded. The interview protocol for participants is attached in Appendix C of this document.

The last step of data collection will be document analysis. Document analysis is a data collection method often combined with interviews in case study research design (Jones, et al., 2014). Documents related to the phenomenon under study provide language evidence of which the participants have given some considerable attention (Algozzine & Hancock, 2016). Documents may also provide evidence of employee values, beliefs, and perspectives (Jones, et al., 2014). Documentation such as hiring protocols, job postings, position descriptions, educational/training requirements for positions, interview questions, and interview notes, for each employer may be reviewed. Documents will be requested after participants have been identified, and reviewed ideally before the interviews, depending on availability. Employer hiring information may provide additional context for the interviews and inform modifications to the interview questions. This information could also provide context for hiring decisions that have been made and may further reveal underlying stigma as identified through the theoretical

framework. I will collect this data prior to individual interviews. A list of related hiring documents to be requested from participants can be found in Appendix D of this document.

These data collection methods support case study methodology by allowing for information to be acquired from the participants' point of view, utilizing more than one method of data collection, and providing an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon in context (Algozzine & Hancock, 2016; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). Semi-structured open-ended interviews coupled with document analysis aims to provide more than one method for better understanding employer perspectives through in-depth data collection related to employer's worldview.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis will occur in several steps. Some scholars suggest the best data analysis takes place during data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), therefore contact summary sheets will be utilized following each interview. Contact summary sheets are a method requiring the researcher to reflect on their own observations following each interview (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This reflective practice allows the researcher to note questions, main themes, concepts, or other significant ideas which may have emerged during the interaction while the information is current (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Contact summary information can also be used to confirm or contradict coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the next step in data analysis. Once interviews have been conducted, the information will be transcribed and reviewed using the Contact Summary Sheet found in Appendix E of this document.

Coding will be the second step in data analysis for this study and will occur in two cycles. In qualitative research, coding is an analytical method used to organize data, such as interview transcript data, into more easily digestible pieces (Saldaña, 2021). Coding is thereby a process by



which a researcher generates a word or short phrase that synthesizes and translates the data attributing meaning to it for future interpretation (Saldaña, 2021). Coding is a critical link for the researcher between data collected and explaining the data's meaning (Saldaña, 2021).

Inductive coding will be used for the first cycle of coding in data analysis (Saldaña, 2021). In inductive coding, the researcher begins their review of the data with no pre-conceived codes or categories but learns and establishes the codes and categories as ideas are revealed in the data (Saldaña, 2021). The researcher will utilize In Vivo coding, identifying a word or phrase used by the participant; and/or Descriptive coding, generating a word or phrase to capture meaningful ideas within the data (Saldaña, 2021). In Vivo coding is a useful method for the researcher to identify participant perspectives within an interview, and Descriptive coding is a useful method for generating major sub-topics within an interview (Saldaña, 2021) First cycle coding will be compared with information noted in the contact summary sheets to ensure inclusion of relevant information.

For step two of coding in data analysis, second cycle coding will be used. Second cycle coding methods are used in qualitative research to allow the researcher to synthesize the coding work from the first cycle into richer, more concrete forms of meaning (Saldaña, 2021). Pattern coding aims to identify repetitive occurrences within each set of data, assign those occurrences a label, and attribute meaning to them across all data sets (Saldaña, 2021). Pattern coding is particularly useful in examining re-occurring behavior in human relationships and perceptions (Saldaña, 2021). Within the theoretical framework, shared ways of perception and action within the data will be noted accordingly. Pattern coding will serve the purpose of this study well in better understanding perceptions of employers and how those perceptions may influence their hiring practices. The researcher will review, revise, and refine codes as necessary to address

emerging ideas from the data. Once second cycle coding is complete, broader categories of similar patterns will be developed, then collapsed into major themes that characterize findings from the entire data set.

### **Criteria for Quality**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research means the researcher ensures accuracy of the data and confidence in the findings by employing checks during the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Jones, et al., 2014). Ensuring trustworthiness requires the researcher to address issues of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Jones, et al., 2014). Credibility refers to prolonged engagement with the field and assurance that a sufficient amount of data has been collected (Jones, et al., 2014). Credibility will be achieved through conducting in-depth interviews with a majority of the community college districts where HIT programs are being offered. Collection of data from the majority of employers in this bounded system provides the best chance for saturation, where no additional data would be useful (Jones, et al., 2014).

Dependability refers to the legitimacy of the inquiry processes (Jones, et al., 2014). Dependability will be achieved by first collecting data in a transparent manner via recording interviews, transcribing data accurately, and utilizing peer review during the coding process. Second, the researcher will refine research questions as necessary to maintain focus on the overarching goal of the study. Third, the study will utilize triangulation. The process of triangulation requires the use of more than one source of data (Algozzine & Hancock, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). This study will utilize in-depth interviews and document analysis. Triangulation also helps ensure justification of research processes (Jones, et al., 2014).

Confirmability refers to the linking of findings to the data and analysis (Jones et al., 2014). As the researcher, you must verify you did not rework the data to fit any pre-established ideas, the theoretical framework, or the research questions (Jones, et al., 2014). Confirmability of findings will be achieved through illumination of differing perspectives and triangulation. Acknowledging participants' multiple perspectives ensures more than one way of looking at the problem of practice and that value can be found in different views. Triangulating between multiple sources of data allows for checking that consistency among themes within and across data is justified and authentic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Jones, et al., 2014).

Transferability refers to the meaningfulness of the findings to the reader (Jones, et al., 2014). Researchers must consider the relevance of the problem of practice and the significance of the study to the field of practitioners. Transferability in this study is achieved through thoughtful identification of a problem of practice which relates to not only to the researcher's job position, but also in the problem's relevance to community colleges in Illinois and across the nation.

### **Researcher Positionality**

I am an employee in the Academic Affairs Division of the Illinois Community College Board, the coordinating agency for all 48 public community colleges in Illinois. My primary responsibilities are related to the review, approval, and recommendation of new curricula the colleges request to offer. As such, I am asked to provide technical assistance and resources to the colleges on developing new and revising existing curricula and to evaluate applications from institutions arguing the need for new degree programs to serve their communities. In my work, I make judgments on whether the applying institution has believably argued the need for their proposed program(s). This research aims to better understand that argument and to provide

insight to the institutions I serve as a state administrator in higher education. Findings from this study will not impact my decisions made within my job duties, rather, the impact will be on the larger scholarly community in better understanding employer hiring practices and their potential influence on the design of CTE programs.

### **Significance**

This proposed study acknowledges that community colleges play a key role in their local economies. Offering educational programs that satisfy student interests and provide employers with a well-equipped labor pool is just one of the missions of our community college system in Illinois. To achieve this colleges must work with communities to determine interest and need for new educational programs. In doing so, community colleges hope to align their offerings with labor market need and prepare students to be employed. Further, given the high turnover rate of individuals in the healthcare field as a result of the pandemic (ICCB, 2021), it is particularly important to better understand how healthcare employers perceive and hire community college graduates. Doing so will help educational institutions better prepare future healthcare employees. This study aims to identify how employers perceive community college graduates, specifically from CTE programs, and how that perception influences their hiring practices.

This research will be of interest to community college administrators, staff who participate in the development of new and the revision of existing programs at community colleges, and state-level administrators who guide educational and workforce priorities for local providers. Community colleges' work with local employers through workforce development and program advisory committees could also be better informed by this study. As identified through the literature review, employers' current perceptions of CTE programs suggest community colleges are doing well in preparing students with technical skills, it is workplace skills that

students seem to be lacking upon employment. A better understanding of how employers perceive community college CTE program graduates can aid in developing and updating CTE programs that better prepare our students for real life workplaces.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **DOES A DEGREE MATTER?**

#### **Introduction**

Health Information Technology (HIT) is an in-demand occupation in Illinois with approximately 8,400 individuals employed in the field statewide (IDES, 2021). As such forty (40) percent of the state's community colleges offer a related program in this field of study (ICCB, 2022). These programs include one-two semester Career and Technical Education (CTE) Certificates and Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.) degrees. HIT as an occupational field does not have a singular specified educational level or licensure/credential requirement for all entry-level employment, therefore the field lends itself to a variety of employer entry-level requirements and preferences in hiring.

Recent research suggests that a community college A.A.S. degree may likely earn applicants an interview, but technical competence alone does not always guarantee employment as soft skills/workplace competencies have a significant impact on employer hiring decisions (Gauthier, 2020b). While employability for Illinois' community college CTE graduates has historically been high (ICCB, 2021), the question of whether their credentials directly influenced that employment persists. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how employers perceived community college CTE program graduates, specifically Health Information Technology (HIT) program graduates, when hiring.

Current literature suggests there is a skills gap between what community college CTE programs prepare students to do and what employers need in the workplace (ICSPS, 2020). This

study aimed to better understand employer hiring perspectives of community college HIT program graduates by identifying attributes employers consider important when hiring HIT employees; perceptions towards community college preparation for entry-level employment; whether any stigma towards community college graduates exists in hiring; and whether regional labor market differences have any influence on hiring practices. Further, by increasing the understanding of employer hiring perspectives, this study can better inform community college faculty and administrators responsible for CTE program development, employer engagement, and career preparation.

### **Literature Review**

The following review of literature summarizes current research related to employer perspectives on community college career and technical education (CTE) graduates. Existing research on how employability is defined, the influence of soft skills in hiring, and the relevance of better understanding perspectives on health information technology (HIT) graduates has been acknowledged as critical to supporting this study and understanding its findings.

Employability skills are defined as a combination of technical skills/competencies and soft skills needed to successfully acquire entry-level employment (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Gauthier, 2020a; Hart Research Associates, 2013). The U.S. Department of Education has defined employability skills as “general skills needed for success in the labor market at all employment levels and for all industries” (USDOE, N.D.). Similarly, Illinois has defined essential employability skills as, “those general skills that are required to be successful in all sectors of the labor market and separate from the technical skills attained in career pathways or academic skills such as reading or math” (ICSPP, 2020, p.1). The technical skills referenced were those specifically needed to perform a job, regardless of industry. General

skills, also known as soft skills, are those skills characterized as workplace navigation competencies, including work ethics, oral and written communication skills, problem-solving, and working well with others (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Gauthier, 2020a; Hart Research Associates, 2013). General/soft skills are important for the employability of community college CTE program graduates.

Employability of community college graduates includes engagement with various stakeholders and employers. Cai (2012) found institutions of higher education needed to have close interactions with employers in order to influence their beliefs on employability of their students. In other words, employers must believe their needs are being heard by educators developing programs, so that they trust graduates of the programs will live up to their employment needs on the job. Cheng et al (2021) found that employers' beliefs were built through a trial-and-error process which started with employers making decisions on what they know about an applicant based on their educational credentials. As employees succeed or not along their employment path, employers adjust their beliefs and view future applicants according to those adjustments. Cai and Cheng's findings are key to understanding how employability skills are understood by employers. As higher education administrators, engaging with local employers supports their confidence in our programs meeting their needs. Likewise, understanding why employers perceive an educational credential holds value supports institutional efforts in designing relevant career and technical education programs.

Furthermore, the workforce and local employment needs of employers are diverse and vary across the state of Illinois. Illinois has 39 community college districts which represent urban, suburban, and rural communities. As such, there may be regional differences in employer hiring needs, preferences, and practices. Students attending community college CTE programs



are typically interested in entry-level employment or for some advancement within their field. Community colleges are challenged with developing curricula that not only serve the interests of prospective students but also meet the needs of local employers (Cai, 2021). Having knowledge of the types of soft skills needed for various levels of employment that can be incorporated into an educational curriculum, while daunting for curriculum developers, is critical in maintaining confidence in students' employability. Current literature indicates that employers expect community colleges to integrate soft skills in all curricula regardless of the intended employment level for its graduates and prior to graduates being employed (Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Benbow & Hora, 2018; Cheng, et al., 2021; Gauthier, 2020b; Hora, 2019). To this end, a gap exists in current research related to how employers perceive employability of community college CTE graduates and how their perceptions influence hiring decisions.

The efficacy of community college CTE programs is often measured by employers according to the abilities of the program graduates whom they hire for local positions (Gauthier, 2020b). As such, increasingly, employers recognize that technical skills are not enough for an employee to be successful in the workplace. Rather, employers believed that graduates' need to have the ability to "demonstrate their capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their college major" (Hart Research Associates, 2013, p. 1). Essentially, soft skills are as influential in being hired and in future employment success, as career and technical skills. Educational institutions need to recognize the importance of soft skills content in career and technical education programs as critical to their success in supplying workers to the labor market within their district and to the successful employment of those graduates.

During the hiring process, employers often focus on general/soft skills when interviewing candidates (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Benbow & Hora, 2018; Gauthier, 2020a; Hart and Associates, 2013; ICSPS, 2020). These soft skills include written/oral interpersonal skills, problem-solving/critical thinking skills, workplace readiness/work ethic, ability/willingness to learn, and acclimating to the workplace culture (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Benbow & Hora, 2018; Gauthier, 2020a; Hart and Associates, 2013; ICSPS, 2020). For instance, Baird & Parayitam's (2019) study surveyed 50 employers across various industries in the United States who employed 50 or more employees. Employers were asked to rate the importance of skills new graduates needed to get hired. They found that problem-solving, critical thinking, and analytical skills were identified as significantly more important in making hiring decisions by employers than educational credentials across these employers (Baird & Parayitam, 2019). When an applicant portrayed appropriate soft skills in an interview situation, it resulted in employers having a more positive perception of a candidate's employability (Baird & Parayitam, 2019). Understanding the level of influence soft skills have in the hiring process is key to developing CTE content that reflects local employer workforce needs.

The Health Care and Social Assistance Industry is the second largest industry in Illinois (IDES, 2021). Currently, there are approximately 826,000 individuals employed in this industry statewide (IDES, 2021). Health Care is also one of the Top Five Industries seeking new employees in Illinois, with an expected average annual growth rate well above the average for all industries through 2028 (IDES, 2021). Health Care as an industry includes a variety of employers and occupations. Employers such as hospitals, offices of physicians, outpatient and urgent care facilities, and mobile health services. Occupations in Health Care include physicians,

nurses, respiratory therapists, phlebotomists, and health information technologists to name a few. Health Care employers exist in rural, small to medium suburban cities, and large metropolitan areas across Illinois.

Health Information Technology (HIT) is an occupational field within the Health Care industry. HIT refers to the electronic information systems used by health care providers and practitioners to track, store, share, and analyze health data (The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, n.d.). Employees responsible for using and managing these systems are referred to as Health Information Technicians or Technologists (HITs). Approximately 8,400 HITs are employed in Illinois with 529 new job openings expected annually (IDES, 2021). While most HITs are employed within the Health Care industry by health care providers, some are employed in other industries such as in Business Services (IDES, 2021). The scope of this study focused on HITs employability within health care providers, specifically hospitals.

Industry-related organizations such as the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA), the Health Information Management and Systems Society (HIMSS) and others have developed lists of necessary technical skills and knowledge needed for HIT workers (Fenton et al., 2012). However, limited information in terms of research is available on the non-technical soft skills needed for HIT program graduates to be successful in the workplace. A study to determine the HIT workforce needs out of the state of Texas focused on identifying both technical HIT and non-technical business skills needed across all healthcare employers for new hires (Fenton et al., 2012). The non-technical business skills included high quality interpersonal skills, critical thinking, problem solving, knowledge and understanding of the bigger picture of healthcare operations and how HIT personnel fit into that cycle (Fenton et al., 2012). Fenton et al

(2012) findings suggest some overlap in the categorization of specific non-technical business skills with soft skills as defined for the purpose of this study; however, their analysis focused more on the needs for new HIT hires to possess non-technical business skills such as data management and computer application literacy. This study aims to fill the gap in current literature by investigating which soft skills are necessary and considered valuable by healthcare employers who hire HIT workers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study used Pryor and Reeder's Model of Social Stigma (2011) as a theoretical lens through which the research questions were developed, data was collected and analyzed. Social stigmatization theory, originally developed by Erving Goffman in 1963, defined stigma as an attribute that results in a discrediting social difference which yields a spoiled social identity (Bos et al., 2013). Stigma exists in the social context rather than within a person. Although individual views of stigma are affected by social perceptions, negative social perception often results in widespread social disapproval (Bos et al., 2013). Pryor and Reeder (2011) expanded Goffman's theory to suggest stigma manifests itself through four (4) broad capacities: public stigma, self-stigma, stigma by association, and structural stigma. While Gauthier (2020a) used Pryor and Reeder's theory as a framework to study the public stigma associated with community college career and technical education programs, current literature does not address the capacity of structural stigma to affect employer hiring practices. Therefore, this study focused on the existence of structural stigma among participant employers and any influence on employers' hiring practices of community college HIT program graduates.

Structural stigma represents the legitimized and perpetuated status by society's institutions and ideological systems of those perceived to hold a stigmatized condition (Bos et

al., 2013). Structural stigma manifests itself through the criteria and processes put in place by those in positions of power and is perpetuated in social inequalities (Bos et al., 2013) such as access to education or through employer hiring practices. An example of structural stigma might be an organization which predominantly hires the graduates of a specific program, or those with a specific credential, or those from a certain type of educational institution. Understanding if and how stigma may influence others' perception(s) of community college HIT program graduates can better inform educators and administrators as they work with local employers to develop educational programs within their districts. This exploration into the influence of structural stigma on employer hiring practices examined the local, social context in which stigma may exist in an employer's workplace operational systems. A focus on employers' perspectives on hiring through this lens helped to 1) identify whether stigma played a role in hiring regardless of technical skills; and 2) better understand whether having an HIT A.A.S. degree provided any advantage to new community college program graduates.

### **Methodology**

This study used a qualitative research design with a case study approach (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). The phenomenon examined was employer perspectives on hiring CTE program graduates within the field of health information technology. The phenomenon was bounded (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014) by industry and position: employers within the healthcare industry, who employ HITs, and individuals who have a specific role in hiring employees within the state of Illinois. The focus on HIT employers within the state of Illinois allowed for a better understanding of hiring perspectives on community college HIT program graduates seeking entry-level employment in a high-demand career and technical education field.

The study used mixed purposeful sampling (Suri, 2011) to identify participants. Sixteen (16) community college districts were identified as offering a HIT program. A list of employers to be targeted for participation within those districts was derived from a list of employers community colleges utilize for program advisory purposes. Participants were limited to individuals with hiring responsibilities, including human resource directors or departmental hiring managers, within district hospitals. Between three (3) and six (6) employers were contacted per district. Correspondence was conducted via email (Appendix A). Twelve (12) unique employers from hospitals within 11 community college districts that offer an HIT program participated in this study (see Table 1). Participants were given pseudonyms to enhance confidentiality (Algozzine & Hancock, 2016; Saldaña, 2021). Districts participating in the study represented metropolitan (four), suburban (three), and rural areas (four) of the state of Illinois.

Data collection included completion of a brief survey providing general demographic information, completion of a structured narrative response questionnaire (Appendix C), and document analysis of various related hiring documents (Appendix D). Each participant responded to 22 structured questions (Algozzine & Hancock, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) covering topics including attributes important in hiring, perceptions of HIT program graduates' preparation, perceptions of HIT program graduates in the workplace, and challenges in regional hiring. Participants were able to choose to provide their responses verbally during an interview (two) or in written form (12). Two people provided both written and verbal responses. Eighteen (18) unique hiring documents were provided across the employers, including job descriptions and job postings. Initial descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2021) was conducted by reviewing both the interviews, questionnaire responses, and hiring documents. Additional pattern coding (Saldaña,

**Table 1***Characteristics of Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>District Location</b>	<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Hiring Role</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Hiring Estimate/Year</b>
Anne	Woman	Metropolitan	Bachelors	Department Manager/Supervisor	0-5 years	1-5 individuals
Barbara	Woman	Rural	Associates	Department Manager/Supervisor	21+ years	1-5 individuals
Deborah	Woman	Rural	Associates	Department Manager/Supervisor	6-10 years	1-5 individuals
Gregg	Man	Suburban	Bachelors	Human Resources Staff	0-5 years	1-5 individuals
Jane	Woman	Suburban	Bachelors	Human Resources Staff	6-10 years	1-5 individuals
Kelly	Woman	Suburban	Masters +	Department Manager/Supervisor	0-5 years	11-20 individuals
Marilyn	Woman	Rural	Associates	Department Manager/Supervisor	6-10 years	1-5 individuals
Nora	Woman	Rural	Associates	Department Manager/Supervisor	6-10 years	1-5 individuals
Nicole	Woman	Rural	Associates	Human Resources Staff	6-10 years	1-5 individuals
Patricia	Woman	Metropolitan	No formal credential	Department Manager/Supervisor	0-5 years	21 + individuals
Sandra	Woman	Metropolitan	Masters +	Human Resources Staff	0-5 years	1-5 individuals
Theresa	Woman	Metropolitan	Bachelors	Human Resources Staff	6-10 years	6-10 individuals

2021) was then conducted by organizing the categories into themes based on the research sub-questions.

Accuracy of the data collected and confidence in the findings has been ensured by employing a variety of checks during the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Jones, et al., 2014). The following measures were taken to enhance trustworthiness of the study.

Dependability by acquiring the majority of districts offering HIT programs from a variety of districts geographically located across the state (Jones, et al., 2014). Credibility through triangulation, or at least two forms of data sources being utilized to collect data (Jones, et al., 2014), including semi-structured interviews, structured questionnaire responses, document analysis, and clarification of ideas and meanings from participants through follow-up emails. Confirmability through verifying a connection between interview questions, themes established, and the research questions (Jones et al., 2014). Finally, transferability in this study, or meaningfulness to the reader (Jones, et al., 2014), was achieved through thoughtful identification of a problem of practice which relates to not only to the researcher's job position, but also in the problem's relevance to community colleges in Illinois and across the nation.

Regarding positionality, I am an employee in the Academic Affairs Division of the Illinois Community College Board, the coordinating agency for all 48 public community colleges in Illinois. Primary responsibilities of this position are related to the review and approval of new curricula. As such, in this position, I am required to make judgments on whether the applying institution has believably argued the need for their proposed program(s). This research will help me better understand employer's perceptions, within a particular industry, on how community colleges prepare individuals for employment. Findings from this study will not impact decisions made within the context of the position, rather, the impact will be on the larger



scholarly community in better understanding employer hiring practices and their potential influence on the design of CTE programs.

### **Findings**

Four questions guided and informed this study. The first question explored what attributes employers perceived as important when hiring community college HIT program graduates. The data indicated that all employers perceived technical skills as necessary to be interviewed and hired, but additionally soft skills are important to be a successful employee in the workplace. The second question explored how prepared employers perceive community college HIT program graduates to be in the workplace. The data indicated that employers perceive new HIT hires, particularly those with a college degree, to be well prepared both with the technical and soft skills necessary to be a successful employee. The third question explored whether any stigma, positive or negative, exists towards hiring community college degree program graduates. The data indicated that employers saw their organizations as inherently hierarchical in terms of educational needs, but that community college education and particularly a degree, was perceived as a benefit in hiring and to the organization overall. The fourth question explored whether regional labor market differences had any influence on HIT employer hiring practices. The data indicated different regional hiring needs for employers exist; however, hiring practices for HIT positions were consistent across the State and size of employer. The following will outline these findings further.

#### **Attributes Important to Employers in Hiring**

Health information technology is an occupational field generally divided into positions that require an industry credential, which often equates to at least some college education or an Associates degree, and positions that require work experience, but do not require any formalized

education. Table 2 outlines an analysis of job titles and corresponding degree requirements. These varying entry-level requirements stem from the type of skill set required for the position. Positions that required an Associates degree most often required an industry-recognized credential, such as the Registered Health Information Technologist (RHIT) credential offered through the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA), or the Certified Professional Coder (CPC) credential offered through the American Academy of Professional Coders (AAPC). The primary difference being AHIMA credentialing focuses on the mastery of in- and out-patient coding, whereas AAPC credentialing focuses on out-patient coding specifically related to physician services, outpatient claims, and adjudication of physician claims (DifferenceBetween.net, 2015). Employer participants in this study indicated either AHIMA or AAPC credentialing was acceptable wherever specific job titles/positions required it.

**Table 2**

*Example Job Titles by Qualification Requirements*

<b>Associates degree required</b>	<b>Associates degree preferred</b>	<b>Work experience required</b>
Medical Coder	Health Record Ambassador	HIT Service Desk Analyst
Specialty Coder	Medical Record Technician	Patient Service Rep
Release of Information (ROI) Technician/Specialist	Billing Specialist	Health Information Clerk
Clinical Data Analyst	Revenue Cycle Specialist	

In terms of educational attributes hiring managers looked for, employers spoke consistently that the educational level necessary for a given position depended on the specific

position's job duties. When asked how critical it was for an applicant to hold an Associates degree to be hired, Marilyn shared:

Having to have a degree depends on the specific position. Some do require a degree, others do not. So for those that do, it is necessary to even be selected to be interviewed. For those that don't, having an educational background with some HIT knowledge is advantageous.

Regarding technical attributes, employers also suggested that demonstration of technical skill knowledge through an educational credential, such as a degree, or work experience, was a critical factor in making a hiring decision.

Jane suggested that while minimum education levels were not necessarily required for all positions, formalized education equated to a perception of job capability. She stated an Associates degree was "valued" because "we look for employees who have shown they can learn and usually having a degree means a person has gone through a learning process and been relatively successful." Further, employers suggested that having an Associates degree in HIT was a demonstration of specialized technical knowledge and skills in the field. When asked about their perspective towards applicants with a college education in HIT, Deborah suggested, "I think they are seen as qualified. HIT degrees are considered a specialized degree and individuals with specialized knowledge are typically in demand." Barbara shared similar sentiments, "I do believe the individuals with a [HIT] degree are seen as more professional and knowledgeable about the profession." Employers from all 11 districts included in this study indicated that applicants with a college degree, and specifically a HIT A.A.S. degree, were seen as very knowledgeable and well-prepared for a career in this field.

Employers also suggested that being able to articulate that specialized knowledge through demonstration of soft skills during the interview process was equally important. The soft skills

most frequently cited for success as an HIT employee were written and interpersonal communication skills, attention to detail, adaptability, willingness to learn, time management, and a positive attitude. However, employers further attested that soft skills were perceived as being teachable, if employees were willing to learn. Jane shared, "Both [technical and soft skills] are important, but in my experience technical skills are more important because people can be taught (if they are willing to learn and change – be adaptable) how to meet expectations of the employer." In general, employers felt that having a college education, or work experience, dependent upon the open position to which they were applying, would prepare applicants for the work, while necessary soft skills were more employer-specific and teachable according to each employer's needs.

Several employers provided examples of how they trained or brought new hires up to speed on workplace expectations. Orientations for new hires, employee mentors, and departmental training were all used to help acclimate new employees to organizational policies and practices. Topics covered in various orientation activities included communicating and engaging, asking questions, time management, professional behavior, and being adaptable to the fast-paced working environment of health information. Understanding this employer perspective provides insight in two ways. First, educators can incorporate teaching these skills into an HIT context within coursework of educational programs. Second, educators can better prepare students for interviewing by practicing these skills or by helping students learn how to promote themselves as being teachable, willing to learn, and adaptable within the employer's unique workplace.

Employers had HIT positions where educational levels were both required and preferred within their organizations. However, findings suggest that regardless of the educational level

requirement for a position, having a college education and especially a degree in HIT, was particularly attractive from the hiring perspective. Sandra, who hires HIT professionals for multiple hospitals across a large health system network, shared when asked whether having a formalized education mattered in hiring:

I look for individuals who have prior experience or some formalized education/training. If an individual has a college education, degree or some education, and no experience, that would be worth exploring further. My experience has been that college educated individuals are well prepared for the demands of this work.

Theresa, when asked whether holding a degree in HIT was critical to being hired shared similar sentiments:

We require a credential for certain positions, which usually means a degree. Some positions don't require a degree but having a certificate or some kind of education may give an advantage in getting an interview regardless of the entry-level [educational] requirement.

Findings suggest that employers find applicants with some college education, and particularly an HIT A.A.S. degree, to be attractive in the hiring process. Regardless of the type of open position and entry-level educational requirements, employers felt any formalized education would be beneficial to applicants in the HIT field.

### **Preparation of HIT Program Graduates**

While entry-level employment requirements for HIT employees varied according to required job duties, employers consistently shared that some jobs require a formalized education, and some do not. As such, employers supported that among individuals hired those with an Associates degree were perceived as being well prepared for the job. When asked whether individuals with an Associates degree were prepared technically to meet the needs of the position, Marilyn shared:

We have hired several individuals over the years with a degree in health information. They had a good knowledge of the field and how our processes work in general... The individuals I have hired with degrees seemed well prepared and willing to learn.

Further, employers agreed that individuals with a degree in health information technology had specialized technical knowledge, were more familiar with the type of work, the working environment, and working in teams. Sandra responded,

My experience with hiring is that college educated candidates [with HIT degrees] have been successful in this type of work in our work environment... with a degree in HIT it does indicate their specialized knowledge of the field. And it tells me they should know and be comfortable with this variety of work and environment because they have been exposed to that in their educational program.

All the employers interviewed for this study felt that individuals they have hired with a community college education were well-prepared technically for the job. Several employers shared their ideas for what community colleges could incorporate into their training programs to further prepare students for work in HIT. Those ideas are described in more detail within the Recommendations section.

Related to soft skills, when asked if employers felt students they had hired with Associates degrees had the necessary soft skills to be successful in their workplace, one participant, Anne, suggested that soft skills may be up to a new employee's motivation:

I would say they [employees with an Associates degree] have decent soft skills. Most individuals we get with a college education are open to learning and growing in the job, whether that be new tasks or adjusting their behavior to suit the environment. Motivation to stay employed is key.

Overall, employers felt that community college educational programs were preparing students well for employment.

Although in terms of soft skills, how well a new hire acclimates to the work environment can be a matter of getting used to working in a professional setting. For some new hires, they may have never done this before. Nicole shared:

Some individuals come to us right out of [high] school and are knowledgeable about procedures but just don't have any experience working professionally yet. That isn't necessarily the fault of the college. We look for people who are motivated to learn to be better at the technical skills and getting along in our organization.

What this employer perspective suggests is twofold: 1) a new hire's motivation to learn and adapt to their new working environment is key to their success; and 2) that more real-world exposure for students within their educational program could better prepare students for the real-world of work in the HIT field.

Gregg, who hires for a variety of facilities, including hospitals, long-term care, group and private physician practices, stated:

Obviously, technical skills are important because we need the job done... communication, critical thinking, workplace behavior such as professional dress, customer service skills, such as dealing with a variety of people, a positive attitude, motivation to learn, are also important... those we have hired with specialized [HIT] degrees typically have good communication skills, are team-oriented, willing to learn, and present themselves in a professional manner... Those individuals with a college education seem to come in with more soft skills... they ask questions, seek help when appropriate, and generally want to work. This could be the training from the college or inherent to the individual... but I evaluate those hires as good overall. Occasionally new hires will need to sit through some basic workplace orientation.

Employers believed college-educated applicants were more likely to have the technical and soft skills needed in their workplace. However, given technical ability and willingness to learn, new hires with minor deficits in soft skills might just need experience working professionally to improve their skills.

## **Impact of Structural Stigma**

This study aimed to better understand perspectives of hiring professionals within hospitals/hospital networks, one of the major employers of health information technology professionals in Illinois. It is worth noting that all the of hiring professionals who participated in this study were experienced in their field (between two and over 20 years' experience), the majority were formally educated and felt knowledgeable about the education level of their current employees. Participants were asked about stigma, positive or negative, that may exist towards hiring community college degree program graduates. Like many organizations, hospitals are hierarchical regarding educational degrees and attainment. Anne shared:

In health a hierarchy of skills exists with physicians at the top of the technical skill area and hospital administrators at the top of the business skill area. All other employees fall somewhere under one of those main areas but everyone has a role to fulfill and everyone is expected to give their best regardless of their place in the cycle of care.

When asked about whether any stigma, positive or negative, exists within the organization towards hiring individuals with a community college education, or towards new hires with a community college education, all employers believed no negative stigma existed. Specific roles in the organization were expected to have a certain education level, so it was not expected that HIT professionals would have the same entry-level educational requirements as medical professionals.

Participants consistently expressed the idea that “fitting in” to the organization was more related to the individual’s interest to engage with co-workers rather than any differences in educational level. Marilyn shared:

I don’t know of any negative stigmas towards people in this way. I don’t think our organization treats anyone any differently based on their education. I think any differences are related to the specific individual, perhaps their ability or their commitment to the job.



Similarly, Jane indicated that:

The employees I know of that completed community college fit in without issues, but that also depends on the individual and how willing they are to adapt and change for their job and environment. I only see positive for those with a degree. I am not aware of any negative stigma for individuals with a [community college] degree.

Employers further suggested that any college education was perceived as positive towards their specific role and the organization overall.

Participants indicated that a college education was valued, and employees were encouraged to seek additional education and/or credentials which increases their knowledge and abilities in the field. Sandra shared that:

I think it [higher education] is valued. A higher education degree isn't always required but as an HR professional I recognize the value in it because we have had good experiences with candidates who have a college education. Once hired, employees are encouraged to seek further education including a college degree and credentialing if applicable.

Participants shared positive opinions on the quality of applicants based on previous experiences hiring individuals with similar backgrounds. Deborah shared:

We have hired several individuals over the years with a degree in health information. They had good knowledge of the field and how our processes work in general... The individuals I have hired with degrees seemed well-prepared and willing to learn... all levels of education are valued and having a specialized degree I see as a positive in hiring.

Nicole also supported this:

Everyone I can think of over the years who had a degree had the technical skills to be successful... [because of] our luck with these [past] employees we hope to get applicants who have at least some college education. We value education and will almost always interview someone with a specific degree in HIT.

Jane further stated, “[I] would prefer to hire people with an A.A.S. degree. Because we have had good luck with those employees... they are coming in with good communication skills, team player abilities, and a willingness to learn and change for the job.” Overall, the perception of

applicants with any college education, but especially with an Associates degree in HIT, was consistently positive. Employer perceptions suggested that in practice, any stigma towards community college educated applicants positively impacts hiring and “fitting in” with the organization was not influenced by educational level.

### **Influence of Regional Labor Markets on Hiring Practices**

Employers from eleven (11) of the sixteen (16) community college districts who offer programs in health information technology participated in this study. Geographically, these eleven (11) districts represent the State of Illinois well including metropolitan, suburban, and rural areas of the State. Understanding whether hiring practices were influenced by any regional differences was one of the goals of this research. Participants indicated that while the numbers of openings employers have and their ability to attract qualified applicants varies, typically by size and geography, hiring practices across the state were not influenced by either. This was evidenced by employers from districts across the state who suggested they preferred hiring individuals with at least some college education if not an Associates degree. Sandra, from a large employer within a Northern metropolitan suburban area shared, “My preference is to interview those with a college education. Not all positions require one, but I have had good experiences hiring individuals with a college education.”

Deborah, from a small organization in a rural community explained that while they do not hire many coding positions which typically require credentialing and a degree, “We prefer hiring individuals with a college education because those individuals typically have had technical knowledge, good communications skills, and were able to learn other roles [within the organization].” Nicole indicated single location employers from Northern, Southern, Western, and Eastern districts across the state “preference for hiring was dependent upon the position

being filled but that generally speaking their preference was to hire individuals with a specialized degree in HIT.” Nicole stated, “generally yes [I prefer to hire someone with an HIT degree] because in my experience those individuals start off with good communication skills, a positive attitude, willingness to learn, and take on more responsibilities.”

Several employers shared that hiring for remote work vastly widens the applicant pool. Sandra from a large suburban area shared, “We have had the need for ROI (release of information) individuals for some time. We really expanded our remote opportunities, which in some ways has increased our candidate pool, but that doesn’t always increase the quality of applicants.” Nora, from a rural area, shared:

We are a small hospital in a small community, rural area. Our hiring needs are small but sometimes it is difficult getting applicants for all levels of jobs in our department. With remote work being more popular since COVID, we have trouble finding people willing to work in house.

Participants indicated that remote work options expanded the application pool. However, participants indicated remote work has its own challenges, particularly among applicants who may not have experience working in a remote or virtual space. Anne, from a large metropolitan area, stated:

We have experienced some challenges in filling positions lately. For remote positions we hire from a 5-state regional area. Most people today expect remote work only and not all positions allow for that. I think our recent hiring issues relate to the remote environment and learning to deal with issues people have working in the virtual space. Some are technology issues, some are issues specific to individuals who aren’t used to working remotely.

While these employers represent a variety of labor markets across the state, the common perspective was that the remote work environment presents its own opportunities and challenges for the field of HIT. Data suggests that employers across the state experience hiring challenges as expected, where smaller, rural areas have more difficulty attracting qualified applicants than

larger metropolitan and suburban areas. This is not uncommon for occupational areas outside of health information technology as well. However, it is important to note that this study found that regional economic differences in labor markets do not influence hiring practices in this specific field.

### **Discussion**

The goal of this qualitative case study was to better understand how holding an A.A.S. degree influenced hiring from the employer's perspective, specifically within the field of health information technology. The case study approach allowed for an exploration of perspectives resulting in a comparison across community college districts within a specific set of employers. Four conclusions can be drawn from the findings: 1) demonstration of soft skills during the interview positively influenced hiring for HIT program graduates; 2) achievement of a college credential, particularly an A.A.S. in HIT, serves as a proxy predictor of employee success; 3) stigma associated with community college education does not negatively impact hiring or employee success within the hierarchy of healthcare organizations; and 4) employer hiring practices are not influenced by regional differences in labor markets.

Prior research suggested that the soft skills necessary for career and technical education (CTE) graduates to be successful on the job relate to verbal and written communication skills, problem-solving, work ethics and working well with others, and a knowledge of how HIT fits into the broader healthcare operations cycle (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Fenton et al., 2012; Gauthier, 2020a; Hart Research Associates, 2013). This study's findings support existing research in that employers of HIT professionals looked for similar soft skill attributes including verbal and written communication skills. Moreover, HIT employers in this

study sought applicants who could also express their attention to detail, time management skills, adaptability to the changing work environment, willingness to learn, and positive attitude towards work. In slight contrast to prior research, HIT employers felt that soft skills were more employer- and position-specific. Depending on the employee's role, the level of soft skills required to do the job could vary. Employers consistently expressed that with a willingness to learn, ability to adapt, and a positive attitude employees could be taught the soft skills necessary to be successful in their organizations. All employers agreed that a demonstration of high-quality soft skills during the interview process was indicative of an employee's future success on the job.

Prior research also indicated that employers looked for soft skills during the hiring process as a predictor of how well an applicant will meet the job requirements and fit in with their organization (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Fenton et al., 2012; Gauthier, 2020a; Hart Research Associates, 2013). The findings of this study supported existing research and extend it within the context of HIT. The HIT needs of healthcare organizations vary, with some positions requiring formalized education and/or an industry credential and others requiring only work experience. Cheng et al. (2021) found that employers make their hiring decisions based on educational credentials and adjusted their behavior towards future applicants according to the success of those previously hired. Employers in this study perceived applicants who had a college education, especially an Associates degree or an A.A.S. degree in HIT, to be well prepared both technically and with soft skills. Employers also suggested that applicants with a degree would likely have a better awareness of the requirements of the job and expectations of employers in a professional work environment due to their knowledge and experience with educational programs including a work-based learning experience. Employers further shared that individuals they had hired with degrees were often already acclimated to

working in teams, more willing to broaden their knowledge base, and take on new roles. This study confirmed holding an Associates degree signaled to employers that among other soft skill traits, an applicant had an interest in and willingness to learn which translated into a more successful match between employee and the workplace.

Participants in this case study were hiring professionals to work in hospital settings. This study utilized Pryor and Reeder's (2011) Model of Social Stigma as a framework. Specifically, the study sought to understand employer perspectives on hiring through the lens of structural stigma, which manifests itself through the criteria and processes put in place by individuals in power (Bos et al., 2013), such as those in hiring positions. Employers acknowledged that their organizations were hierarchal in nature. However, within this context, employers did not perceive any negative stigma towards community college graduates. In contrast, employer perception was that any college education, including a community college education, was a benefit to the organization overall. Employers felt their organizations valued education and all employers shared having an educational benefit for employees looking to further their education and/or obtain industry credentialing. This might be because, as an organization, hospitals tend to employ larger numbers of individuals with high levels of education. There might be a trickle-down effect in which education at all levels is valued. This might also be because employers, and specifically individuals involved in hiring, are in positions of power. As such, they are positioned to establish hiring criteria for non-credentialed positions and to determine the value of an applicant's educational credential. Though not outwardly acknowledged by participants in this study, the underlying structural stigma associated with a college education, specifically the HIT A.A.S degree, for these HIT employers existed in a positive sense for degreed applicants. In general, employers perceived HIT professionals, regardless of credential or educational level, to

have a valuable role in the cycle of care and to be key members of the healthcare management team.

Finally, in order to offer educational programs that satisfy student interests and provide employers with a well-equipped labor pool community colleges must work with local employers to determine interest and need for new educational programs, as well as align their content with employer expectations. Given the high turnover rate of individuals in the healthcare field as a result of the pandemic (ICCB, 2021), it is important to better understand how healthcare employers perceive and hire community college graduates. Findings in this study support existing concerns many small districts or districts in rural areas of the state have expressed over the years; that the applicant pool for their labor needs is smaller than in larger districts or in districts considered metropolitan and suburban. Regardless, employers from all size districts and areas of the state expressed no differences in hiring practices, only differences in hiring needs based on the skill requirements of their open positions. This was true in metropolitan and suburban districts. Employers in smaller districts or rural areas of the state, however, continue to hire primarily for in-office work. Employers hiring for remote/virtual environments had concerns more related to employees acclimating to the remote/virtual workspace, rather than the size of applicant pool overall.

### **Recommendations**

Findings from this study revealed several opportunities for community college CTE program faculty, administrators, and state level entities to improve HIT educational programming and the success of their graduates. The first recommendation is the incorporation of additional content in educational programming, as identified by employers as key to both

being hired and being a successful employee. Those soft skills include communication skills, in person and over email, attention to detail, adaptability/willingness to learn in the working environment, time management, and a positive attitude towards work. Employers further suggested that incorporating content reflective of these soft skills might help develop students' abilities during the hiring process and once they have been formally employed. The content area suggestions included the following:

- 1) Instruction on and practice with interviewing skills. Employers felt that many applicants came to them with an unrealistic salary expectation for entry-level employment, therefore incorporating information or assignments that allow students to research local and remote entry-level employment could be helpful. Further, they felt applicants could benefit from some coaching on how to provide examples of their abilities outside of the context of HIT, particularly for individuals applying for their first professional position in the field.
- 2) Exposure to a real-world working environment sooner in their technical program. This included a framing of how HIT roles fit into the larger picture of healthcare and various organizations that utilize HIT; exposing students to both in-person and remote work arrangements; how to maintain professionalism communicating in-person, remotely and via various written forms of correspondence; working with diverse populations, both colleagues and customers; exposure to the variety of HIT workplace roles both customer-facing and non-customer facing; and finally, reinforcing being adaptable to the workplace and a willingness to learn new skills/roles.

Acknowledging employers' perspectives on a successful hire/employee by incorporating these content areas into existing and new HIT programs could lead to increased placement for the institution, as well as more successful employment for the graduate and employer.



The second recommendation relates to utilizing employer perspectives in program development and renovation. Program Advisory Committees are not mandated by the Administrative Rules of the Illinois Community College System. However, within the application for approval of a new program community colleges are required to address the use of advisory committees and/or employer partners consulted in the development of the proposed program. The findings of this study suggest that the individuals in hiring positions within community college districts perceived the college as having prepared applicants well, technically, for entry-level employment. Further, the majority of employers made recommendations for including the additional content previously noted. As such, it is recommended that individuals tapped for Program Advisory Committees or for other program development activities (i.e., guest speakers in the classroom or career day-type events, specifically include employees responsible for interviewing and hiring HIT professionals for local healthcare organizations. Doing so could provide community colleges with additional opportunities for meeting local workforce needs and for increased successful student placement.

The final recommendation relates to the continued need for state-level entities to collaborate on educational initiatives and workforce preparation. Exposing students to real-world working environments sooner in an educational program, incorporating additional content that improves an applicant's hiring potential, and specifically enlisting the participation of those individuals responsible for hiring in HIT could be incorporated into state-level initiatives such as Perkins Programs of Study, Workforce Equity Initiatives, and related CTE grant projects. Further, sharing the findings of this study and its recommendations through state-level professional development activities may provide additional opportunities for program faculty to

rethink content of existing HIT-related courses and curriculum to better address the soft skills and attributes identified as high value to high professionals.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to better understand employer hiring perspectives of HIT community college A.A.S. degree program graduates. Does the degree matter in hiring? Findings of this study suggest that, yes, it does. Holding an Associates degree, and especially an A.A.S. degree in HIT garnered interest from hiring professionals in all areas of the state regardless of job market size or the skill level required for open positions. Further, positive structural stigma associated with applicants having a community college education resulted in the degree serving as a proxy predictor of employee success for these hiring professionals. This study fills a gap in current literature by focusing on perceptions of applicants during hiring rather than perceptions of employees currently on the job, or the educational programs that produced them. Findings can better inform community college faculty and administrators responsible for CTE program development, employer engagement, and career preparation. Recommendations are straight forward and suggest minor revisions in program format or course content could better prepare individuals for more successful job placement in the field and enlighten state-level practice on employer engagement.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **SCHOLARLY REFLECTION**

#### **Reflection on the Dissertation Process**

My dissertation journey started during the Summer of 2020, as our society settled in to managing life during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the previous winter, I had been thinking about the end of my career and the “what next?” in life. After nearly three decades working in a state educational agency, I could see retirement on the horizon. With a handful of years left until that milestone, it felt like the perfect time to try to earn my doctorate. I entered this doctoral program excited to learn, not knowing what to expect with each course but looking forward to the journey. Along the way it became evident to me that my work with program approval at the state level left a nagging question in the back of my mind, “Does having a degree matter?”. Almost daily in my review of applications for new programs I see colleges argue that employers prefer hiring individuals with a college education, but more so having a degree provides applicants with a hiring advantage. My aim in conducting this research project was to better understand what employers really believe about a community college education and reveal whether having a community college degree provided an advantage in hiring.

As I reflect on the dissertation process itself, for me the most challenging step was data collection. Understanding employer hiring perspectives requires collecting information from employers. My plan was to solicit names of employers who had participated in helping our community colleges develop programs, such as through participation in a program advisory committee. All the colleges I asked provided names and contact information, and I emailed those employers. One of my fears with this approach was that employers would not be responsive to

my emails, and thus I would not be able to find enough participants to make the study feel legitimate. The initial response rate was decent; however, my fear became a reality as some employers would agree to participate but then failed to set up interviews or canceled scheduled interviews, and others would not respond to follow up at all. It became clear these individuals, who are human resource or departmental hiring managers in medical facilities, are extremely busy professionals who do not have extra time. Ultimately, the lack of interview response resulted in a change to my data collection plan. Because my process included sharing a copy of the interview questions, what I found was that many of the people I contacted responded to the interview questions in writing. For whatever the reasons, these individuals felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts in writing than through an interview. After some discussion about a change in data collection with my Chair, we agreed it made sense to change my plan from using a semi-structured video interview process to a structured narrative response interview process. Fortunately, I collected information from employers representing the majority of the college districts I had hoped to include. I am appreciative of my Chair for working through this with me. Thus, the first lesson learned through this dissertation process is that you must be flexible in your information gathering approach. The plan you start with might need adjusting. What you think might be the only way to gather the data you need may end up being one choice among several paths available to acquire information. As a researcher, you have to be willing to negotiate with yourself how the process unfolds.

Another lesson learned through this process is that legitimacy in research, especially for the novice researcher, is often a personal construct, as findings and recommendations can be valuable regardless of the sample size and breadth. Keep in mind my perspective, because of my

position with a state agency, is typically that from a statewide lens. When I initially identified my topic of interest and my research design as a case study, focusing on hiring practices of employers within one district did not feel representative enough for applicability statewide. I chose to collect data from more than one district because this felt more applicable to the state's entire community college system. Choosing to collect data from multiple districts was inherently more of a challenge and given the issue with responses from potential participants I understand that now. I was able to gather data from the majority of districts targeted. However, accepting that the usefulness of my research is not based solely on the size and/or breadth of my sample helped me to see the value of this work overall and what can be done with it professionally.

### **Application to Professional Practice**

My career has been focused on helping individuals start their own careers through access to community college career and technical education (CTE) programs. As coordinator for the statewide approval process for community college programs, my job is to consume the research our community college staff conduct on potential new programs and evaluate the extent to which their research meets state approval standards and supports their proposal. As such, asking whether the degree students earn through completing our CTE programs matters in hiring seems like a natural outgrowth of the work I do. The findings of this study offer insight into the perspectives of employers and could be utilized by colleges in their own research on program needs and employer engagement. This research will also be utilized as a personal perspective on my professional practice/role in reviewing program applications.

This project helps confirm that the technical content being included in our community college HIT programs is relevant to the field and prepares students well for the workplace.

Employers felt that the new hires with a community college education were well prepared to take on the duties of the position they were hired into. Further, employers felt that new hires who held a community college A.A.S. degree were more acquainted with the general duties required of the job, working on teams, time management, and had a strong willingness to learn. This project also helps confirm the necessity for soft skills to be addressed in community college programs.

Employers repeatedly emphasized the need for high quality soft skills such as communication skills, time management, attention to detail, being team-oriented, having a willingness to learn, and being adaptable to various situations. These soft skills may not always be included in curriculum in obvious ways, however, students who have repeated exposure to developing these skills will likely be more successful in the workplace. In my professional role, I plan to look more deeply into the soft skills content being included in our CTE programs.

This project illuminates the role of employer engagement in program development. Employers, particularly hiring professionals, are busy with little extra time. It is easy for us as educators to make the case for their participation in research for educational programming. This research shows how hiring decisions are not always as easy as an applicant's educational background but are complex weighted determinations that fall onto individuals who must make subjective choices for their organizations based on their own experiences. Furthermore, these hiring determinations are often made in emergent situations where positions need to be filled sooner, rather than later, to keep workflow moving. The quality of employer interactions in the program development process can be much more valuable than the quantity of those interactions overall. Finding local employers whose staff are committed and willing to provide their perspective is critical to developing and maintaining relevant educational programs that prepare

students for local workforce needs. Considering quality versus quantity of employer engagement offers potential for adjusting state expectations in the program approval and review processes.

This project further confirms that community colleges work hard to include employer perspectives and prepare students for the workforce. Applications for program approval from our community colleges allude to this but hearing it from employers helps confirm our hope as educational administrators that the process is working. From my perspective, moving forward with a new program can occasionally stir up some uncertainty for program graduates. I wonder if students will be able to secure entry-level employment and how well they will be prepared for the job. This research's findings are a relief and validation of our state-level policies on employer engagement.

### **Application to Research**

The process of writing the proposal, journal article, and this reflection has been an extraordinary learning experience. For someone whose writing had not been assessed in many years, I admit being self-conscious about my abilities. Getting feedback early on in my writing has been key. Further, throughout the program I utilized both the NIU Library and the Academic Support Center for research and analysis tips, tools, and strategies on conducting research and writing a dissertation. Having access to individuals with an objective view of the project who could teach me how to look for resources and how to organize my thoughts was extremely valuable in this process. Reviewing studies done with similar methodologies or similar topics was also helpful in understanding how to frame my ideas and present them in a more scholarly style, versus the no-frills presentation of bureaucratic writing I had grown accustomed to using.

My perspective on research has evolved since participating in this doctoral program. While the impetus for this project stemmed from my professional role and personal interest, I initially had no real idea the breadth of educational topics out there to research or the use for such projects. I have increased my understanding and appreciation for the research process and perhaps someday would appreciate being a part of another research project team. This project really challenged me to step-up my writing, develop new research skills, and think critically about the proposal and presentation of the study overall. Over the last three decades of my career my writing focus has been more so on providing only the necessary information in the briefest form possible. I better understand the importance of the process and explanation of the process to others so that consumers of the research are not just reading about your findings but also understand the how, why, and the so what of your journey.

### **Conclusion**

Better understanding employers' perspectives on hiring practices directly connects our system's career and technical education programs with their goal of graduate employability. At its core, this research project intended to provide relevant recommendations for community college administrators and program faculty who design CTE programs, but also sought to satisfy a personal need for validation of the state-level process that I have devoted my professional life to coordinating for the community colleges in our State. While the required process of program approval does not always demand much attention by executive leaders in our system, the colleges, administrators, faculty, and students my work ultimately serves has been something I am extremely proud of having been a part of for the last nearly 30 years. This dissertation process has provided an opportunity for me to not only learn and grow as a researcher but also as



an employee in higher education. As my time in this role may be winding down, I hope this research will prove helpful to others in supporting their arguments for program need and in designing curricula that better prepare our CTE students for the real-world workplace, because community college career and technical education and especially the A.A.S. degree does matter.

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APPENDIX A  
PARTICIPANT EMAILS

**Email #1**

Dear XXXX,

I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education & Community College Leadership program at Northern Illinois University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study about your experience as a human resource professional or staff person involved in the hiring process for your organization.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand how employers perceive Community College graduates holding an Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.) degree in the field of Health Information Technology.

The intended benefit of this study is to provide community colleges with additional insight into program content when developing new and revising existing programs, and to contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding employer perspectives on community college career and technical education program graduates. There are no known risks to your participation in this study.

Your participation in my research study is voluntary. Invitation to participate in this study is only being extended to employers in the health care field in locations within a community college district that offers a related HIT program(s), and to staff who are involved in the hiring process.

Participation in the study will require a 60-minute individual recorded interview, via Zoom/WebEx. If you choose to take part in the study, we will arrange an interview time that is most convenient for you. I will then forward an overview of my research study, Consent Forms to allow me to record the interview via audio/video, as well as the interview questions. There is no cost to participate in this study and remuneration is not being offered in exchange for your participation.

Please let me know if you are interested in participating by contacting me at

I am happy to review any study details and answer any questions you may have prior to your consenting to participate. Your participation in this study will be valuable to the continued development of high-quality community college programs in Illinois and to the greater success of your local economy.

Sincerely,

Tricia Broughton, Doctoral Candidate  
Higher Education & Community College Leadership Program  
Department of Counseling & Higher Education  
Northern Illinois University

**Email #2**

Dear XXXX,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Attached is an overview of the study's purpose, a Consent Form for your completion, and the Interview Topics/Questions to be discussed. Also included is a list of related hiring documents being requested. If you have copies of these materials and would be willing to share them with me for the purposes of this study, please email me with the information attached at [REDACTED]

Participation in the study will require a 60-minute individual recorded interview, via Zoom/WebEx. I will be in touch shortly with a selection of dates/times to schedule the interview.

If you have any questions regarding the study or your participation, please contact me.

Thank you again for your participation, as your insight will be valuable to the continued development of high-quality community college programs in Illinois and to the future success of your local economy.

Sincerely,


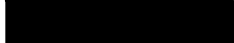
Tricia Broughton, Doctoral Candidate  
Higher Education & Community College Leadership Program  
Department of Counseling & Higher Education  
Northern Illinois University



APPENDIX B  
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**Title of Study:** Does the Degree Matter? Understanding Employer Hiring Perspectives on Community College HIT Program Graduates

### Investigators

<b>Name:</b>	<u>Tricia Broughton</u>	<b>Dept:</b>	<u>NIU</u>	<b>Phone:</b>	
<b>Name:</b>	<u>Dr. Carrie Kortegast</u>	<b>Dept:</b>	<u>NIU</u>	<b>Phone:</b>	

### Key Information

- This is a voluntary research study of employers' perspectives on community college AAS degreed employment applicants and employees. This study involves a one-time interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes with the potential for follow-up contact to clarify information from the interview.
- This study aims to better inform community college faculty and administrators responsible for CTE program and course content development, employer engagement, and career preparation.

### Description of the Study

The purpose of the study is to acquire a better understanding of how employers perceive community college career and technical education (CTE) Health Information Technology (HIT) program graduates when hiring. More specifically, researchers are investigating whether employer perception influences hiring and what attributes employers value when hiring.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Participate in one (online via WebEx, Zoom, etc.) interview up to one hour in length and offer responses to questions related to your employer role in the hiring process to the best of your ability.

### Risks and Benefits

There are no reasonably foreseeable (or expected) risks.

There are no direct expected benefits to participants, however, indirect benefits to the community include improved relevancy of community college CTE programs, better prepared community college CTE program graduates, and an increase in the quality of the local labor pool.

### Confidentiality

- This study is anonymous. We will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity.
- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

### **Your Rights**

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process.

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, feel free to contact the researcher, Tricia Broughton at [REDACTED] at any time or by telephone at [REDACTED] or Carrie Kortgast, Ph.D. at [REDACTED]. 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 as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at (815)753-8588.

### **Future Use of the Research Data**

After removing all identifying information from your data, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

I give my consent to be audio recorded (or video recorded, as appropriate) during the online interview meeting.

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

APPENDIX C  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Note to participants: Thank you for participating in this interview today. You have been provided some basic information on the purpose of this study, but to summarize this study aims to better understand employer perception of CC HIT program graduates, and the influence those perceptions have on hiring practices. You have already provided consent to participate and be recorded today, but I want to assure you that all notes and information I acquire will be kept private and anonymized before any inclusion in the study findings. The interview itself should last about an hour. Are there any questions for me before we begin the interview?

**Broad questions (NOTE: These questions are reflected in the Employer Survey):**

- How long have you been with this organization?
- Please describe your educational background.
- How would you describe your role in the hiring process for your organization?
- Approximately how many HITs does your organization typically hire in a year?
- What is your knowledge of how many employees in HIT positions at your employer have CC credentials?

**The following are conversation topics and representative questions:**

**Attributes Important in Hiring**

- When making hiring decisions, what are some of the attributes to do typically look for in HIT professionals?
- Can you describe how important technical skills are versus soft skills when hiring a new applicant?
- Successful employees often possess technical knowledge and skills to perform the duties of the job, but what are other skills, or soft skills necessary to be successful in your workplace?
- How critical to being hired is it for an applicant to hold an Associate's degree in HIT? Why? Or why not?
- How does previous work experience factor into your decision-making?

**Perceptions of HIT programs preparing students for the workplace**

- When making hiring decisions, how does having an HIT degree factor into your decision making?
- Thinking about individuals you hired with an HIT degree, how did these individuals have the technical skills necessary to meet the needs of your company and the positions?  
Please provide some examples.
- Please discuss your views on how CC HIT programs prepare applicants with the soft skills necessary to meet the needs of your company and position?
- Thinking about individuals you have hired with HIT degrees; how would you evaluate the quality of their soft skills?
- What are some of the technical or soft skills that educators could incorporate into their programs to better align with your needs in the workplace?

**Perceptions of HIT program graduates in the workplace**

- What do you think is the value of a higher education credential within your organization?
- How does your organization value having an AAS degree?
- How do people view individuals with a HIT degree?
- Is this different than individuals without any degree? Or with another type of postsecondary degree?
- How does your organizational culture shape expectations of new employees?
- What is your perception of how employees who are CC CTE graduates “fit in” to the organization? Are there stigmas, positive or negative, for people with degrees?

- In thinking about individuals who have and do not have an HIT degree, do you see differences in performances? How?

### **Regional needs and differences shaping hiring practices**

- What do you think are some of hiring needs and challenges in your region related to healthcare information?
- How do community colleges in your area help meet these hiring needs?
- What are the challenges you experience in hiring based on your location?
- Potential questions based on responses:
  - What are the challenges to hiring people with an AAS degree?
  - Would you prefer to hire people with an AAS degree? Why?
- As an employer, what recommendations would you make to community colleges to better support career preparation for the HIT field?

### **Wrap up**

- Is there anything additional you would like to share about your or your organization's experiences with CC CTE graduates?

Closing: Thank you for participating in this interview today. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me and if you are interested in receiving a copy of the study once complete, please let me know.

## **HIT/HIM Interview Questions**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. To summarize, this study aims to better understand employer perception of Community College HIT program graduates, and the influence those perceptions have on hiring practices.

The following questions aim to reveal what attributes are important to you (the employer) when hiring, your perceptions on HIT programs' preparation of students, your perceptions on new hires in the workplace, and what, if any, are the local challenges you face hiring qualified graduates in this field.

Please respond to any or all questions that apply to your position.

### **Attributes Important in Hiring**

- When making hiring decisions, what are some of the attributes you typically look for in HIT professionals?
- Can you describe how important technical skills are versus soft skills when hiring a new applicant?
- Successful employees often possess technical knowledge and skills to perform the duties of the job, but what are other skills, or soft skills necessary to be successful in your workplace?
- How critical to being hired is it for an applicant to hold an Associates degree in HIT? Why? Or why not?
- How does previous work experience factor into your decision-making?

### **Perceptions of HIT programs preparing students for the workplace**

- When making hiring decisions, how does having an HIT degree factor into your decision making?



- Thinking about individuals you hired with an HIT degree, how did these individuals have the technical skills necessary to meet the needs of your company and the positions? Feel free to use an example.
- Please discuss your views on how CC HIT programs prepare applicants with the soft skills necessary to meet the needs of your company and position?
- Thinking about individuals you have hired with HIT degrees; how would you evaluate the quality of their soft skills?
- What are some of the technical or soft skills that educators could incorporate into their programs to better align with your needs in the workplace?

#### **Perceptions of HIT program graduates in the workplace**

- What do you think is the value of a higher education credential within your organization?
- How does your organization value having an AAS degree?
- How do people view individuals with a HIT degree?
- Is this different than individuals without any degree? Or with another type of postsecondary degree?
- How does your organizational culture shape the expectations of new employees?
- What is your perception of how employees who are CC CTE graduates “fit in” to the organization? Are there stigmas, positive or negative, for people with degrees?
- In thinking about individuals who have and do not have an HIT degree, do you see differences in performances? How?

**Regional needs and differences shaping hiring practices**

- What do you think are some of hiring needs and challenges in your region related to healthcare information?
- How do community colleges in your area help meet these hiring needs?
- What are the challenges you experience in hiring based on your location?
- Would you prefer to hire people with an AAS degree? Why?
- As an employer, what recommendations would you make to community colleges to better support career preparation for the HIT field?

APPENDIX D  
RELATED HIRING DOCUMENTS

The following documents are to be requested from each employer participating in the study and serve to provide some background information:

- Internal/Human Resource job descriptions – These documents typically include a description of the position, duties required, and the minimum/preferred qualifications of the successful applicant. This information will be helpful in understanding whether community college CTE program completion is acknowledged as a minimum or preferred educational requirement.
- Interview questions – These documents include the list of questions the hiring committee will ask each candidate during an interview. Questions may vary according to position; however, the questions will provide insight into the perceived value of candidates' educational background.
- Interviewer notes – These documents represent the hiring committee's personal perceptions of candidates. Notes may provide insight into the hiring committee's perception of each candidate.
- Job postings – These documents advertise employment opportunities and describe the minimum/preferred qualifications for each position.
- Hiring data – Any information the employer may have related to the applicants for recent positions, such as whether any individuals held a CC CTE credential, and any information on the educational background of the individuals ultimately hired. A figure for the number or percent of individuals in HIT positions with CC CTE credential

APPENDIX E  
CONTACT SUMMARY FORM

Today's Date:

Date of contact:

Contact with:

Contact conducted via:

What were the main ideas that stood out from this contact?

What were similarities you noticed with other contacts?

What were the differences you noticed from other contacts?

Summarize information you gained related to the social stigmatization theoretical framework:

Structural Stigma

What questions arose from this interaction?