Communicating the Importance of Careers: Gainful Employment, Organizational Discourse, and the Role of Higher Education

Shelly L. Robinson
Purdue University

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/open_access_dissertations

Recommended Citation
https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/open_access_dissertations/1811

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
COMMUNICATING THE IMPORTANCE OF CAREERS: GAINFUL EMPLOYMENT, ORGANIZATIONAL DISCOURSE, AND THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Shelly L. Robinson

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of Purdue University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The Brian Lamb School of Communication

West Lafayette, Indiana

May 2018
THE PURDUE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL
STATEMENT OF COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Dr. Patrice M. Buzzanell, Chair
    The Brian Lamb School of Communication
Dr. Stacey Connaughton
    The Brian Lamb School of Communication
Dr. Melanie Morgan
    The Brian Lamb School of Communication
Dr. Pamela Morris
    Department of Youth Development and Agricultural Education

Approved by:

Dr. Jay P. Gore
    Head of the Graduate Program
In Dedication:

To my mom, Rose, the sweetest and strongest woman I have ever known. Although she is not here to see me complete this journey, she has been with me every day; To my dad, Don, who told me I could choose to do whatever I wanted in life as long as I went to college and received a degree first, and then worked a lot of overtime in the steel mill to make it possible; To my husband, Doug, who has always been nothing but supportive in every way; and to my kids, Cole and Sarah, who remind me every day that there are still miracles on Earth.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Dr. Patrice M. Buzzanell for her continued guidance and support throughout the duration of this project. I have been blessed to have such an amazing mentor. Additionally, thank you to Dr. Stacey Connaughton for her kindness and encouragement, Dr. Melanie Morgan for reminding me how everyone learns differently, and Dr. Pamala Morris for helping me to think more deeply about multiculturalism. A special thanks to Purdue University for being a source of encouragement and place of lifelong learning for me from BA to Ph.D.

Boiler Up!
**LIST OF TABLES**.......................................................................................................................... ix

**LIST OF FIGURES** .......................................................................................................................... x

**ABSTRACT** ...................................................................................................................................... xi

**CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION** ....................................................................................................... 1

1.1 The Birth of the New Gainful Employment Rule ................................................................. 2
1.2 Gainful Employment Rule ................................................................................................. 11
1.3 Rationale of Study ............................................................................................................. 15
1.4 Summary and Preview ...................................................................................................... 17

**CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE** .................................................................................. 18

2.1 The Push for Education ....................................................................................................... 18
2.2 The Living Wage ................................................................................................................. 22
2.3 The Crash of 2008 ............................................................................................................. 23
2.4 Gainful Employment Rule (GE). ..................................................................................... 25
2.5 The Promise of Financial Aid ............................................................................................ 28
2.6 GE’s Purpose ..................................................................................................................... 29
2.7 Bi-Partisanship .................................................................................................................. 31
2.8 Selecting an Institution ...................................................................................................... 33
2.9 College Scorecard and Proposed College Ratings System (CRS) .................................... 34
2.10 Defining Success .............................................................................................................. 35
2.11 Gallup/Purdue Index ........................................................................................................ 37
2.12 Job Outlook 2016 and Beyond ......................................................................................... 38
2.13 Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................... 39
2.14 Social Construction of Meaning ....................................................................................... 40
2.15 Assumptions of Social Constructionism .......................................................................... 41
2.16 Interpretivism .................................................................................................................... 45
2.17 A Critical Lens ............................................................................................................... 47
2.18 Career Discourse ............................................................................................................. 50
2.19 Small “d” and Big “D” Discourse ................................................................................... 52
2.20 Critical Discourse Analysis ............................................................................................. 53
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY ................................................................................................................................. 58
  3.1 Participants and Texts.............................................................................................................................................. 59
  3.2 Researcher Positionality ....................................................................................................................................... 61
  3.3 Procedures ............................................................................................................................................................. 61
  3.4 Importance/Significance of the study..................................................................................................................... 66

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS ......................................................................................................................................................... 67
  4.1 RQ1: How do students understand or portray their perspectives based on career conversations and experiences? .................................................................................................................................................. 72
    4.1.1 “A Degree is a “Golden Ticket”.................................................................................................................... 72
      4.1.1.1 Memorable Messages About Degree Attainment ...................................................................................... 73
      4.1.1.2 Disadvantages Related to Social Network .............................................................................................. 75
      4.1.1.3 Hypervigilance for Fear of Missing Out ................................................................................................. 78
    4.1.2 “It Is All Up to Me”........................................................................................................................................ 79
      4.1.2.1 Lack of Knowledge of Available Career Options .................................................................................. 80
      4.1.2.2 Efforts to Secure Employment are Self-Guided ..................................................................................... 84
      4.1.2.3 Professional schools are more career-centered ...................................................................................... 87
    4.1.3 “I Was Shooting Blind”.................................................................................................................................. 89
      4.1.3.1 Frustrations over needing experience (for entry-level jobs) ................................................................. 92
      4.1.3.2 Difficulty Identifying Transferable Skills .............................................................................................. 95
    4.2 RQ2: How do students report or share these experiences with others? .......................................................... 97
      4.2.1 Too General to Be Useful, Too Late to Matter ............................................................................................... 98
        4.2.1.1 Lack of Intimacy with Advisors .............................................................................................................. 98
        4.2.1.2 No Specific Advice, No Experts in Their Field ..................................................................................... 99
        4.2.1.3 Services Discovered Too Late to Be Advantageous ........................................................................ 102
      4.2.2 “They Were There, I Just Didn’t Use Them” ............................................................................................. 104
        4.2.2.1 Underutilization of Available Resources and Services ....................................................................... 104
        4.2.2.2 Failure to Recognize Touchpoints and Important Milestones .............................................................. 105
        4.2.2.3 Career Development Not Required and Seemed Optional ................................................................. 107
      4.2.3 “There Are No Guarantees” .......................................................................................................................... 108
        4.2.3.1 Degrees Alone Do Not Guarantee A Good Job .................................................................................. 108
      4.2.4 Mixed messages about preferred trajectories .............................................................................................. 109
4.2.4.1 Following one’s calling does not always result in high pay ........................................ 110

4.3 RQ3: How Do Students Act Upon These Understandings, If at All? ......................... 111

4.3.1 “I Finally Started to Make Connect the Dots” .......................................................... 111

4.3.1.1 More Time, Experience, And Maturity Equaled Greater Insight ..................... 113

4.3.1.2 Need and Appreciation for Mentorship .............................................................. 114

4.3.1.3 Self-Reflection Brings Self-Accountability ....................................................... 115

4.3.1.4 Getting What Is Needed to Achieve Goals ....................................................... 115

4.3.1.5 Opportunities for Improvement in Higher Education ...................................... 116

4.3.2 “Going Back to Get It Right” ................................................................................. 117

4.3.2.1 Education is worth more than a paycheck ......................................................... 117

4.3.2.2 Taking on Debt Gains Access to Networks and Opportunities ...................... 119

4.3.2.3 Advanced Degrees Needed for Future Advancement or Growth .................... 119

4.4 RQ4: What Are the Discourse, Or Cultural Formations, Underlying Students’
Perspectives About the Relationships Between Career and Higher Education? .......... 120

4.4.1 “I Came to Get an Education” ............................................................................. 121

4.4.1.1 Hold No Understanding of GE Disclosures ..................................................... 121

4.4.1.2 Choices Compromised by Pressures to Secure Employment ................. 124

4.4.2 “Is College Even Worth It?” ................................................................................. 128

4.4.2.1 Shift in The Perceived Value of Education ..................................................... 129

4.4.2.2 Willing to Pay Big for Big Results ................................................................. 131

4.4.2.3 Desire Greater Affordability .......................................................................... 134

4.4.3 “Career Success is…” ......................................................................................... 135

4.4.3.1 More Than A Salary, But Also Includes Medical, and Retirement ............ 136

4.4.3.2 More Than Just A Job, But A Career ............................................................. 136

4.4.3.3 Desire Meaningful Work .............................................................................. 137

4.4.4 Critical Discourse Analysis ................................................................................ 138

4.5 RQ5: How Do D/Discourses Among Students and Institutions of Higher Education
Related to Career Reveal Deep Power Relations and Whose Interests Are Reconstituted
Communicatively? ......................................................................................................... 138

4.5.1 Micro Level Tensions ......................................................................................... 140

4.5.1.1 Tension 1: Purpose of Higher Education ....................................................... 141
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Focus Group Participants (Categories adapted from Carnegie Classification System) 60
Table 4.1 Emergent Themes and Subthemes of Student Perspectives about Careers ............... 71
Table 4.2 Micro Macro Level Themes and Tensions ................................................................. 141
Table 4.3 Descriptors in “About Us” Section of Institutional Websites by Type ..................... 145
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1 U.S. Unemployment Rates, 2008-2018 ................................................................. 24
Figure 2.2 Unemployment Rates & Median Earnings, 2015 .................................................. 37
ABSTRACT

Author: Robinson, Shelly L. PhD
Institution: Purdue University
Degree Received: May 2018
Title: Communicating the Importance of Careers: Gainful Employment, Organizational Discourse, and the Role of Higher Education
Committee Chair: Patrice M. Buzzanell

This research examines student understandings of the relationships between higher education and career since the implementation of the Gainful Employment Rule. The Gainful Employment Rule states that education and training programs lead to degrees or prepare students for "gainful employment" in an occupation (USDOE, 2014). Policymakers during President Obama’s administration sought to provide better oversight with increased accountability for low performing colleges and universities and enhance transparency related to the student loan debt crisis by implementing protections for students as consumers of education. These guidelines initially were designed more so for community colleges and proprietary institutions of higher education but the ramifications with the changing of the guard and new leadership with President Trump’s administration will likely expand current policy to include not only four-year public institutions, but all institutions. An assumption is that the stakeholders for whom such guidelines were made would know about Gainful Employment and the practices and events designed to assist students in employability preparation, career development, and lower time to degree completion and debt. Another assumption is that such expanded notions of student success would be built into more linear career trajectories of and discussions about occupational preparation (see Buzzanell & Goldzwig, 1991). However, no one has investigated these assumptions by examining students’ discourses (everyday talk and interaction, or discourses, as well as the societal understandings, discourses, that make mundane language choices and conversations sensible and politicized; see Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Moreover, no one has examined how these discourses might correspond with the text in institutional websites or other materials that are aligned with the Gainful Employment Rule.

Interpretive methods and Critical Discourse Analysis were used to analyze both the transcripts of focus groups with recent graduates and the promotional materials from nonprofit and proprietary
institutions of higher education. These analyses revealed micro/macro tensions related to the purpose of education, determinants of career success, and career development and placement approaches and practices. Specifically, identifying tensions—whether higher education is for personal growth or job attainment, and whether career success is determined by finding fulfillment in one’s work or receiving high levels of compensation, and whether personal and institutional approaches result in career achievement—highlighted how and why there are disconnects between Gainful Employment Rule discourses and intent.

This study contributes to career communication and policy scholarship in organizational communication, particularly that which takes discursive and tension-centered approaches. Moreover, findings indicate that future research and practice would benefit from examination of issues from lenses associated primarily with emotional labor, sensemaking, and resilience. These implications touch on other areas such as meaningful work and career competency theories. They do so by gaining insight into the emotional labor exerted by students as they pursue career success, into students’ sensemaking of their worlds and knowledge related to careers, and into career resilience processes by which student overcome disruptions and create new normals to meet personal career expectations. This study also contributes to current pedagogical and student development practices and identifies future opportunities to better prepare tomorrow’s workforce.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

There are tremendous changes in the U.S. labor force. With the number of employees in the workplace increasing by as much as 10% over the past 50 years and the number of jobs not keeping pace, the need to be more marketable to employers while insuring long-term career success for job-seekers increases as well (U.S. Bureau of the Census & U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). More workers mean increased competition on the playing field in the world of work. The need to seek out career, technical, vocational training, or post-secondary education has become a social and economic imperative. To stress this sentiment even more, hiring managers describe today’s bachelor’s degrees as equivalent to the high school diploma of 100 years ago, meaning that, as more people obtain these degrees, regardless of what institutions they are from, the degrees become more common and potentially less valuable (Lawrence, 2012). To remain competitive for jobs, even those positions that once were considered more labor intensive (i.e., law enforcement, agriculture, retail management) now require a degree or some formal education for their entrée point. For example, an international steel producer may hire engineering technicians for labor supervision positions that once required only high school diplomas. In many cases, the degree is not utilized to its fullest in these positions, but the employer believes this educational requirement results in better hires. Looking forward, labor experts have forecasted that the next decade may bring significant opportunities for workers and the workplace as workforce participation is greatly impacted by an aging and potentially retiring labor force (Toossi, 2015).

Moreover, there has been a significant drop in current labor participation rates since the latest economic recession. Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey (2016), imply that job seekers through 2022 may finally have the upper hand as future demands for an increasingly educated workforce seems necessary (USBC & USBLS, 2016). With the cost of
getting an education on the rise and less federal funding earmarked for higher education, more of those expenses are being funneled directly to students, often by way of student loans (Chen & DesJardins, 2010). Thus, students, parents, and legislators all want to ensure successful returns on the investments in higher education. Simply put, they want to know that good paying jobs will be available in their fields upon graduation.

This kind of assurance and the belief system that undergirds such claim about employment are the core of this dissertation project. Specifically, the aim of this study is to examine how determinants of career success as a result of higher education often differ based on whose point of view is being considered. Policies and legislation, such as the Gainful Employment rule, have the potential to impact institutions and potentially influence programmatic and curriculum choices that contribute to graduate job attainment. At the same time, student perspectives about career preparation and placement and their view on career success not considered. As a result, in this chapter serves as an introduction to the evolution of gainful employment, transforming from "employment" to a definition molded by federal regulations designed to protect students from the burden of student loan debt from their educational or vocational pursuits that must produce a reasonable income or return on their investment (USDOE, 2016). Additionally, in this chapter, an evolving discussion about the notion of a proposed college ratings system and other measures designed to educate prospective students on successful career trajectories and allow for institutional comparisons. Later, the rationale of this study is discussed with a preview of upcoming chapters.

1.1 The Birth of the New Gainful Employment Rule

In late 2007, the United States experienced the beginnings of what now commonly is known as The Great Recession, a word play on the Great Depression, another economic crisis in
American history (The Great Recession, n.d). Spanning 2007-2009, this economic downturn and subsequent rebuilding resulted in two events that simultaneously and significantly impacted the quest for added skills and credentials within the labor force. First, the economic recession forced many employers to downsize their existing labor force, stop hiring new employees, and/or close their doors altogether leading to some of the highest unemployment rates in years (USBC & USBLS, 2016). The second event was an effect of the former, namely, enrollment in higher education soared. Attempts to make a living wage left the unemployed or underemployed struggling to find their rightful place in the workforce. They often could not find comparable jobs to those lost because these jobs no longer existed. Although experienced in the labor force, these workers lacked the updated skills that alternative employers were demanding. Additionally, they lacked the credentials required. Due to these deficits, more individuals sought out higher education to gain a competitive edge. Their efforts to obtain higher education degrees caused an educational boom. Thus, higher education reacted to this great need to train or re-educate those who were not able to bounce back and secure employment expediently. Their initial reaction was to make space for the underemployed and unemployed as well as for the college-aged students who were unable to enter the labor force with viable options.

At the same time, recent graduates avoided the unstable job market and opted to attain advanced degrees with the hope that the job outlook would improve during or upon completion of their graduate studies. Recent graduates and degree-holding job-seekers also hoped that advanced degrees would provide a more sophisticated and/or complex set of skills that would make them more competitive against the other 1.9 million recent graduates who were unemployed (Eisner, 2010). Eisner’s (2010) research on needed workplace skills of the future anticipated that 85% of new job creation beyond 2015 would require a college degree. If workers did not have a degree
or a job during this time, making an investment in one’s future to seek career training of some type seemed logical, even if it meant taking on the risk of student loan debt. This reasoning led to higher student loan debt. Higher education would respond to the increasing need for diverse workplace skills quickly with new training programs, course offerings, and certificates; especially in the for-profit sector that could mobilize such changes with less bureaucratic process.

While workforces were being downsized and companies were closing, displaced workers took early retirement, took lesser positions, left the workforce entirely, or flocked to enroll in public, private, and for-profit institutions of higher education seeking all forms of education (i.e., training, certificates, degrees) as means of advancing in their future careers. The hardest hit was an aging workforce in labor intensive industries whose job skills, once highly sought, had become antiquated or obsolete, and whose members were increasingly being replaced with automation and newer technologies (Carnevale & Smith, 2011). The older workers were those to choose retirement if they could afford it or to choose lesser positions that would require them to work longer in their lives than planned, given the economic crash that left many retirement nest eggs suffering (Burtless, 2016). Additionally, there were increasing numbers of veterans deployed during the Invasion of Iraq (Iraq War) transitioning back to civilian life and utilizing their GI bills to avoid the dismal job market, not unlike the recent college graduates (Sander, 2012). The new GI bills, also known as the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, expands educational benefits for veterans, but also includes the ability to transfer these benefits to their spouses or children (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2008). Veteran benefits changed to better assimilate returning service men and women by providing multiple career options that would avoid long-term unemployment and flooding the job market with veterans.
In short, college and university life, in the post-recession years, was not just for those aged 18-22, typically considered the traditional college student. Instead, a variety of non-traditional students were turning to higher education. Veterans and non-traditional adult learners returned to school, by choice, at a much higher rate than in previous years. As thousands of students sought programs inside and outside the brick-and-mortar schools, many also turned to the for-profit sector (Simmons, 2013). This sector was offering accelerated programs, online/distance education, foundational coursework, and reduced admission standards, much of which were not offered at many public institutions, unless they opted for the community college network. The number of college students in the for-profit sector increased to 2.2 million students, nearly 15% of the total number of enrolled undergraduates (Heller, 2011). More students going to school resulted in greater utilization of Title IV funding (Federal Student Aid) in the form of loans, grants, and federal work study dollars at a variety of schools (USDOE, n.d.). Policymakers were scrutinizing loan default rates, graduation rates, job placement figures, and graduate earnings due to recent lawsuits alleging fraudulence in the for-profit education sector to determine if all the taxpayer dollars that had been poured into higher education was doing what the money was supposed to do, namely, create a gainfully employed workforce. Given how much money was dedicated to workforce development efforts, one might think this closer look was a good thing, but all higher education was not being probed. The deep dive was to focus primarily in relation to for-profit vocational or career schools, which included public two-year community colleges (Hethcoat, 2011).

With the efforts from the Truman Commission (1947) and the Higher Education Act (1965) came the promise of educational opportunities for almost every high school graduate wanting to pursue one credential or another, also known as the Guaranteed Student Loan program. The promise of educational equality contributed to a boom in private and public post-secondary
enrollment, especially in proprietary education, also known as the for-profit sector (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). The guarantee of federal financial aid, which included subsidized and unsubsidized loans, made these attempts to strengthen career development and preparation through education and training even easier for many prospective students who would have never considered college (HEA, 1965). In other words, if a US citizen wanted to go to college, financial status was not going to hold them back. American culture and education-related government policies socialized prospective students to believe every person is entitled to a college education, regardless of college readiness. Increasingly, vocational and career schools emerged. Additionally, sub-par colleges and universities grew out of the need to meet the growing interest in higher education with lower enrollment standards. Students enrolled in diverse types of programs and schools because federal financial aid was made available in indiscriminate ways. What was missing at the time were discussions about accreditation and professional endorsements or a reliable tool to compare one institution over another. Often, it never occurred to these first-generation students or their families to properly vet the institution they were selecting. Often, schools and training programs were not accredited and there were few federal regulations for the industry requiring job placement results or proof that the training could or would help students achieve career success. It was buyer beware. To complicate matters, students with no previous higher education experience or no family members and friends who had experience would have known to ask about accreditation or known the impact of accreditation on the value of their degrees and its economic impact. Even those who never attended college knew it was expensive.

So far, I have highlighted the changing logics, statistics, and rationales for multiple changes in higher education. These changes have included not only the numbers, types, and motivations of students but also desired educational outcomes. These outcomes included certificates, career
preparation, and training, with the venues in which such educational experiences occurred expanding to incorporate public, private, and for-profit institutions of higher education and a variety of career or vocational colleges. A closer look at the growth of the proprietary sector reveals other trends.

From the turn of the century into the midst of the recession, 2000 to 2009, for-profit enrollment had nearly tripled (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2011). The for-profit sector’s programs took less time to complete a degree, provide appealing modalities such as online education, and admit any student who wanted to try college. Many students choosing the college route were unprepared for the rigors of college or vocational training, often opting to leave the institutions before completing degrees (Brock, 2010). More simply, the for-profit sector capitalized on the weaknesses of the competition. While the community colleges offered a good value for prospective students, they also adhered to the standard 16-week semesters and traditional modalities of instructional delivery, like in-person classes, twice a week. Many non-traditional students found the offerings of the proprietary schools more appealing even though the cost was often 10x more than the community colleges. The for-profit schools offered 6-10 week courses whose modalities were both online and, in the classroom, or completely online, and because of this condensed scheduling, they also offered the ability to finish degrees faster. For students who had been enticed by the diverse delivery options and promises of job, the unforeseen reality that they could attempt a program and fail, all while accumulating debt was putting them in even more dire financial situations than before they started their educational pursuit (Remington & Remington, 2012). The student loan default rate was rising not only for this group, but also for the students completing their degrees or programs.
Around 2010, displaced workers-turned-students began to complete degrees. Now, seemingly better qualified, they attempted to reenter the workforce, expecting the transition to be easy. Unfortunately, the job market did not increase at the rapid pace predicted or originally expected and the unemployment rate peaked, leaving nearly six unemployed people per job available in the United States. The Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2009, “9.1 percent of college graduates were unemployed in 2009, up from 5.5 percent in 2005 and 4.4 percent in 2000” (USBLS, 2016). New job creation could not compete with the number of new and sustained job seekers. This phenomenon was difficult for many to understand as the unemployment numbers presented to the public seemed to be slowly decreasing (USBC & USBLS, 2016). What these numbers failed to represent were the numbers of workers who finally just gave up and stopped looking for full-time employment, not because they wanted to leave the labor force but because they either retired or took on permanent part-time work instead (Toossi, 2015). Over time default rates on student loans increased while the unemployment rate remained higher than expected (Remington & Remington, 2012).

Many of the displaced workers who sought workforce development and reeducation had borrowed money not only to fund their education but also to support their costs of living. Requests for deferments to repay loans based on hardship (i.e., unemployment and underemployment) became commonplace. Since taxpayer money funds federal financial aid, the government, specifically policy makers, began to take notice. Degree holders were not making higher wages and were often unable to repay their student loans (USGAO, 2014). The high default rate and inability to repay loans because of low income by degree completers was in addition to those one-time students who tried college and never completed their degrees. The point of discussion for many years that most college students defaulting on federal loans were from at-risk populations
became even more evident. These borrowers often came from low-income families and dropped out of school within a year. This pattern for low-income borrowers was in comparison to borrowers from more affluent families who might have taken out bigger loans, but tended to stay in school longer, complete their degrees, and secure steady employment, allowing them to more easily repay their loans.

The Guaranteed Student Loan program brought on by the HEA seems to unintentionally target borrowers least likely or able to repay loan incurred for an education never completed (Ginsberg & Ginsberg, 1989). Dropouts account for nearly 30 percent of the student population from year to year resulting in high student loan debt with no means, and often no intention, of repaying their debt (Fuller, 2014). This pattern ironically caused more harm than good. These dropouts and low-income degree holders were defaulting the system designed to help them become gainfully employed because they were, in fact, not gainfully employed or they were electing to be underemployed. In fact, failed educational pursuits only widened the income gap, reinforcing inequality for low-income students (Dalton & Crosby, 2015). The default rates and unsuccessful attempts at gainful employment by degree completers resulted in a closer look at the institutions, or at least for-profit institutions (Miller, 2010).

There are, of course, other factors to consider before placing blame for default rates, placement issues (unemployment or underemployment) on the institution. For example, the struggling and highly competitive job market is a necessary consideration. Also, career development professionals can attest to the many students who do everything correctly with regard to preparation and still do not secure what would be considered gainful employment. Reasons for their lack of gainful employment vary. They do poorly in interviews or choose not to accept employment for one reason or another; they may fail to complete a degree due to family obligations,
making it impossible to start paying back their debt. Taxpayer dollars were utilized for all types of education based on a student’s career interests without insurance that the training would lead to increased earnings or guaranteed employment. Federal Student Aid paid for career colleges and vocational training in cosmetology, massage therapy, and barbering with little evidence of growth or demand in the field. Looking for answers to reasons for student default rates, politicians and lawmakers, including the Department of Education, shared accusations of abuse, questions about possible predatory enrollment practices, and the possibility of inflated tuition rates as possible reasons for this trend (USGAO, 2010). A closer look into higher education in all sectors would be forthcoming, but the booming proprietary sector was the primary focus. Undercover investigations by the Forensic Audits and Special Investigations team, part of the Government Accountability Office (GAO), determined that many of these accusations made against the for-profit sector tended to be true (USGAO, 2010). Some of these for-profit institutions were enrolling students to meet demands at such a high rate that ethical considerations such as foundational preparation for higher education were no longer considered standards for enrollment.

On the other side of the debate was the notion that all potential students, whether considered to be ready or not for higher education, could be properly prepared if foundational coursework was provided by the institution. By offering both foundational coursework mixed in with other core curricula it was thought that students would persist through completion of the degree. The additional need for foundational coursework added to the length of time required to complete the traditional two-year associate degree and four-year bachelors degree. Unfortunately, persistence or retention through degree completion did not occur, leaving these students with debt and no degree. Eventually they would default.
Educational reformists claimed recruitment of an at-risk population of students to be considered predatory (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2011). The Gainful Employment Rule, new legislation, was introduced by the federal government so that the industry of education was regulated to protect those being preyed upon and to safeguard the investment made by taxpayers (Gilpin, Saunders, & Stoddard, 2015). It was thought that if a school or program properly prepared students, they would find work and pay back their student loans. If the school or program’s preparation and training did not lead to good paying positions in students’ selected fields, then the preparation was not deemed worthy of taxpayer dollars. If unworthy of taxpayer dollars, the educational program should and would be defunded, meaning the program was no longer eligible to receive Federal Student Aid as a paying contributor to support completion. This assumption of causality was and remains the premise upon which the Gainful Employment Rule (GE) was built. Simply put, educational providers must prove return on the investment in education.

In sum, this section provided an overview of contemporary higher education and why a need existed for the creation of gainful employment rules. Now that the rationale and overview for this study has been presented, I next define the federal definition and implications of GE.

1.2 Gainful Employment Rule

In a traditional sense, college was all about learning arts and language in years past. In a pragmatic sense, especially as a career development specialist in higher education and a first-generation college and graduate student, I have viewed gainful employment as the primary purpose for college. Students select a vocational or technical school or an institution of higher education to be properly prepared for the world of work and to achieve successful employment outcomes. The assumption was that the more education one received, the more employable one became. This kind of thinking about the underlying pragmatic value of education has been part of the American way,
a core belief or common-sense notion that education provides a gateway to prosperity and success (Podeschi, 1982). It is one basis of the American Dream where effort, persistence, and hard work enable anyone in the United States to have a better life regardless of the individual’s origins (Bernstein, 1997).

Past research has shown that with each additional level of education one attains, the individual’s overall income grows exponentially (Dalton & Crosby, 2015). With these beliefs and empirical evidence for the economic value of education, then questions were raised. If indeed hard work and higher education were supposed to lead to positive outcomes, then why were so many educated people defaulting on their loans? Although bipartisan talks about legislation began much earlier, in 2014, the outcry from legislators for federal regulations and oversight for higher education increased. Proposed enforcement more commonly known as the “Gainful Employment Rule,” (GE) was enacted (Audette, 2011). Failure for institutional compliance to these federal regulations would lead to accreditation issues and defunding, or more specifically, “the inability for institutions to utilize Title IV funding for a period of three years or more” (USDOE, 2014).

The underlying logic for GE was based on a series of seemingly obvious causal statements. If students could not obtain financial aid, they would not enroll. If students could not pay for a particular program, the program would naturally become defunct because there would be no way for students to self-pay, decreasing demand. Over time, the proprietary schools would be impacted the most, especially those who seemingly made educational attainment a “big business.” These proprietary institutions would then reinvent themselves or go bankrupt due to the ineligibility to receive federal dollars for tuition payment. Without aid, the programs were no longer affordable or desirable.
One example of how defunded programs no longer thrive can be seen in the demise of Corinthian Colleges, which included Everest and Heald Colleges and WyoTech. Investigations by state attorneys, lawmakers, and the other governmental departments caused the Department of Education to delay tuition payments to the school, resulting in forced closures and the sale of nearly 100 campuses nationwide (Hannan, 2014). With most for-profits getting nearly 90% of their tuition payments from Federal Student Aid, greater scrutiny and strict enforcement of federal GE guidelines will likely impact the industry for years to come (Tierney, 2011). High-ranking officials at for-profit universities (such as DeVry University, University of Phoenix, and others) are working to comply with the imposed GE guidelines, but have expressed concern throughout the process. They, along with some outspoken government officials, believe the for-profit sector has been unfairly targeted. In response, they ask for accountability measures for all institutions, non-profit and for-profit (McCain, 2011). Their concerns are not unwarranted. Although most schools (public, private, and for-profit) felt the impact of GE rulings in some way, the Department of Education’s “Dear Colleague” letter fails to fully explain reasoning for the distinction between sectors. The distinction requires reporting for all for-profit degree programs and excludes non-profit degree programs (USDOE, 2011).

When the Obama Administration shared the final GE rules, public and private non-profits seemed somewhat sheltered by the rules. Non-profits were shocked when the Administration announced another form of assessment for all sectors. Not much after GE going in effect, later in 2014, President Obama announced what came across as an add-on to GE, namely, his intent to initiate a college ratings system (CRS) (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2014). The CRS was implemented in the 2015 school year and promised to educate students (consumers) on the value of their education by providing consistent and transparent empirical data-driven information that
would allow for proper comparison of one program or school to another (Shear, 2014). The plan also requires increased student accountability on progress toward degree completion and specific systems that enabled institutions to track and link financial aid to performance. Students could no longer expect to take their time to finish a degree in six or seven years, nor could students expect to fail their courses and still receive funding. The biggest surprise to higher education was that CRS impacted all four-year institutions regardless of their for-profit or not-for-profit status by providing similar information as required by GE and adding student performance factors (Eaton, 2014). A poor rating would have consequences. Poor performance on the scorecard would result in accreditation and enrollment issues that may significantly impact students enrolled in struggling programs and the programs themselves. In other words, the degree and depth of monitoring programs and outcomes would be unprecedented.

Furthermore, how students select schools and spend their financial aid also would come under the purview of these changes. Specifically, school selection and financial aid spending would be influenced by specific pre-determined outcomes. The Obama Administration’s implementation of a scorecard and college ratings system (CRS) was an attempt to reform education by creating transparency for prospective students from the onset and ultimately help them become educated consumers of higher education (Field, 2013). This added knowledge about student outcomes compiled and regulated by the federal government was designed to assist students and parents in making better choices in relation to college selections and cost. With standardized comparisons, students and parents could compare statistics when considering multiple institutions for admission. The scorecard laid out information on cost, graduation rates, and career outcomes (also known as job placement statistics) to provide greater insight into the
value or return on their educational investment. This rating system, not yet fully implemented at the time of this dissertation writing in 2017, would allow for comparisons from school to school.

What these compliance measures did not adequately convey is that many academic institutions with lower scores are those catering to low-income families or providing remedial or foundational coursework that other institutions of higher education stopped providing (Collins, Jenkins, Strzelecka, Gasman, Wang, & Nguyen, 2014). In other words, with scorecards and standardized information driving program and institutional decisions, a logical consequence would be institutional curtailment of admissions by any but the strongest applications. It would seem easier to have stronger outcomes when an institution limits those whom it serves. Like the misleading unemployment rate that did not accurately reflect when job seekers gave up their job search, the scorecard ironically may have hurt institutions serving traditionally disadvantaged communities and individuals who could benefit most from higher education. With this background in mind, in the next section, the rationale of this study is discussed.

1.3 Rationale of Study

Although regulatory compliance surrounding GE and the introduction of CRS has brought tremendous attention to higher education, it seems shocking that more focus has not been given to the communication surrounding gainful employment and its alignment with “career success.” Examinations into discourse, both institutional and how practitioners’ practices share or communicate the importance of career development and ensure successful outcomes is unclear. More specifically, despite the impact regulatory issues are having on higher education, there has been no recent research that examines or seeks to understand how student perceive the relationships between higher education and career since the implementation of the Gainful Employment Rule. Discourses seek to define what organizations find significant as displayed
through their everyday talk and text and prescribe what the public should pay attention to resulting in interpreted meaning and practice (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). This research study seeks to fill this gap and others by examining how organizations, specifically institutions of higher education for the purposes of this project engage in d/Discourse around how the institutions position and frame the institution (via websites and promotional materials administrative, organizational, academic, and development choices) internally and externally. Additionally, the research study seeks to examine how recent graduates: (a) recall these career discourses; (b) understand or portray their perspectives based on these conversations and experiences; (c) report their understandings to others; and ultimately (d) how they act upon these understandings (if at all).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is one method that enables scholars to understand how administrators acting on behalf of the institutions they serve, and recent graduates constitute their social reality and construct meaning (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009). Organizational scholars understand that using focus groups can allow for interpretation of the discourse utilized surrounding GE by capturing a snapshot in time. Deeply rooted in the field of communication studies is critical discourse or textual analysis (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson, & Walker, 2010). Thus, scholars should seek to find meaning and specialized characteristics of given discourses surrounding GE. The acts of negotiating, decision-making, positioning, and framing are constructed communicatively. Therefore, in addition to focus groups, this study conducts a textual analysis of the d/Discourses to deconstruct the policy and the institutional reaction and student understandings to the policy through an organizational communication lens. With consequences being so great, administrators may “teach out” or phase out poor performing programs (as determined by federal regulations), regardless of popularity or need.
In addition to the imposed federal regulations, decisions related to admissions standards, programmatic offerings, and more can be impacted drastically. How will institutions deal with students seeking degrees for personal growth and enlightenment and no hard-core career plans? How will they counsel graduates accepting low-paying jobs, or opting to volunteer or complete community services upon graduation? How will they quantify the students opting for entrepreneurialism or working in non-related career fields? Will young mothers be stigmatized for choosing to stay at home with their kids after graduation because placement is the only acceptable outcome in the eyes of the institution? These are questions and issues that may affect higher education with these new regulations.

1.4 Summary and Preview

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed today’s workplace challenges and provided brief introductions to regulatory issues surrounding the Gainful Employment Rule (GE). To better understand the evolution of GE regulations and gain better context surrounding the discourse and communicative challenges facing institutions of higher education, in Chapter Two I review the literature surrounding GE by providing a historical glimpse of thoughts and motives leading to today’s regulatory compliance. Additionally, I highlight the theoretical framework driving my study while taking an interpretive critical lens and pose my research questions. In Chapter Three, Methodology, I discuss the term discourse, advantages of focus groups, the utilization of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as my primary method.

The next chapter begins with a historical overview of social and political views on higher educational from the late 19th century to present day.
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 The Push for Education

As early as 1889 the historical monograph provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior to the Commissioner of Education captured discussions related to ranking or classifying what was or was not an institution of higher education (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1890). There was a clear distinction between jobs requiring a college degree and those deemed as needing lesser vocational training of the time. Training was necessary in careers like farming and mechanics, but often occurred on the job or through apprentice programs over long periods of time. These types of training allowed workers to gain knowledge in their respective fields but did not have the prestige value or theoretical basis for why things were done in particular ways. The use of the term “college” or “university” did not apply to manual trade programs or other vocational training programs, as those titles were reserved for schools considered to provide superior education (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1890).

Since 1898, there have been many alternative views on the purpose of higher education. There have been traditionalist and revisionist interpretations by scholars and sometimes lawmakers and politicians. Blackburn and Conrad (1986) describe the traditionalist view held since the Civil War Era that “Colleges exist to develop people intellectually, so they become creators of knowledge and solvers of problems both natural and social. Colleges exist to prepare people for vocations that society needs” (p. 212). Blackburn and Conrad (1986) summarize the revisionist view on higher education of the 19th century as a time of growth, believing that knowledge and innovation were occurring at such a fast pace that there became an increasing need for more disciplines and sub-disciplines, more experts and expertise, and in the end more choice for prospective students.
In their book, *The Shaping of American Higher Education*, Cohen and Kisker (2010) discuss how 19th century Americans viewed education as a “means to ascending from lower to middle class and from middle to upper class” (p. 123). This view of education was and remains part of a belief system that has gained even more interest and credibility over recent years. Gaining access to colleges and universities had been an issue of admissions, finance, and access in higher education as early as the 1920s, the system of the time simply could not accommodate the admission of all prospective students seeking entry into the institutions (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). This demand opened the door for the growth of private and for-profit education. For-profit education is not new to our era, the industry and its exponential rise has been around for decades just waiting for the right opportunity to grow. In fact, Ruch (2003) writes about the growth of the sector in his book, *Higher Ed, Inc.: The Rise of the For-Profit University*. He writes that for-profit education stems from Colonial America where founding fathers sought to fill a need.

Benjamin Franklin was an early advocate of higher education as an industry. At the time, traditional universities followed the Oxford and Cambridge models, teaching theology, literature, and language. When people sought skills in trades or more applied skills like reading and writing, they often paid personal instructors to teach the desired skills. This was often a way for clergymen and others to supplement their income. Franklin was an advocate because he believed by teaching trades and other needed skills; the community would become skilled and contribute to economic growth. Classes for women in crafting and sewing were also popular. In addition to women, this form of education also served minority populations such as Native Americans and those with disabilities. At the time, the for-profit sector catered to law, medicine, and even specialty schools for those with disabilities. History seems to repeat itself, as the boom in for-profit education during the Great Recession occurred due to demand. The traditional university changed as a result.
In the mid-1900s, the curriculum acceptable in higher education shifted as the system grew and broadened to more practical and applied interests. The shift focused on more specialized and/or professionalized careers such as farming, social service, teaching, and journalism. The shift also transformed considerations about what was or was not a labor or trade occupation (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Some occupations requiring training that was more technical and artistic found their way to the junior colleges, now referred to as community or vocational colleges. Higher education continued to add programs until almost any specialized area of study was available. Great debate over the role of universities existed between the academy and government during this transformational time in higher education. The question was whether universities should be preparing students for professions or focus on true scientific inquiry and scholarly development. Many scholars believed universities should allow other agencies to take over vocational and technical education. Others believed the university was more about the experience, conservation of knowledge, and passing on a higher culture (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). With this discourse, the collegiate experience became a place for young adults to mature, find themselves, and assimilate into society.

In the 1950s, great attention was paid to the boom in higher education. Commissions focused on how state systems should look. Junior colleges would offer two-year degrees, while universities would handle bachelor’s degrees and graduate education. Not unlike today’s lawmakers and politicians (e.g., Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders), free higher education to the 14th grade or completion of junior or Community College was recommended. This movement would increase access and equality in the quest for educational enlightenment and overall opportunity (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Governance and regulation emerged increasingly allocating taxpayer dollars to student services (Higher Education Act, 1965). The Higher Education Act of
1965 (HEA), often referred to as Title IV, stated that all students, not just those academically prepared, could utilize federal financial aid at any of 5,400 institutions deemed eligible, regardless of whether they were for-profit, non-profit, public, or private. To be clear, a student’s need (financially or their desire to pursue an education) was paramount to their ability to be successful in any of the institutions. The view of higher education was no longer one of just an elitist opportunity. Education was now available through federal funding for those that wanted it.

The workforce also was changing. More members of the workforce sought alternative routes to a college degree. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics identified that part-time student who worked in roles off-campus was on the rise in the 1990s (Ruch, 2003). This increase often occurred because education was a way for non-traditional students or adult-learners to secure promotions through job skill improvement. These workers seeking professional growth and job security often matriculated to the junior college system (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Due to great demand for access to higher education, proprietary or for-profit institutions had flourished in the United States since World War I. Due to the Higher Education Act, these alternative programs increased in popularity even more after regulatory changes surrounding usage of federal financial aid and GI Bills occurred during the mid-1960s and early 1970s. These regulatory changes aligned these institutions as partners in educational opportunity (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). For-profit institutions were popular for many reasons such as they minimized the number of electives seen in the more traditional bachelor’s programs of today. As time passed, online education, evening and weekend classes, and time to degree (shorter than four years) all influenced the popularity of these types of offerings. Financial aid was available. Although regulatory compliance protocols have been in place, default rates on student loans remain higher in for-profit programs when compared to the public sector (Cohen & Kisker, 2010).
The primary differences between colleges and universities in the 1940s were how they viewed the social role of higher education (Hofstadter & Hardy, 1952). Universities contributed to research and knowledge; colleges oriented toward “community” and meeting the needs of society, which included commercialization and industrialization. Hofstadter and Hardy (1952) talked of the democracy of higher education as access and equity for all, specifically in the public universities and junior colleges. Colleges were less exclusive and referred to as mass education, admitting students who lacked intellectual abilities, interests, needs and capacities. Mass education at the college level was different because enrollment standards were lower, and the admitted students often needed large amounts of foundational coursework to achieve a satisfactory starting point when compared to university admissions with higher standards for entrance. Today, these courses are available in the junior or community colleges, so students can prove themselves as qualified students before moving on to baccalaureate programs.

2.2 The Living Wage

Per UC Berkeley’s Labor Center, the Self-Sufficiency Standard determines the living wage needed by adults to meet their basic needs without receiving additional help of any kind from others or agencies, also known as the poverty level (Labor Center, 2016). There have been times in this country when there have been more jobs than workers, but that was well before our latest recession of 2009. In fact, per the Economic Policy Institute, the last time there was a 1:1 jobseeker to job ratio was December of 2000 (Shierholz, 2010). Related to this concept, the ability to earn a living wage is gainful employment. Utilized since the 1900s, the term “gainful employment” defined workers over the age of ten who secured a job, and thereby were considered employed (Bose, 1984). The turn of the 21st century was a different time for the labor force and higher education in the United States, as compared to the 20th century, decades earlier when college was
a designation for an elite few. Strict child labor laws did not evolve until 1938 (Taylor, 2015). Many children started working the family farm or business as a family duty rather than to receive a paycheck. Over the years, the legal definition of gainful employment began to evolve by society and in the legal context.

In the late twentieth century, there were stipulations on, not only gainful employment, but the definition of work. Jablin (1987) posited preparatory work or work that prepares one for real work (i.e., part-time, unskilled, student work, volunteerism) is not “real work” at all. Clair (1996) explicated the notion and further defined what was or was not “a real job.” Her findings defined gainful employment or “a real job” as one that brought money, utilized an education, and fell into a standard 9-5 day. More simply, it was “working for an organization and being paid well for work” (p. 253). In the twenty-first century, the definition of gainful employment evolved once more. This transformation came with greater stipulations and a more specific focus than Bose’s (1984) definition taken from the Census of 1900, specifically for college graduates. For the Department of Education (DOE) these past definitions would no longer be acceptable. I discuss their new definition and implications later in this study.

2.3 The Crash of 2008

The stock market crash of 2008 was not just a year when we experienced an economic recession or the burst of the housing bubble, but also the start of an upward peak of unemployment. In January 2008, the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) reported an unemployment rate of 5.0%, by October 2009, that rate had reached 10% and would take until September 2015 to return to normal levels (see Figure 2.1).

Not since the Great Depression of the 1930s has the United States experienced such extreme changes to the job market. Katz (2014) discussed causes, consequences, and possible
solutions to the job market crisis suggesting that to keep up with civilian population growth, the United States needed 10.6 million more jobs to get back to the employment rate before the start of the Great Recession in late 2007 (Katz, 2014). Youth (ages 16-24) often did not even attempt to find employment and instead sought out higher education in hopes of a quick turnaround. Teenagers found themselves competing with displaced workers for hourly jobs. Other older workers who found themselves displaced sought out higher education for more technical skills in hopes of greater marketability. Oreopoulos and Petronijevic (2013) stressed that college-educated adults with bachelor’s degrees out-earned those with only high-school diplomas by 84 percent ($1.2 million over a lifetime for those with bachelor’s degrees, compared to $780,000 for a high school diploma).

Figure 2.1 U.S. Unemployment Rates, 2008-2018
Additionally, in February of 2009, President Obama promised to increase the number of college graduates per capita from the United States to regain our place as an academic superpower (Guida & Fugili, 2012). This economic recession, coupled with joblessness, resulted in higher default and deferment rates of those with federal financial aid in the form of student loans. Determining the cause of why these educated individuals could not repay what they borrowed became important, since federal funding covered most of these loans. Although the job market was terrible, finding jobs that paid wages worthy of the education they had received was an expectation. Interestingly, blame for the loan default problem was not put on the borrower (aka the job-seeker) nor attributed to the recession. Lawmakers and politicians sought answers to the default problem from the institutions of higher education who provided workforce preparation.

2.4 Gainful Employment Rule (GE)

In 2010, the Obama Administration introduced the Gainful Employment Rule to America. The Gainful Employment Rule (GE), created and enforced by the Department of Education, protects students from low-performing or predatory career colleges as prospective students consider enrollment in training and education opportunities. Schools preparing students for "gainful employment in a recognized occupation" must abide by GE rules (USDOE, 2011). The regulations attempt to identify programs that provide “affordable training” and lead to “well-paying jobs” in comparison to programs that leave students with high amounts of student loan debt and poor earning potential and capacity. These governance efforts seek greater accountability by requiring institutions to provide student outcomes on program costs, graduation rates, earnings within six months of graduation, and how much student loan debt that students accumulate. This information is to assist consumers of education when making choices about training and education.
These regulations also serve to help the government “to protect students from deceptive practices on the part of some for-profit colleges” (Gainful Employment Rule, 2014).

Under the new Gainful Employment Rule (2014) regulations, proposed in 2010 by the Obama administration, a training or educational program leads to gainful employment if students’ annual loan payments do not exceed twenty percent of the graduate’s income after paying for necessities like food and housing (also known as discretionary income). Colleges or training facilities with programs that exceed these amounts would be at risk of losing taxpayer-funded federal student aid dollars. The intent behind this new regulation is that the “worst performing programs” would lose eligibility to receive federal funding (financial aid) toward these failing programs. The inability to receive federal financial aid would likely mean fewer students to pay their bills as prospective students seek education and training elsewhere (Gainful Employment Rule, 2014).

The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE, 2015) had estimated that “about 1,400 programs serving 840,000 students--of whom 99 percent are at for-profit institutions--would not pass the accountability standards.” These federal regulations provide oversight to entities offering career and vocational training, most of them falling under the for-profit sector (Audette, 2011). Many contend the rule specifically targeted the for-profit sector, primarily because a handful of these organizations were committing abuses (i.e., inflated placement rates, high debt-to-income ratios) (Deming, 2010; Hethcoat, 2011). Others contend this focus occurred because the for-profit sector was collecting 25% of all Pell Grant spending coupled with higher student loan default rates than public institutions (Marcus, 2010; Serna, 2014). To protect students from future abuses, the DOE evaluated 53,000 educational programs that resided in public, private, and proprietary schools. The DOE’s findings reported that 40,000 of the evaluated programs that would be labeled
as career and technical training programs and fall under GE, were from traditional non-profit institutions, primarily community colleges (Marcus, 2010). It was not until the fall of 2014 that federal regulations on GE became clear (Gainful Employment Rule, 2014). The DOE finalized how it was now defining gainful employment based on borrowing, earnings, and loan repayment (Jones, 2014; Miller, 2010). This did not mean that all those impacted by GE just accepted it. Many institutions fought back and continue to do so even though the rules became effective on July 1, 2015.

Impacting proprietary institutions, the hardest, discussions about equity and access reignited. Guida and Figuli (2012) highlight that these institutions serve more students who are at greater risk of failure to complete any education program in many cases, with larger proportions of students being low-income and minority populations. Additionally, populations served by the for-profit sector borrow more and default at higher rates as well on these federal loans, both subsidized and not. There have been arguments that the type of program and the quality of a program are not the primary reasons for these failures and defaults. Switching these students to the public sector would not necessarily increase the persistence for completion of programs nor reduce the default rates, switching students might simply reduce the overall amount of debt the students incur. Concerns that some institutions may reduce access to at-risk students by choosing not to enroll them which is in direct contradiction to the original intent of the HEA (Guida & Figuli, 2012). Usage of Federal State Aid plays a big role in the GE rules. The metrics used to assess a program’s success and determine whether it remains eligible for Title IV funding include their debt service to total earnings ratio, debt service to discretionary income, and a loan repayment test (Gainful Employment Rule, 2014).
2.5 The Promise of Financial Aid

As discussed earlier, the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), often referred to as Title IV, stated that all students, not just those academically prepared, could utilize federal financial aid at any of 5400 institutions deemed eligible, regardless of whether they were for-profit, non-profit, public, or private. To be clear, students’ need was paramount to their ability to be successful in any of the institutions (Guida & Figuli, 2012; Higher Education Act, 1965). Financial aid can consist of grants, scholarships, work-study, and loans that are both subsidized and unsubsidized. Again, since these aid dollars are need-based, academic preparation for the non-traditional (students entering college after 25 for the first time) is not a consideration. These non-traditional students are more likely to attend for-profit institutions because of the flexibility of delivery, length of educational program, lower admission standards, and foundational coursework provided (MacQueen, 2012).

The DOE identifies risk factors impacting this underserved population, often identified as “at-risk students” with seven characteristics. These characteristics include: waiting or delaying enrollment in a postsecondary program, attending only part-time, working full-time while attending, being financially independent from their parents, having children (or other dependents) other than a partner or spouse, being a single parent, and receiving a General Educational Development (GED) certificate instead of the standard high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). At the same time, this population is more likely to over-borrow when selecting a program and committing to borrowing aid. Because the at-risk population are more often lower income so the additional access to loans to pay for books, supplies, and direct living expenses is enticing at that moment, the long-term impact of those choices may be unclear to the student at the time. Students borrow at the maximum allowable limits leading to excessive debt. If they drop out, the loans come due and they have no credential to secure progressive employment or a steady
means of repayment. Current laws tie the hands of institutions allowing students to borrow as much as they qualify for even if it exceeds true need or the long-term ability to pay the amounts back (Guida & Figuli, 2012).

Additionally, although over borrowing is an issue, as are the other risk-factors mentioned, the fact that many federal grants have few stipulations on academic preparedness are a large part of the problem. Many quality schools have stopped offering foundational coursework and increased their admission standards. Thus, pre-requisite work must be completed elsewhere. The fact that students can utilize grant dollars at the institution of their choice, regardless of whether they pass the classes, contributes to the problem. The DOE anticipates that by identifying substandard schools and programs via GE, an accrued savings of $4.3 billion can occur by 2024, simply because poor performing programs would be ineligible to receive Pell Grants (DOE, Executive Summary, 2014). This projected savings leads into discussions about the primary purpose of GE.

2.6 GE’s Purpose

The GE action’s primary purpose is defined clearly in the DOE’s (2014) Executive Summary:

The regulations are intended to address growing concerns about educational programs that, as a condition of eligibility for title IV, HEA program funds, are required by statute to provide training that prepares students for gainful employment in a recognized occupation (GE programs), but instead are leaving students with unaffordable levels of loan debt in relation to their earnings or leading to default. GE programs include nearly all educational programs at for-profit institutions of higher education, as well as non-degree programs at public and private non-profit institutions such as community colleges. Specifically, the Department is concerned that a number of GE programs: (1) Do not train students in the skills they need to obtain and maintain jobs in the occupation for which the program purports to provide training, (2) provide training for an occupation for which low wages do not justify program costs, and (3) are experiencing a high number of withdrawals or “churn” because relatively large numbers of students
enroll but few, or none, complete the program, which can often lead to default. (USDOE, 2014)

Because many schools have increased admission standards and degree offerings, aspiring students are seeking higher education elsewhere, this often means the community college system, trade schools, or the for-profit sector. These institutions understand they are filling a certain gap that exists in academic preparation and that there is a need for students to attain degrees and affiliated credentials. Many at-risk students become referrals to junior or community colleges and turned away from traditional programs. The for-profit sector in higher education is happy to address the foundational issues these students face and in more convenient delivery methods. Since federal grant regulations do not bind for-profit institutions, how they spend their profits are solely up to them. Large amounts of money are spent each year on marketing and recruiting new students. This enthusiasm to enroll mass amounts of students has sparked even more questions and concerns from the government that views these programs as more opportunistic than altruistic:

We are also concerned about the growing evidence, from Federal and State investigations and qui tam lawsuits, that many GE programs are engaging in aggressive and deceptive marketing and recruiting practices. As a result of these practices, prospective students and their families are potentially being pressured and misled into critical decisions regarding their educational investments that are against their interests. For these reasons, through this regulatory action, the Department establishes: (1) An accountability framework for GE programs that defines what it means to prepare students for gainful employment in a recognized occupation by establishing measures by which the Department will evaluate whether a GE program remains eligible for title IV, HEA program funds, and (2) a transparency framework that will increase the quality and availability of information about the outcomes of students enrolled in GE programs. Better outcomes information will benefit: Students, prospective students, and their families, as they make critical decisions about their educational investments; the public, taxpayers, and the Government, by providing information that will enable better protection of the Federal investment in these programs; and institutions, by providing them with meaningful information that they can use to help improve student outcomes in their programs. (USDOE, 2014)
2.7 Bi-Partisanship

This project is not motivated by partisan politics but has a political orientation insofar as its focus is on everyday discourses and implementation practices as well as the societal, including policy and law, macro Discourses surrounding gainful employment. The critical discursive lens unearths in whose interests these changes in gainful employment and related rules or guidelines pertain. With that said, considerations on both sides of the aisle are important, since partisan lawmakers and politicians brought about these regulations.

Both Republican and Democratic views are mixed. Both parties agree there should be regulation for the education industry. However, there does seem to be some partisanship on the issue. Democrats feel scrutiny should impact the for-profit sector only. A series of lawsuits were initiated by former employees and ex-students against the for-profit education industry, but not initiated against institutions offering non-profit education. For example, ex-students of Everest College were suing the for-profit institution due to the inability to transfer credits to other schools (UPI.com, 2010). Whistleblowers, current and former employees, at the Harris School of Business alleged predatory lending practices to students with disabilities or criminal backgrounds that made career success for those individuals in their selected areas of study impossible (Perez-Pena, 2014). Additionally, several other suits against the sector were filed accusing the industry of reporting false career earnings and job placement statistics, making them appear more attractive to prospective students (Hethcoat, 2011; Hannan, 2014). Republicans feel that federal regulation of higher education is acceptable, but that “all” of higher education should standardized. In a letter to the Education Secretary, Arnie Duncan, Senator John McCain (2011) stated:

The problem with the gainful employment regulation is not limited to the rulemaking process. As a matter of policy, the regulation arbitrarily targets one sector of higher education with new proposed standards, which would be difficult for any type of institution to meet. In examining accountability standards for higher
education institutions receiving federal student aid, any new rule should apply to all institutions rather than targeted solely based on tax status. (McCain, 2011)

The Democratic agenda as of the late during the 2016 presidential election had suggested that higher education should be free to those families making under $125,000/year. It is unclear how that type of proposition would impact GE laws since student loans would not exist under that plan. It is also likely that future regulations and the GE rule itself may evolve over time based on who is in office. The point is that educators did not initiate the conversation around GE, lawmakers and politicians have been dictating to higher education how the field (higher education) should define success in relation to educational outcomes. These laws now contribute to and somewhat shape and impact the institutional message and meaning involved in administrator’s communicative practices to prospective students and other consumers of education.

The Republican agenda pushes less regulation and free enterprise. With new leadership in government as a result of the presidential election, President Trump brings the potential for policy change and reversal in GE and other areas. Trump himself ventured into the for-profit sector with Trump University (currently known as the Trump Entrepreneur Initiative) from 2005-2010, a real estate program rather than an accredited university. The Washington Post states that although the President settled a lawsuit that claims the program was fraudulent, there are other comparable for-profit educational institutions that have been found to be deceptive in their enrollment and marketing practices (Moore, 2016). Members of a class-action lawsuit claimed Trump’s endorsed program provided only “tricks of the trade” and no tangible skills for students. Trumps agreed to settle for $25 million dollars yet admitted no wrongdoing as part of the settlement agreement (Moore, 2016).
2.8 Selecting an Institution

For many students, especially those in the at-risk population, institution selection may be associated largely with their access to informational resources (Brown, Wohn, & Ellis, 2016). Although there are many resources that rank online and brick-and-mortar campuses and programs and that can assist students in the selection process (i.e., *US News and World Report*, the *College Board*, *Kiplinger*, *Forbes*, and the *Princeton Review*), websites and view-books can be confusing and often are only on an introductory level (Brown et al., 2016). The reality is that students may select an institution because they are familiar with the institution’s television advertisements or pop-ups via social media. They may also select an institution because they do not recognize subtle differences in branding that often mislead students who are unaware that Northwestern College and Berkeley College and many other for-profits sounds prestigious because they are capitalizing on the name of elite non-profit schools like Northwestern University or University of California at Berkeley, often referred to as Berkeley. The play on names that trick those unaware of the differences. These individuals believe that they have been accepted into an elite program.

With the increase of online programs being offered by elite schools, many students simply do not understand the differences in these schools or what accreditation is even about and why it is so important. High performing students who are low-income often benefit from advisor interventions to more selective institutions. Additionally, student choices are impacted by location, timing of or simply the offer of admission, cost, brand, programs offered, duration, and delivery. The GE rule is also impacting student choice by inspiring the introduction of a government-maintained college ratings system, also known as the college scorecard.
2.9 College Scorecard and Proposed College Ratings System (CRS)

From the beginning of his administration in 2008, Obama had started looking toward making significant changes in higher education. Within his first year in office, he had started implementing changes by simplifying financial aid and implementing a tax credit for those attending public institutions (Obama & Biden, 2008). The GE implementation had taken many years to draft, receive feedback, and then formally roll out. Since many of the public and private non-profit institutions were spared from GE, President Obama’s efforts announcement of an impending implementation of a college ratings system, or college scorecard, may have been surprising to the non-profits.

At the root of this decision to implement a college ratings system is the $150 billion dollars in loans and grants distributed to colleges and universities every year (Shear, 2014). Obama’s plan would allocate more aid to high ranking schools and less to low ranking schools (Field, 2013). This attempt to rank schools and reward success on the measures of GE resulted in a college ranking system also known as the Post-Secondary Institution Ratings System (PIRS). Data collection during the 2015-2016 academic year included measures such as number of students receiving the Federal Pell Grant, average cost of attendance, student loan debt, graduation and transfer rates, and commitment to access and diversity (NASFAA, 2014).

The National Association of Financial Aid Administrators (2014) pointed out that this system would likely determine future allocation of institutional financial aid, weeding out low performing schools regardless of who they serve, thus limiting access to many. This educational reform effort is problematic for many because it only looks at certain metrics and does not provide context for what the numbers mean. The scorecard’s metrics involve overall costs, graduation rates, loan default rates, median borrowing, and employment (Collins, Jenkins, Strezelecka, Gasman, Wang, &Nguyen, 2014). The DOE hopes that a standardized scorecard will bring “transparency”
to students and parents in overall value of higher education by examination of costs and relative outcomes (p. 2).

Institutions have expressed concerns over many items on the scorecard, but mostly around what the scorecard neglects to include. Data on learning outcomes should not only focus on graduation rates and placement upon graduation, but also long-term student success and even student satisfaction critical to understanding an institution’s success (Collins et al., 2014). More than twenty organizations including The American Council on Education, The National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, United Negro College Fund, and Thurgood Marshall College Fund all have expressed concerns with current metrics. These organizations have asked for adjustments to the metrics so as to better represent institutions that are less selective and that display greater diversity in their student populations (Collins et al., 2014).

The revised scorecard is an attempt to make information easily accessible, allowing prospective students to select institutions based on consistently and uniformly reported data provided across the board. What the scorecard currently misses and may be most important over time is long-term success of graduates. One of the most difficult talking points in discussing what success looks like is how is success defined and by whom?

2.10 Defining Success

There have been many recommended measures to identify what success looks like for higher education in terms of careers, but many of these measures were enacted for the for-profit sector and were short-term rather than longitudinal. Some key indicators of success shared by for-profit sector professionals were presented to a full committee meeting of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions in 2011. These suggested indicators included: a level playing field for both non-profit and for-profit sectors, adjusted demographics in reporting, tracking learning
outcomes, gaining employment in their chosen profession, and the ability to pay back student loans (United States. Committee on Health, Education, Labor, Pensions, 2014).

All the proposed measures seem to point to value or return on investment. Flores (2015) reminds us that college graduates with a bachelor’s degree will earn $1.6 million more in compensation over a lifetime, additionally suggesting that degree attainment benefits individuals and the nation, decreasing inequalities and more. The Bureau of Labor Statistics breaks value and return on investment down even further showing that not only is there an income difference in degree attainment, but also reduced unemployment as well (Figure 2.2). These are important considerations but do not address one’s personal definition of career success nor how one values their individual collegiate or vocational experience.

Buzzanell and Goldzwig (1991) suggest individual and personalized interpretations of career success. These interpretations are based on common values to not undermine personal achievement and progress versus monetary measures. Again, even if one puts aside the personal experience and focuses on external success measures, a more accurate reflection of what success looks like from college graduates may be a graduate’s ability to earn more over time because of their degree rather than saying success is placement upon graduation. One study that seems to consider factors of success overall and not specifically at one institution or another The Gallup-Purdue Index started in 2014 and focuses on longitudinal data.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education attained</th>
<th>Unemployment rate in 2015 (Percent)</th>
<th>Median weekly earnings in 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>$1,623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional degree</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>$1,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters degree</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>$1,341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors degree</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>$1,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates degree</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>$798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college, no degree</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>$738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>$678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than a high school diploma</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>$493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All workers</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>$860</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.2 Unemployment Rates & Median Earnings, 2015
Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers (Note: Data are for people’s age 25 and over).

2.11 Gallup/Purdue Index

The largest representative data on college graduates and outcomes related to their career success to date is the Gallup-Purdue Index (Gallup, 2014). In 2014, the index introduced by Purdue University, Gallup, and the Lumina Foundation measured student outcomes in higher education of all ages across the entire United States. Possibly an answer to other rating systems that may or may not tell the entire story surrounding student success, this annual report serves to provide higher education leaders with opportunities to make improvements in and out of the classroom. This national movement gave voice to higher education by creating its own measures and accountability for the sector (Daniels, 2015). It is based on the assumption that a bottom-up attempt from the stakeholders, like the Gallup/Purdue study, for any change or reform regardless of industry or issue, will be more successful than one that is mandated from the top or the outside.
If one considers higher education to be an organization, the leaders must come together and voice the actionable items they will take for the sake of all students. The Gallup-Purdue Index may be
one way to change the hegemonic conversation around placement upon graduation as the determining factor of what is and is not successful.

2.12 Job Outlook 2016 and Beyond

In the last decade, the United States fell behind in the global educational rankings making us unprepared as a nation to meet the educational demands of the job outlook into 2024 (U.S. falls behind, 2010). The rankings were a primary catalyst for the initiation of CRS. The U.S. has ranked as low as 28th in areas of like reading skills, math, and science. In 2010, the Huffington Post shared parts of an AP interview U.S. Education Secretary, Arne Duncan. He responded to the rankings “This is an absolute wake-up call for America. The results are extraordinarily challenging to us and we have to deal with the brutal truth. We have to get much more serious about investing in education (U.S. falls behind, 2010). Again, looking to the Economic Policy Institute, as of July 2016, the United States continues to see modest job growth but at a much slower pace than expected. Nonetheless, because of this anticipated shortfall, Career and Technical Education (CTE) at the secondary level has also been reevaluated to better prepare students for viable careers. Holzer (2015) investigated higher education and workforce policies identifying pathways to creating more skilled workers while also keeping student loan debt at a minimum. Holzer called for providing better synchronicity between the employers’ needs for skilled workers and career training. He also considers training delivery and who is paying for it. Recognizing that most vocational training occurs in the community colleges and result in weak outcomes, Holzer suggests stronger partnerships between industry and providers of this type of training that result in career growth and good paying jobs for those participating in the training.

CTE may help part of the workforce and does supply high school graduates with a higher set of entry-level transferrable skills than in the past, but will this help fill the types of jobs that are
projected to exist in 2024? Will these skills be enough, likely not? Most high school graduates, even with CTE coursework will need additional vocational training or higher education. What do these changes mean? How do faculty and staff communicate career expectations to students, if at all? These questions only add to the need for this study. Now that I have introduced the rationale of the study and provided historical context, the next section discusses the theoretical framework for the study.

2.13 Theoretical Framework

Scholars describe communication as a fundamental mode of explanation (Deetz, 1994). Communication is fundamental because it is a central or essential process occurring in everyday life that allows for mutual understanding to occur. This understanding occurs through the means of explanation, or detailed descriptions, accounts, and observations. This understanding changes as people create and recreate their views of the world or realities. Human beings’ realities are social and co-constructed to include aspects like relationships, identities, and structures. We accomplish this by examining how others create their realities through use of language and interaction. Burleson (1992) reminded communication scholars that we constitute communication through messages and that communication deserves study in and of itself, not simply or solely as a means of posing interventions into other phenomena. In other words, scholars should take communication itself seriously (Burleson, 1992). By taking communication seriously, the discipline appreciates the difficulties involved in the research and study of communication because scholars are in fact studying themselves and the environments in which they live and work. Human beings live and breathe in these social worlds that they construct meaning because the unique ability exists to change relationships, organizations, and societies from moment to moment in every interaction. This change occurs through careful examination of assumptions underlying
messages and of the context in which such communication occurs. By surfacing assumptions, particularly those that benefit dominant groups in society, discussion can ensue about how to transform discourse of micro through macro levels and the institutional and social practices and policies that support and are supported by particular understandings and interests.

Thus, this dissertation project is grounded in interpretive-critical theories that are aligned with discourses of understanding and of suspicion (Mumby, 1997) as scholars seek both to make meaning of everyday life and to construct knowledge that reflects key stakeholders’ sensemaking of their own experiences, and to explicate in whose interests particular communication takes place and serves. To describe this twofold theoretical foundation for this project, I first discuss the social constructionist metatheoretical perspective in which interpretivism is situated before turning to critical theory.

2.14 Social Construction of Meaning

The social world consists of multiple realities that are unique to everyone. People are agents who act in their social world (based on their individual understanding of that world or their subjective positions) to mutually constitute meaning in their own reality through a reflexive interactive process of communicative construction (Carey, 1989). We construct our worlds or realities. Since the creation of realities is a social process, these worlds or realities are constructed socially, with others, or constituted communicatively (Craig, 1999). Similarly, Mumby (1989) defined communication as “the art of discourse, much more than a vehicle through which ideas, values beliefs, etc., are disseminated in a culture, but is rather constitutive of a social actor's culture and meaning system” (p. 293). This constitutive or creative process more clearly portrays communication as a co-created process that builds upon what one knows to be reality or truth by means of mutual understanding. Communication is a phenomenon that “living” and is therefore
susceptible to changes and reactions to the message or stimuli in intended or unintended ways based on how receivers understand or interpret messages. The process is not a one-way process, but a two-way process that is ongoing. The understanding creates, shares, and socially constructs as participants reciprocally constitute an interactional process as its own explanation (Deetz, 1994). For greater understanding, not only do constructivists consider the depth of the communicative process on the surface, but they also look deeper to gain understanding of the contents of belief or belief systems (Stroebe & Kruglanski, 1989). This process must not be understood as objective or subjective, but rather as an ongoing interaction that is communicatively intersubjective (Miller, 2004). This intersubjective process also adheres to several assumptions.

2.15 Assumptions of Social Constructionism

Gergen (1985) views social constructionism as an “artifact of communal interchange … explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live” (p. 266). Gergen (1985) posits there are several assumptions of social construction. First, individuals’ experiences do not necessarily determine how the world understands the same events or occurrences. An easily understood example could be historical recollections of any war. There are at least two truths that exist simultaneously. For example, members of the United States do not recall or remember wars in the same way that members of other countries involved in the same dispute recollect the same events. Priorities, politics, vantage point for events, and other ways of viewing the phenomenon affect how people construct and reconstruct history at the time and again when revisited by upcoming generations. Moreover, not all members of different nations would have access to the same information and often, international alliances may shift over time and space. Thus, people revise and construct history continuously to meet their purposes or needs.
The second assumption is that understanding is a social artifact, or a historically situated interchange, a by-product shared by people. These interchanges result in “active, cooperative enterprise of persons” in relationships (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). In other words, individuals can revisit what they understand and acknowledge events as history today and at another time, years later. At that later time, they may assign a completely different socially constructed meaning or understanding. The third assumption is that people sustain understanding over time; people deeply connect and engage in negotiations and mutually agreed upon social process. This interactive process allows people to “make their social and cultural worlds at the same time these worlds make them” (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). These realities are constructed through social processes in which “meanings are negotiated, consensus formed, and contestation is possible (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010, p.174). These often-contested understandings are influenced or “tainted” by individual and subjective memories and often reinforced by media, propaganda, and political influence constrained by the tensions of the time. For example, race has often had contested meaning. Many construct race as ancestry or biological make-up while others contest this definition as they feel race is more about social perception (Glenn, 1999). Most recently, some contest the meaning of gender as well. Gender originally described biology or was attached to physical sex, male or female. Over the years, paying more attention to distinctions in the areas of sex and gender identification left its meaning highly contested. Movies like The Crying Game and television shows like TransAmerica, and I am Jazz (a transgender teenager) started new social constructions surrounding gender. Most recently the in-depth interviews and reality show, I am Cait, with former Olympian, Bruce Jenner, surrounding his transition to Caitlyn have enabled people to witness these changing social constructions at work around the water cooler as people sort through their own values, beliefs, and understandings. No longer is one’s sex or biological make-up required to match
gender. The conversations both online and offline have awakened new understanding and initiated change for some to construct new meaning in that gender is more broadly integrated with and manifest in about identity. These changes have also impacted daily language. No longer are “his” and “her” the only pronouns indicating male or female identity, but the use of “they” has become more common as well. Although these conversations have taken place in the LGBTQ communities (i.e., transgendered identities and being, assigned gender roles, non-conforming to societal norms) for some time, these new exposures into popular culture have helped members of dominant groups construct their own identities vis-a-vis whose who are different from them.

Allen (2007) added an additional assumption to those already mentioned about social construction, specifically for scholars invoking a critical perspective. She expressed the point that constructivists must also refute essentialist claims about identity as natural, inevitable, and universal. Instead of taking for granted what has been accepted socially as truth, she encouraged scholars to question knowledge about the world, and therefore about themselves (p. 262). To revisit gender for another example and expand on Allen’s point, the difference between traditional and changing gender roles is discussed.

Traditional gender roles often dictated that boys play with guns and girls play with dolls during recess or at the playground. Similar to Buzzanell’s (1995) article about the glass ceiling, these gender roles reinforce the ways gender identities are socially enacted every day. These “normal” constructions are stereotypical roles. Allen (1997) and Buzzanell (1995) suggested refuting these taken-for-granted norms and expectations related to gender as they are socially constructed roles that, when fixed or sedimented establish structures of inequality, but that, when recognized as changeable through language and interaction, have profound consequences. Buzzanell (1995) pointed out that if scholars and practitioners fail to take a social constructionist
view, the focus on outcomes and numbers as is prominent in glass ceiling d/Discourses promotes only particular types of realities that serve only certain interests. In the case of Caitlyn Jenner, one must look to gendered processes to identify advantages and disadvantages in community and the workplace that may exist as social constructions are changing by examining the phenomena for its greater complexities so as to (re)construct understanding.

In summary, these explanations and assumptions are considered a somewhat simplistic view of constructivism involving the basic point that people construct their worlds socially by way of everyday talk and conversation in real time. Their socially constructed reality is both patterned and emergent, constructed in the utterance-by-utterance dynamic of the ongoing exchange (Bartesaghi & Cissna, 2009, p.129). It is important we remember that social realities do not exist independent of the events that create and maintain them (Putnam, 1982).

There are a couple of last important points regarding constructionism to keep in mind for this dissertation project. First, constructionism does not limit methodology and can utilize a variety of qualitative methods such as ethnography, ethnomethodology, narrative analysis, textual analysis, focus groups, participant observation, and even autoethnography while considering multiple contexts (May & Mumby, 2005, p. 268). Lastly, Stroebe and Kruglanski (1989) point out that there are often critiques of social construction is sometimes critiqued for being too vague, as lacking rigor, and as being too radical in its implications. Regardless, understanding how people construct their worlds socially through communication is the first step in ascertaining how gainful employment might be understood, motivate action, and cause future change. Next, we discuss the interpretive perspective and how it relates to social construction.
2.16 Interpretivism

The interpretive perspective or interpretivism is a socially constructed process with multiple realities. Corman (2000) discusses how the interpretivist perspective has “a focus on language, symbolism, intersubjectivity, and empathetic observation” rather than taking an objective stance and great distance (p. 8). As discussed earlier, social construction is an intersubjective existent process, therefore, there is room for multiple understandings bound by elements such as time, context, or culture. These understandings allow for continuing discovery through interaction and engagement with the participants. This perspective works well when the researcher is seeking understanding into what some people think and do, the problems they are confronting, and how they make sense of these understandings. Meaning and understanding of reality develops both through social and experiential methods.

Several basic premises of the interpretive paradigm require consideration when scholars study these agents. First, people make decisions and act based on their individual or subjective understanding of situations. Their social reality consists of an interactional process with others and is therefore constantly changing. People understand their experience through the meaning making found in the symbols and language of their social lives. Named objects make up their social lives or worlds with socially determined meanings.

Accordingly, Myers (2008) further explains that interpretive researchers achieve access to reality “only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments” (p. 38). As researchers, we accept that interviews and observations are necessary, but an extra step must occur. To gain greater understanding, researchers must interpret the feelings and mindsets of the observed. In this study, a critical lens is also part of the theoretical framework. Generally qualitative in nature, an interpretive perspective allows for revealing actors or agents and their actions through naturalistic inquiry and research. Rather than putting emphasis on
predictions about cause and effect, researchers must put greater emphasis on interpreting meaning and understanding. To fully understand and interpret meaning researchers must listen, observe, and understand participants’ perspectives by examining social artifacts such as events, websites, stories, and conversations to understand and interpret these social constructions. Deep examination allows the interpretive researcher to achieve a rich, thick, detailed insight and understanding of the phenomenon, committing fully to being involved.

Mumby (2009) explained this perspective as the difference between "thin" and "thick" description, an important difference between experimental and interpretive science. Geertz (1994) described thick description as an explanation marked less by a perfection of consensus and more by a refinement of debate (p. 230). In Geertz’s view, interpretive research is “essentially contestable” simply because of its subjective or intersubjective nature (p. 230). For example, it is like the difference between verbal communication and the depth added when we consider the accompanying nonverbal communication. The same is true when we look beyond the individual construction and consider other factors of influence such as organizations. For most interpretive researchers, the organization is a social site, a special type of community that shares important characteristics with other types of communities (Deetz, 2001, p. 23). The emphasis does not focus on the economics of the organization, but rather the social world it constructs. The purpose is to share how particular realities are produced socially and maintained through action in social sites like ordinary talk, stories, rites, rituals, and other daily activities. This emphasis on the social sites and the social worlds they construct is often known as a naturalistic approach (Bantz, 1983). This naturalistic approach often includes “participant observation or other personal contact to collect material and work out understanding with the site community” (p.24). Not all naturalistic research deals with the organization. The social context is all around us where we interact and carry on our
everyday lives. Deetz (2001) describes people not as actors or agents but as active sensemaker’s often providing narrative accounts that explain the social process (p. 25). The researcher becomes the instrument during data collection and meaning emerges because of interaction and collaboration.

In conclusion, interpretivism focuses on the ways we create and negotiate meaning so that we can understand and depict people’s lives via socially constructed realities. People get together and communicate as a means of making sense of their worlds. Researchers must interpret feelings and frames of reference to gain greater depth, understanding and meaning. This deep dive into data or discourse allows for a unique look at organizational life. Understanding meaning from the process and experience requires an inductive method of inquiry or interpretative mode that is a social construction individually and results in multiple realities. Next, the researcher examines the importance of applying a critical approach.

2.17 A Critical Lens

Approaching research with a critical lens allows researchers to reveal how organizations are places of power that use their communicative practices to push the strategic agenda or ideology of the dominant group (Deetz, 2005). This dominant group reinforces their ideology via the institutional discourse (i.e., websites, social media, brochures, metrics, and organizational goals), both through talk and text. The dominant group in many organizations is the owner, top management or administration, or even stockholders. These varied discourses intend to direct the thoughts and actions of others to achieve desired outcomes or maintain the status quo. In addition, organizations as places of power often oppress or even suppress the views and interests of the less powerful subordinate group (Deetz, 2005). In many instances, the less powerful in organizations are the middle management and everyday workers. For example, this form of top down
management or downward communication may have contributed to the rise of unions in higher education in the 1960s. Palmer (1999) chronicles the rise of collective bargaining and union organization in higher education. Faculty members of the time felt they had no control over low salaries and staff reductions threatening the tenure of many scholars. The only way they felt their voices would be heard was through unionization and striking. Activities and worker movements such as these tipped the favor of control to the faculty, creating a more equalized organizational culture. Mumby (2004) describes the critical approach as emancipatory. The unionization in higher education highlighted the voices of the subordinate group, giving them emancipation from the dominant control of the institution. Next, the researcher takes a closer look at Mumby’s tenets of critical scholarship.

Mumby (2004) describes three tenets that critical scholars should take when examining organizational discourse. First, communication and discourse constitute meaningful social practice. Second, power is central to understanding these social practices. Thirdly, he states that critical analysis offers an opportunity for organizational change by its stakeholders. A recent example of the utilization of these tenets that also displays the dominant/subordinate voices and eventual emancipation was highlighted in Forbes magazine. Willingham’s (2016) article exposed a publicly traded for-profit pharmaceutical company. Mylan is the manufacturer of the EpiPen, an injection device used to deliver epinephrine, a drug used to treat allergic reactions or anaphylactic shock. The company raised the cost of this device by 400% using the justification that their injector pen was the only way to ensure users received the intended dosage of the drug, causing great demand by allergy sufferers. For years, gradual increases in the price occurred, eventually reaching over $200 per dose, even when the actual cost of the drug to save lives was closer to $1. Slight increases occurred over time and basically went unnoticed.
The dominant group in this scenario was likely the board of directors including the chief executive officer who drove company profits to over $1 billion dollars in 2015 with 40% of that profit coming as a direct result of EpiPen sales. This dominant group was accountable to their profits and stockholders first, even though this medication was a lifesaver for many suffering from common allergies. When many people who had normally relied on this product could no longer afford it, a more critical investigation into Mylan and the EpiPen revealed that the increase was not due to increased production costs, but increased profit expectations (Willingham, 2016). Thus, the subordinate group, the afflicted consumers, revolted, exposed the dominant group, and thereby gained a voice. In other words, a critical lens allows for democratic practice, striving for greater equality, giving voice and eliminating dominant control and otherness. As a result, a more inclusive future for the organization and its multiple stakeholders, allows the changing discourse to be shape and reshape (Deetz, 2005).

In this study, there are several dominant and subordinate voices that could be examined. For example, choosing an institution of higher education as our organization may highlight senior leadership or Trustees as the dominant voice. The middle administration comprising of faculty and staff may be the oppressed as they are forced to create discourses that meet the needs of the institution enacting the message controlled by the senior leadership or Trustees. Another choice could highlight the Department of Education or the federal government as the dominant group, since they implemented GE rules, exerting power over the impacted field of higher education. The higher education industry would be the oppressed in this example as they did not contribute to what measures and metrics accurately and inclusively reflect successful outcomes in post-secondary education. Another choice would allow researchers to determine that the dominant group emerges from the unregulated, more inviting rhetoric allowed within the marketing practices
in the non-profit sector is while the subordinate group becomes the controlled messaging required and regulated by GE for the for-profit sector of higher education is the oppressed. In yet another example, researchers could be to view the institutions of higher education without distinction between sectors as the dominant group, while students acting as the subordinate group suffers with no true voice. In one last example, a critical lens might encourage researchers to view this approach as an organizational intervention, where researchers view students’ choice of institution as the dominant group, while institutions become the oppressed. In summary, the benefits of using a critical approach in research includes the ability to uncover hidden power structures. Next, the researcher discusses select career discourse in communication.

2.18 Career Discourse

In the past, theories related to career were generally situated in psychology, sociology and counseling. Works often focused on career development, career exploration, personality and interest inventories, and career choice. For example, Brewer (1942) examined the increased need for vocational guidance and counseling due to technological growth, divisions of labor, vocational training and education, and shifts in social values and increasing expansion contemporary democracy and social movements. Roe’s (1956) personality development theory examined relationships between work behaviors, career choice and personality. Roe identified motivations and psychological needs related to feelings about one’s work. His later work (Roe, 1957) focused more on personality attributes, background and upbringing, individual development and experiences, and satisfaction levels as indicators for appropriate occupational selection. Bandura’s (1969) social cognitive theory of behavior discussed career or vocational selection with positive and negative support during formational learning experiences as key influences. Later, in the 1980s Hackett and Betz (1981) focused more on self-efficacy expectations and work performance as
determining factors in career and educational choice. Holland’s (1985) personality theory situated people into six categories and environments: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, or conventional. These types assisted individuals with career exploration and selection based on personality traits and became a career interest inventory. Super’s (1990) sought to synthesize many existing theories of career development that were all underpinning self-concept and learning theories. Lent, Brown, and Hackett’s (1994) evolved Bandura’s work into social cognitive career theory. They identified specific factors such as occupational or academic interests and related abilities, impact self-efficacy beliefs and affect career choice goals and actions. Outcomes, aspirations, commitment level and expression of their career choice goals influence work performance including successes and failures. These early career works excluded a communicative lens.

With the early 1990s we saw an emergence of scholarship that embraced career, socialization, and related issues. Additional scholarship in the areas of work, career, and employability arose with a communicative focus. For example, Bell, Roloff, Camp, and Karol (1990) examined career success and the impact on personal relationships. Buzzanell and Goldzwig (1991) identified that there was insufficient literature related to modern careers and discussed nonlinear approaches to career provided better positioning for upward mobility in the workplace and also included a needs and values focus as a means to reimagined and personalized paths to career success. Reinking and Bell (1991) investigated connections between loneliness, communication competence, and career success. Eisenberg, Goodall, and Trethewey (1993) discussed the importance of getting what you want, following rules (creativity and constraints), and practical communication application (at work). Tannen (1994) examined conversational styles of men and women in the workplace including whose voices are heard, who gets credit for work,
and what work is accomplished. Buzzanell (1995) called attention to how language and unjust organizing processes contribute to the glass ceiling metaphor. Cheney (1995) examined workplace democracy in an industrialized world. Clair’s (1996) work on the meaning of “a real job” and Sypher’s (1997) book highlighted the key role of communication in the workplace through a collection of case studies are just a few more examples of career communication work. Other work on emotional labor/work (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003), the meaning of work (Cheney, Zorn, Planalp, & Lair, 2008), and resilience (Buzzanell, 2010) have also contributed to the ongoing research. What has not rigorously been examined in terms of career are the tensions between the micro—macro d/Discourses, specifically interrogating the meanings of career in higher education. The rest of this chapter further examines the term d/Discourse and reviews some of the literature on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in organizational settings and application to this study. Because discussions about d/Discourse and about critical approaches in discourse studies are both theoretical and methodological, the overviews that are presented in this chapter act as a springboard for data analytic passages in the following chapter.

2.19 Small “d” and Big “D” Discourse

Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) talk about the many meanings of the term discourse, even though many researchers use the term as if there was only one mutually agreed upon definition. To be more specific, Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) define two major approaches to organizational discourse. The first approach to organizational discourse they discuss is “the study of social text.” Social text studies examine talk and written text in social action of contexts found in everyday organizational interactions (p.1126). They also define this view with relative terms such as local-situated, micro, or meso discourse approaches. The second approach to organizational discourse they discuss is “the study of social reality” as discursive construction.
Social construction studies examine the use of language to shape social reality through expansive interpretive practices that are situated historically (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 1126). They also define this view with related terms to include universal, macro-systemic or Grand/Mega Discourse approaches. Rogers (2004) proposes a similar explanation of d/Discourse describing little “d” discourse as the grammar of what is said or written while big “D” Discourse refers to the ways of representing, believing, valuing, and participating with all of the sign systems that people have at their disposal. This distinction stresses that language and intention cannot exist independently and are always historical and intertextual, linked across time, place, and speakers. (Rogers, 2004, p. 7)

Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) differentiate between micro and macro in another way. First, they discuss little d (discourse) as “the study of talk and text in social practices.” Second, they discuss big D (Discourse) as “general and enduring systems of thought” (p. 7).

Fairclough (1993) expands the view of discourse analysis to “socially shaped and socially constitutive”; this view advises that researchers should not opt for “structuralist” or “actionalist” positions (p. 134). As discussed earlier, there are many definitions used to describe discourse, but there are just as many ways to analyze it. Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) discuss the popularity of analyzing discourse and its many forms, attributing the popularity to discourse analysis’s ability to focus on human interaction, identify dominant organizational activity, allow for empirical analysis while using a critical approach. Next, the researcher examines CDA as methodological approach before breaking down the proposed study.

2.20 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a critical theory and method used by researchers to study language and the social world explaining relationships through description and interpretation
of their discourse (Discenna, 2016; Rogers, 2004). Tracy, Martinez-Guillem, Robles, and Casteline (2011) prefer to define CDA as “discourse analysis with a critical thrust” (p. 241). Fairclough (1993) recommends analysis of discourse to include discursive practices, events, and texts as well as social and cultural structures (p. 135). This deep examination allows for discovery of relationships or linkages that may exist between discourse, dominant ideology, and power relations. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) suggest CDA researchers approach discourse with a focus on a social problem, examine political and progressive interests (power relations), analyze how language and practices contribute to the existing problem, accept that power relations are continually being shaped and reshaped by the discourse, and recognize how advancing dominant ideologies remain a constant factor. This approach explicates more clearly into eight principles that drive CDA, according to Fairclough and Wodak (1997).

The first principle states that CDA should address social problems meaning it takes a critical approach to social problems by problematizing and unveiling what is often hidden to others. The second principle highlights that power relations are discursive implying that that power is a negotiated and renegotiated social act that is negotiated and renegotiated through discourse. Next, the third principle explains that society and culture is constituted through discourse. In other words, language, every utterance, makes independent contributions to the produce and change society, culture, and power. The fourth principle posits that ideological work is done through discourse. Analyzing discourse using discursive practice, allows for insight and understanding into how the text was received, interpreted, and what type of social impact occurs as a result. The fifth principle explains that there is history that exists with every discourse. Therefore, researchers must be reminded of the historical context that surrounds the discourse for fuller and deeper understanding. The sixth principle reminds that there are linkages between society and text that is mediated. CDA
should focus on the connections being made between text and society, sometimes referred to as orders of discourse. The seventh principal requires analysis to be interpretive, but also explanatory in intent. Lastly, the eighth principal sees discourse as a form of social action that uncovers the hidden power relations and oppression in order to bring change.

CDA is unique when compared to other forms of discourse analysis as it stresses the importance of critical researchers taking an explicit sociopolitical stance while sharing a point of view and perspective (van Dijk, 1993). CDA is most often political in nature with the intent of identifying relevant and timely issues by pointing out inequalities and injustices with the hope for change (Fairclough, 1993). It is important to note that even though objectivity is attempted, the researcher’s own positionality and voice may seep into this project although unintended.

My personal interest in this topic comes from a career dedicated to career development and placement. Spending fifteen years in public, proprietary, and private institutions of higher education, specifically working with students and their transitions to the workplace has prompted a form of engagement in me that does not seem to impact other administrators in the same way. Educating students about the debt they incur and the profession they choose as well as how these aspects impact what is successful or not by federal regulations are complex issues that many institutions lay firmly in the lap of career services departments. These changes occur at a time when the job market remains bleak for many. As a first-generation college student, first-generation graduate student, and administrator, I understand both the student and institutional perspectives surrounding the issues of gainful employment.

In this chapter, I have discussed and defined my (meta)theoretical framework and d/Discourses and have highlighted Critical Discourse Analysis. Although there is little doubt that through the years, d/Discourses surrounding career trajectories, job markets, and securing gainful
employment have occurred on thousands of college campuses across the country. First Year Experience (FYE) courses, experiential learning (e.g., service-learning, practicum, internships, senior design projects) have assisted in making students more marketable upon graduation. What is still unclear is students’ understanding of the institutional d/Discourse, and if there are any impacts or strategic actions that occur because of the understandings. This study examines how recent graduates recall these career discourses, how they report them, and identify what is happening as a logical extension of the d/Discourse. The research questions that emerged from this literature and that guide this study are:

RQ1: How do students understand or portray their perspectives based on career conversations and experiences?

RQ2: How do students report or share these experiences with others?

RQ3: How do students act upon these understandings, if at all?

RQ4: What are the Discourse, or cultural formations, underlying students’ perspectives about the relationships between career and higher education?

RQ5: How do d/Discourses among students and institutions of higher education related to career reveal deep power relations and whose interests are reconstituted communicatively?

One way to achieve this understanding is by utilization of interpretive critical discourse analysis. This interpretive approach to discourse allows a look at how students constitute their social reality and construct meaning from career conversations during undergraduate studies at colleges and universities throughout the United States. Scholars from many disciplines and with diverse research interests have utilized Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the past, but there is little
work examining gainful employment’s impact on career discourse between institutions, faculty, and students. Next, the researcher discusses the methods used for this study.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in two parts examining two contrastive end points of the continuum d/Discourse, namely micro (discourses) through macro (Discourses), with examination of understandings reflected in institutional texts and participants’ words, followed by critical analyses of these d/Discourses to see in whose interests such understandings are constructed to benefit as well as how d/Discourses might become transformative to institutions seeking continual improvement.

The first part of this study is an interpretive thematic analysis of institutional texts and participants of focus groups allowing the researcher examine micro and macro d/Discourses that are constructed and available related to institutional priorities and decision-making aligned with institutional documents, specifically websites. The second part of the study will analyze the data utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to identify underlying precluding groups of both power and structure.

This study uses an interpretive critical lens to gain greater understanding and meaning of the d/Discourse as shared by graduates of institutions of higher education. The research design involves discourse analysis (talk and text) between the non-profit and for-profit sectors in higher education. These interpretive methods put the researcher in the role of primary interpretive instrument to compare and contrast findings in a more comprehensive manner. Merriam (1988) believes humans are best-suited as instrument because of the naturalistic approach discussed earlier in Chapter Two. Naturalistic approaches work in cooperation with human sensibilities allowing the insights gained from these focus groups to present opportunities to cause change (Merriam, 1998).
3.1 Participants and Texts

After receiving IRB approval, a small purposeful sample was recruited for focus groups, totaling seven focus groups. The focus group meetings lasted between 30 minutes and 75 minutes and averaged a length of 65 minutes. The digital recordings of the seven focus groups and associated notes resulted in just over 8 hours of audio and were transcribed into 180 single-spaced pages. In addition to talk, the data collection included a thematic analysis of discourse surrounding the issues as displayed in the texts available to their stakeholders and prospective students, specifically websites of higher educational institutions in the non-profit (public, private) and for-profit sectors in the United States. Posting of recruitment announcements took place on social media and other internet forums as an advertisement for a voluntary research study along with email invitations to recent undergraduates now attending graduate school at a midwestern university in an interdisciplinary social sciences program.

Recruited participants for this study were recent college graduates who had completed their associate’s, bachelor’s or master’s degrees, within the last three years (2014-2017). Additionally, the participants were U.S. citizens who paid for college incurring some form of student debt via government loans or who paid for college without incurring any debt at all. The citizenship request was because gainful employment rules do not apply to international students who may receive subsidized and unsubsidized funding outside of the United States and therefore, do not receive U.S. taxpayer support. All participants had attended a U.S. institution (throughout the mainland and Puerto Rico). The researcher strived for multicultural participation to ensure highlighting no single experience. The make-up of the focus groups was diverse and included participants from varying socio-economic, racial, and institutional backgrounds. There were 25 participants: 13 females and 12 males (see Table 3.1). Formal collection of demographic information did not occur, however, by observation, it appeared that most were Caucasian (n=20, 80%) and there were three
African Americans (n=3, 12%) and two were Hispanic (n=2, 8%). Although all participants had graduated from an institution of higher education, some had attended private institutions, while others had attended public institutions, and five (n=5, 20%) had also attended a community college before transferring to a four-year institution. There were nearly 30 unique institutions represented including private colleges like University of San Diego, Oberlin, Notre Dame, Wake Forest, University of Chicago, Pomona, Tufts, and Davidson College and public colleges including California Polytechnic, Santa Rosa Community College, University of Puerto Rico, University of Florida, Redding Junior College, University of North Carolina, UC-Berkeley, and Purdue. There were 5 first-generation college students among the participants. The groups also included recent graduates of both bachelor’s and master’s degree programs with a range of 0-5 years of work experience.

Table 3.1 Focus Group Participants (Categories adapted from Carnegie Classification System)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Undergraduate Type</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Locations</th>
<th>Degrees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ira</td>
<td>Arts &amp; Sciences</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Meryl</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Oprah</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Master’s C &amp; U</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>Arts &amp; Sciences</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>East / Midwest</td>
<td>BA, MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>George</td>
<td>Arts &amp; Sciences*</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Public/Private</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>AA, BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Arts &amp; Sciences</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Research*</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Public/Private</td>
<td>Southwest / Midwest</td>
<td>AA, BA, MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Kristy</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Public/Private</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>BA, MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>Research*</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Public/Private</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>AA, BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Master’s C &amp; U</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Jerry</td>
<td>Master’s C &amp; U*</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>BFA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Ivan</td>
<td>Research*</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Public/Private</td>
<td>West / Midwest</td>
<td>AA, BA, MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Ross</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>E.T.</td>
<td>Master’s C &amp; U</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Arthur</td>
<td>Arts &amp; Sciences</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>East / Midwest</td>
<td>BA, MA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*indicates junior college)
3.2 Researcher Positionality

Throughout this research project, the researcher collecting this data and facilitating the focus groups has held administrative leadership positions in higher education institutions in public, private, and proprietary settings. A unique perspective that this researcher brings is a progressive career of more than fifteen years working with at-risk, first generation, and non-traditional learners as well as those gaining admission into elite institutions and living lives of privilege as they pursue career success and gainful employment.

3.3 Procedures

The primary data collection method for the purposes of this study were focus groups. Markova, Grossen, and Linell (2007) define focus groups as “a research method based on open-ended group discussions that examine a particular set of socially relevant issues” (p. 32). The authors also discuss how and when to properly use focus groups in research and suggest that they are used independently, but often used in combination with other methods to gain deeper understanding of the topic of study. Generally, focus groups consist of 4–12 persons brought together to explore the researcher’s questions on a given topic or questions that are “in the focus” (p. 33). The focus groups in this study averaged 3-4 participants per session. Although participants in focus groups are always brought together, the environment can be either in-person or virtually with the assistance of computer-mediated technology (e.g., Skype, WebEx, Go-to Meeting). In this study, all groups were live, in-person, and onsite. Typically, the researcher or moderator guides focus group discussions creating natural interaction between participants and the moderator. Interaction is a key element or influence on focus groups. Zorn, Roper, Broadfoot, and Weaver (2006) argue that interaction and discussion influence people's beliefs about substantial issues and personal efficacy. As a result, focus groups could develop communicative self-efficacy and
empowerment by creating learning environments involved in interaction as they construct and reconstruct understandings (Zorn et al, 2006).

Focus groups have the potential to illumine and stimulate directed discussion surrounding the topic of consideration providing greater richness (Dickson, 2009). When planning for focus groups, researchers consider the research questions, how many and how to recruit, where the discussions will take place, recording protocols, and more (Dickson, 2009). With the hopes of achieving profound insight, the researcher selected Critical Discourse Analysis as the methodology for this study.

Supplemental discourse mined from 10 University websites, included viewbooks (marketing materials for prospective students), and other promotional materials to supplement the focus group data. Additionally, the researcher collected observational data to even further supplement the focus group and textual data collected. These data collection methods provided the researcher the opportunity to dive deeper into the experiences of the participants recruited for this study. Focus groups as the primary means of data collection allowed for separation of the participants based on their individual educational experiences. Group discourse allowed the researcher to collect unique data that may be missed if the researcher were to choose individual interviews. By choosing focus groups, the researcher believes participants were engaged in a way that allowed for greater reflection and redirection based on the directionality of the conversations. The environment was comfortable and convenient, with seating in a circular fashion to better engage the group. Although attempted, an assistant moderator was not recruited to assist the researcher who also acted as the moderator of the focus groups. The primary role of the assistant moderator was meant to handle logistics (room arrangement, welcome participants, operate recording equipment, take notes). The researcher handled these logistical functions and
acknowledges that some observations may have gone unnoticed. Following a semi-structured format, recording, transcribing, and analyzing the sessions occurred. Open-ended questions initiated deep interaction of group participants while providing opportunities for individuals to share their stories in their own way while engaging others to do the same. Follow-up questions and redirection were based on the engagement level of each focus group and individual statements made by participants.

To understand how distinct types of institutions handle discourse surrounding GE, it was important to ascertain if and why there may be differences in one institutional type when compared to another. Observations by the researcher provided an additional tool for deeper interpretation of the data and further provide thicker description. As mentioned, several different texts were used to analyze and interpret the data. Institutional websites and downloadable collateral provide abundant material and communicate a great deal about each university’s organizational culture and discourse, especially discourse used as a recruitment tool to prospective students. Once the researcher began analyzing the data from each of the sources (notes from observations, transcripts from the focus groups and institutional discourse via the web), she applied a Critical Discourse Analysis.

This researcher chose a collective point of view gaining further understanding of the implications of the GE rule in multiple environments. For this study, the researcher examined several types of institutions as well as those from the public and private sectors. Interestingly, until recent delays and definition changes to GE in 2017, those held to GE fell under different sectors. In the past, only some institutions complied with federal GE regulations as a requirement, others received protections. For example, public community colleges, generally offering certificates and associate degrees are non-profit, while private proprietary colleges, universities and vocational or
“career” schools are for-profit, but both must comply to the GE rule. On the other hand, public and private universities granting bachelors, masters, and doctorates that are non-profit are not currently held to the rule. In early 2018, it appears that attempts to alter the GE rule are being made to drastically alter current practices by requiring enforcement for all institutions regardless of profit status. For this reason, the researcher opted to construct multiple focus groups with graduates representing a variety of institutional types and locations to unveil a more diverse cross-sectional understanding versus one based on changing definitions and legislation.

To properly examine varying institutions, the researcher took into consideration the type of institution of higher education as an independent organization, reviewed language usage, and oppositional understandings by reviewing texts including websites and other promotional materials (collateral) presented to consumers of education (i.e. current and prospective students, parents, ratings boards, etc.) This research examines materials captured in the recruitment cycle for academic year 2018-2019. Although most schools are always in recruitment mode, for the purposes of this study, the researcher focused specifically on discourse (text) electronically available in the winter of 2018. Focus groups reflect on discourse (talk) occurring between the years of 2008-2017 (based on 6-year graduation rates and graduation dates within the five years).

The researcher conducted a tiered analysis. In the first tier of analysis, the researcher focused on emergent themes that arose from the focus groups, also viewed as the micro_Discourse, based on the research questions that centered on recalled career conversations, shared understandings of the Discourse, accountabilities and actions in micro and macro settings, and students’ perspectives, specifically their connections between career and education. In the second tier of analysis, the researcher examined institutional discourses, also viewed as macro_Discourse via websites and other collateral geared toward prospective students in addition to the
focus group data. The researcher focused on materials geared toward the prospective student because GE rules exist partly as a measure for transparency and consistency for consumers of education. These measures are to assist students in making informed choices about the product they are purchasing, their education.

During the first tier of analysis, the researcher utilized the constant comparative method, “designed to aid analysts with these abilities in generating a theory which is integrated, consistent, plausible, close to the data, and in a form which is clear enough to be readily, if only partially, operationalized (Glaser, 1965, p.437). Charmaz (2006) discusses visiting the data collected (observations and notes) for purposes of initial coding to creative tentative themes or categories. Next, the researcher revisited or reexamined the data (full transcripts) by comparing incidents to further refine themes. The application of a general thematic review of the data, field notes and transcripts, allowed for common themes to emerge from the focus groups, both individually and collectively. In addition to constant comparison, the researcher used Owen’s (1984) work on interpretive themes and Zorn and Ruccio’s (1988) application, the researcher’s thematic analysis considered recurrence or repetitiveness of ideas, repetition or frequency of words or phrases, and forcefulness of the talk related to the five research questions: 1) How do students understand or portray their perspectives based on career conversations and experiences?; 2) How do students report or share these experiences with others?; 3) How do students act upon these understandings, if at all?; 4) What are the Discourse, or cultural formations, underlying students’ perspectives about the relationships between career and higher education?; and 5) How do d/Discourses among students and institutions of higher education related to career reveal deep power relations and whose interests are reconstituted communicatively? There were seven homogenous focus groups with different themes emerging from each group.
After reviewing GE related institutional discourses in both not-for-profit and for-profit sectors, the researcher conducted a critical discourse analysis. Data collected allowed the researcher to gain insight and identify differences in areas such as gender, program disciplines, experience level, marginalized populations, and university distinction. At the same time, exemplars in the public, private, and proprietary sectors may present future research opportunities related to areas such as organizational processes, change management, decision-making, institutional identity, sense making, and self-structuring. Each focus group included a contextual overview of the institution and its unique characteristics such as size, location, sector, focus, GE disclosures, if any, and degrees granted. Additionally, this overview looked at the economic and political structures that may or may not exist, including everyday organizing processes. An interpretive approach allowed the researcher to extract meaning and understanding by coding for themes and identifying consistent discourse related to GE issues.

### 3.4 Importance/Significance of the study

The findings of this study have the potential to directly impact current communicative practices and institutional discourses of academic administrators as they navigate GE, rankings, scorecards, curriculum design, and other issues facing the changing field of higher education. Additionally, the findings may expose challenges faced by administrators during this turbulent time of regulatory change that can lead to academic quality improvement processes of the future. Lastly, this study may lend insight into the role of career development, where it begins, where it ends, and ultimately who to hold accountable for the outcomes.
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

This chapter presents findings organized around the following research questions delving first into students’ understandings or interpretations about and enactments of careers and gainful employment: How do students understand or portray their perspectives based on career conversations and experiences? (RQ1), How do students report or share these experiences with others? (RQ2), How do students act upon these understandings, if at all? (RQ3), What are the Discourses, or cultural formations, underlying students’ perspectives about the relationships between career and higher education? (RQ4), and How do d/Discourses among students and institutions of higher education related to career reveal deep power relations and whose interests are reconstituted communicatively? (RQ5). These questions bridge micro discourses and macro Discourses by bringing together participants’ talk and interaction during focus group exchanges and the broader embedded talk and assumed understandings in societal and institutional structures. Discussion about these Discourses displays how students perceive and discuss higher education and gainful employment in ways that differ from what is generally presented in online materials and other texts. Additionally, throughout the results section, supplemental information about how to make changes in the areas of student concern have been included for efficiency due to the large number of themes and subthemes associated with the research questions.

Some of the overall emergent themes (see Table 4.2) included perspectives of first-generation college students, including their thoughts on the resources and services provided by the institutions (specifically campus career services), perceptions of professional staff and advisors, and misunderstandings of career-related discourse. Additionally, the talk exposed the many pressures that students face, as well as their confusion about career pathways and options, inabilitys to identify or recognize transferable skills, their diverse perspectives on the value of
education, and their perceptions about accountabilities in general. There were also insights on what was lacking in higher education, such as the need for greater alumni mentorship, structural changes, and additional insight into some of the challenges that transfer students, or junior college students, face after transition into four-year institutions. First, an examination of the themes related to RQ1.

For the first research question (RQ1) on how students understand or portray their perspectives based on career conversations and experiences, three themes emerged. First, participants expressed their previous belief that higher education or “a college degree is a ‘golden ticket’” to good things in life. However, lack of knowledge regarding available career options or pathways and uncertainty about utilization of social capital left them feeling disadvantaged, especially if they were first generation college students. Students either became hypervigilant in developing self-efficacy or failed to recognize the need for development of these skills. Second, they also shared feelings of isolation and fear when it came to the job search, taking on an attitude of “it’s all up to me” to find their way during the transition to the workplace. The third theme exposed vulnerability around the idea of “shooting blind,” with explicit admissions about not really knowing what was unknown to them and feelings of frustration for missed opportunities in identifying relevant and transferrable skills.

For the second research question (RQ2) about how students report or share these experiences with others, three themes around resources, resistance, and results emerged. First, participants shared their expressions of “too general to be useful, too late to matter”, meaning that students often did not report or share their experiences because they did not know where to go and whom to ask or how to find personalized information, if they even considered seeking help. Additionally, if they did discover paths for positive encounters, they were operating with hindsight and emotions of frustration and anger with themselves that they were too late in the process to help
them with their needs. In the second theme, participants were in consensus that resources on campus related to career development and preparation were readily available. They stated, “they were there, I just didn’t use them.” Unfortunately, in many cases, students recalled interactions and opportunities for support but made choices to disregard them or simply did not comprehend the need for these types of experiences in the moment. In the third theme for RQ2, participants expressed anxiety and fear that “there are no guarantees” with job placement and acknowledged their misconception that degrees alone guarantee anything. They also discussed confusion over viable career pathways in academia and failed expectations that the popular mantra to “follow your passion” (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015) will result in high pay, even though they put in the work to achieve the degree.

For the third research question (RQ3) on how students act upon their understandings, if at all, the themes of self-discovery, accountability, and lifelong learning emerged during iterative data analyses. First, participants expressed that once on the job, they could reflect on internships, research, and team projects as they noted “I finally started to connect the dots.” They were also able to gain perspective on needing guidance from others through mentorship. In the second RQ3 theme, they described the figurative “falling on one’s sword” sharing that their lack preparation resulted in less than ideal career outcomes and an acknowledgement that they may not have accomplished as much or landed where they imagined, resulting in the third theme of “going back to get it right” this time. Many of those interviewed had recently considered, started, or completed a graduate program exposing a willingness to take on more student loan debt to get additional skills, gain access to networks and obtain advanced degrees that will likely be the expectation of the future.
For the fourth research question (RQ4) delving into what Discourses, or cultural formations, underlay students’ perspectives about the relationships between career and higher education, three themes around the purpose and value of education emerged. First, participants grappled with their realities by stating “I came to get an education.” This theme highlighted differences in thought between the institutional goals of education and students’ goals. Student discontent and disillusion spiked when the stresses and pressures of adulthood caused them to potentially “settle” (i.e., take what was available, or engage in suboptimal decision-making) rather than thrive. Realizations that career choices and ideals often were compromised to ensure transferability of skills into high demand jobs that could pay the bills, this leaving “calling” and “passion” behind. In the second theme, participants questioned “Is college even worth it?” Participants shared shifts in perceived value of their education, of their felt need to go to an elite school to stand out, and of their desires that higher education was more affordable given the prospect of lifelong learning and future degrees or professional certificates as an employer expectation in their futures. In the third and final theme of RQ4, participants expressed little to no knowledge of gainful employment (GE) rules that were meant to assist them as consumers of education. They continued to define career and their understandings of what “career success is…” by sharing expectations of ideal careers and meanings.

The fifth research question (RQ5) moves on to the second tier of analysis and a critical lens was applied to unveil the micro/macro level tensions among students and institutions of higher education related to career and identified inherent tensions surrounding higher education, specifically around notions of the purpose of education, definitions of career success, career development, and placement.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ1: How do students understand or portray their realities based on career conversations and experiences?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| “A degree is a golden ticket” | - Memorable messages that college degrees guarantee success  
| | - Disadvantages related to social network  
| | - Pressures to be hypervigilant for fear of missing out  
| “It is all up to me” | - Lack of knowledge of available career options  
| | - Efforts to secure employment are self-guided  
| | - Professional schools are more career-centered  
| “Shooting blind” | - Need for early and continued intervention  
| | - Frustrations over needing experience for entry-level jobs  
| | - Difficulty identifying transferable skills  
| **RQ2: How do students report or share these experiences with others?** | |
| “Too general to be useful, too late to matter” | - Lack of intimacy with their advisors (career and academic)  
| | - No specific advice, no experts in their field  
| | - Services discovered too late to be advantageous  
| “They were there, I just didn’t use them” | - Underutilization of available resources and services  
| | - Failure to recognize touchpoints and important milestones  
| | - Career development not required and previously seemed optional  
| “There are no guarantees” | - Degrees alone do not guarantee “a good job”  
| | - Mixed messages about preferred trajectories  
| | - Following one’s calling does not always result in high pay  
| **RQ3: How do students act upon these understandings, if at all?** | |
| “I finally started to make connect the dots” | - Often gain clarity about knowledge, skills, abilities on the job  
| | - More time, experience, and maturity equal greater insight  
| | - Need and appreciation for mentorship  
| “Falling on one’s sword” | - Self-reflection brings self-accountability  
| | - Expressed need for additional skills to achieve career goals  
| | - Desired opportunities for improvement in higher education  
| “Going back to get it right” | - Education is worth more than a paycheck  
| | - Taking on debt gains access to networks and opportunities  
| | - Advanced degrees needed for future advancement or growth  
| **RQ4: What are the Discourse, or cultural formations, underlying students’ perspectives about the relationships between career and higher education?** | |
| “I came to get an education” | - Hold no understanding of GE Disclosures  
| | - Choices compromised by pressures to secure employment  
| | - Increasing pressures that degrees lead to jobs  
| “Is college even worth it?” | - Shift in the perceived value of education  
| | - Willing to pay big for big results  
| | - Desire greater affordability  
| “Career Success is…” | - More than just a job, but a career  
| | - More than a salary but also includes medical, and retirement  
| | - Desire Meaningful work  

4.1 **RQ1: How do students understand or portray their perspectives based on career conversations and experiences?**

Responses to this first question coalesced around the idea that education is a gift with a promise attached that positive career outcomes or career placement is a given. Like many gifts, there are times when the receiver is required to complete a few extra steps before the gift is ready to go, like adding the batteries or programming a few function features. The extra work required by the receiver is necessary for the gift work properly, and the same is true of education. Career development and preparation could be framed as a required extra step that must be completed before the receiver of education fully functions. With this analogy in mind, the first research question (RQ1) asked: How do students understand or portray their perspectives based on career conversations and experiences? The three primary themes that emerged were that students’ perceive that families have shared beliefs that (1) “a degree is a golden ticket,” feelings that students must bear the burdens of career alone in (2) “it is all up to me,” and that lack of knowing ultimately led to misguided attempts in transitioning successfully to the workplace as they carried on even though they acknowledged (3) “I was shooting blind.” This discussion now examines the first theme, A Degree is a “Golden Ticket” in depth.

4.1.1 **“A Degree is a “Golden Ticket”**

The first primary theme that a degree is supposed to be the “golden ticket” resulted in three subthemes whereas participants noted that (a) family members believed that a college degree could lead directly to career success, employability, and a good life; participants also noted that (b) they learned about their disadvantages in and out of the classroom with regard to social networks; and they expressed (c) their needs to be hypervigilant and fears or suspicions about being left out.
4.1.1.1 Memorable Messages About Degree Attainment

The iconic portrayal of college send-off through graduation that is in movies such as “The Blind Side” (2009) when the Touhys send Michael off to college. This send-off involves parental concern and relief, student excitement and anxiety, and years of classes, exams, extracurricular experiences, and other events. However, this scenario differs based on whether students are first generation college students or come from families in which college attendance, if not graduation, is intergenerationally understood to be expected if not mandatory.

When parents send their children to college, they suffer through several years of nail biting anticipation, and then finally watch them walk across the stage to *Pomp and Circumstance* and receive their diploma. With graduation comes a profound sense of relief, especially when they themselves did not attend college. This relief is because, in their eyes, a college degree signifies that everything in life is going to be okay for their child. This accomplishment, this piece of paper, is framed as a document or set of credentials that can miraculously open doors to success and prosperity. Parents believe, or want to believe, that their child will want for nothing.

Participants in this research project voiced their parents’ and other family members’ hopes, aspirations, and expressions of anticipation and relief. Ira, a first-generation college student that attended a large public university in the east, indicated “because no one in my family had ever gone (to college), it was viewed as like a golden ticket, sort of. ‘You got a college degree. You're set.’” This memorable message and others like it helped to frame expectations and understandings of career, not only for students, but their parents (for memorable message research, see Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012; Medved, Brogan, McClanahan, Morris, & Shepherd, 2006).

This golden ticket reference is from “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory”, a movie from the 1970s that depicted Charlie, a very sweet and poor boy that secures one of only five
coveted golden tickets to tour one of the most famous chocolate factories in the world, an experience about which every kid on the planet supposed was dreaming, based on the book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, by Roald Dahl. In his quote, the participant, Ira, meant that his and other families framed education as providing the firm economic and human capital foundation for a viable lifestyle and, perhaps, an ability to have a more comfortable life than they themselves or other family members had because they did not have college degrees. Inkson, Dries, & Arnold (2014) defined human capital as an individual’s assets that creates economic value for self and others. For example, higher education is viewed as a venture in human capital that will likely pay off through increased productivity. The quote expressed family members’, especially parents’, understanding that their children, college graduates, were now among a select few to have an elite opportunity in life that not everyone received. Participants’ talk in focus groups mirrored Discourses about opportunity, hard work, and deservingness to which Bernstein (1997) refers as continuities or enduring values in work ethics or the symbolic meanings of work in the United States. Participants’ phrasing also recalled what others have said to them—“You got a college degree. You're set”—establishing a direct causal relationship between Discourses of Degree and Employability and establishing a social contract or long-term implicit agreements held together by societal norms, roles, and anticipated consequences for career enactments from which organizational relationships between employer and employee, known as psychological contracts, are understood (Rousseau, 1990; Buzzanell, 2000; Philips & Oswick, 2012). Of importance is that the golden ticket not only lessens uncertainty about social and psychological contracts but also eases the process of job search and advancement because of the implied advantage bestowed by the college degree. In other words, the normative expectations surrounding the golden ticket connect talk and broader societal understandings and symbolic meanings of work. Ironically, the
degree itself meaning the certificate of achievement in higher education—not the learning—becomes a symbol of all that is possible in life.

The participant, Ira, who voiced the golden ticket image was a first-generation student. This generation in families represents hope, privilege, and pathways to success. Since 1940, those 25 years and older holding a bachelor’s degree or higher in America has increased from 4.6% to 33.4%, the job market is much more competitive, and degrees are much more commonplace (Loschert, 2017). The golden ticket was a (perhaps) simplistic formula for success, one that is based on previous generations’ mantra that higher education can automatically lead to success. Although first-generation college students represented a small number of participants in this study, their shared concerns about overall preparation and transitions to post-degree career received nods of agreement from members of each focus group, even if the other participants themselves were not first-generation students. In other words, the golden ticket resonated with all the focus group participants, even though first-generation students articulated it. The next theme looks at disadvantages in and out of the classroom.

4.1.1.2 Disadvantages Related to Social Network

In the second sub-theme, for first-generation students and others of modest means, the college degree was supposed to lessen class differences, that is, to equalize advantage. Over time, however, this simplistic understanding of what a college degree represented and could produce gave way to concerns about disadvantage. These concerns were framed by research participants as suspicion and fears about being vulnerable. Participants expressed their beliefs that their parents’ lack of historical knowledge and perspective on college and career opportunities may have put them at a disadvantage. Their suspicions about these inequities became increasingly obvious to students as they sought to transition to the world of full-time work. They perceived that their peers
who benefitted from family members’ educational and career experiences would have clear advantages, perceptions based on observing, overhearing, and talking directly and indirectly about peers’ communication with others. These advantages came in the form of guidance acquired through family members’ recounting of past successes and failures. Additionally, participants began to realize during their college years that their lack of social network in professional circles often impacted their career trajectories. One first-generation student, Oprah, who attended a large public university in the southeast stated how difficult she found the transition from college to full-time employment, especially,

...if you don't have personal connections to help. For example, my parents didn't go to college. They don't have professional careers. So, the way that other kids could be—their dad would get them an internship at the judge's office or whatever. If you don't have those, you almost don't even know that they're there because no one's telling you that they're available.

She linked family college experience and professional careers with peers’ abilities to seek and receive “help”, use and develop “personal connections”, obtain insights about actual “internship” opportunities that might align with career goals (“at the judge’s office or whatever”). Oprah framed her disadvantage not only as not obtaining these benefits from personal connections, but also as not even knowing what to ask or where to look or how to go about creating a career pathway (“you almost don’t even know...no one’s telling you...”).

Although framed as guidance and conversations among familial connections, this participant, Oprah, was voicing a need for a mentor or sponsor, not even a formal or long-term mentor, but just someone who might occasionally provide advice, feedback, and/or information (episodic, spontaneous, or moments of mentoring) or might engage in an informal mentoring relationship (Ibarra, 2000; Long, Buzzanell, Anderson, Batra, Kokini, & Wilson, 2014). For others, access to networks, even if they must pay for it in the form of student loans was necessary. When considering what schools to attend and how much student loan debt to take on, they opted to take
on much more if they believed that the institution could provide an inside track to key alumni with access to pathways and people in ways that their family ties could not. Thus, these students believed that their strong ties or social capital could not fulfill their employability and career needs. As a result, they felt as though they were obligated to buy applicable social capital or to access to weak ties (Granovetter, 1973; Burke & Kraut, 2013; Hansen & Villadsen, 2017).

Another participant, Kristy, attended a large public university in the Midwest with a student minority population of near 33%. She felt strongly that the shortcoming in terms of social networks and access became apparent to her far before it was time to look for internships, employment, or possible networks. She expressed that, as an African American minority plus a first-generation student, she recalled times when she did not receive the attention and support from faculty that other students received. She noted that the lack of attention and support can lead to higher drop-out rates for those unfamiliar with navigating this space. Her understanding was that only when a professor felt someone showed promise in the classroom, did that student earn professorial attention. If students showed little academic promise, then they received little time and attention from the professors:

I think the lack of understanding that may be there is a little bit of extra care needed depending on the student. Not just minority (or first-generation) but just depending on the student. You know you might need a little bit extra assistance in the classroom. You might need something to be further explained that you didn’t understand in class.

The signals or extracted cues that Kristy used for sensemaking about not gaining attention and help were: displayed “lack of understanding”, need for “a little bit of extra care” or “a little bit [of] extra assistance in the classroom”, and/or having “something to be further explained” (for extracted cues in sensemaking, see Weick, 1995). These cues seemed to create professorial impressions that the students were not worth the extra effort or explanation. For many participants, their behaviors and anticipated response by professors meant that they should not indicate that they do not know
something and that they should not ask for help. Their behaviors only reinforced a perpetual cycle for many, affirming the “cream rises to the top” belief that affords more privilege to those already advantaged (see Kanter, 1977; Rosenbaum, 1989).

4.1.1.3 Hypervigilance for Fear of Missing Out

For some first-generation students and others, not-knowing what options are available is not acceptable. This feeling of not knowing or fear of missing out seemed to prompt a form of hyper-vigilance related to everything career related. The fear of missing out in endemic among adolescents and college student affecting their face-to-face and online information gathering and relation seeking behaviors (FOMO, see Przybylski, Murayama, and DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013; Alt, 2015). For students who have embraced this FOMO ideology, they have taken additional precautions, seeking out alternative methods to ensure they have the same or equivalent career opportunities as others. For example, Ross went to a public university in the western United States. He shared that being a “self-starter” and “extremely proactive” helped lessen anxieties and fears. His hypervigilance to ensure that he did not miss out led him to seek out top experiential learning opportunities (“I interned at the state department…and two of my professors asked me how I got that.”). Feelings of being left out were also a reason for hyper-vigilance, “I had to take that extra step to be able to gain access to some of these opportunities that would have not been presented to me otherwise.”

Having the eye on the prize (i.e., being goal oriented) and enacting perseverance can also be a form of hypervigilance. Steve shared, “I know that a lot of that has been through hard work, through a lot of self-discipline, you know, wanting something, chasing after that.” Steve’s description of his actions highlighted his “wanting” to achieve a goal versus needing to achieve it. He then commented about his extreme attentiveness to this goal by acknowledging that this
achievement was not easy, taking “hard work” and “self-discipline.” His talk represented intention, determination, and purpose as he was “chasing” after his goals. This proactive behavior was one way in which research participants counteracted disadvantages by guiding themselves through the process through overly cautious behavior.

Despite the shared beliefs and memorable messages of family members about degree attainment and success, many of those already at-risk (minority, first-generation, or low-income) perceived that they continued to struggle and often did not receive the same level of preparation or support. It meant that students often did not report or share their experiences because they did not know where to go and whom to ask, if they even considered seeking help. Students who struggled and did not show professors’ expectations for long-term career potential and success felt that they could not forge the connections to help them or utilize social networks. They expressed that they felt very discouraged. Education was not the “golden ticket”. Next, a look at the perceived reality that students feel they must go it alone.

4.1.2 “It Is All Up to Me”

The second theme, “it’s all up to me,” illumined feelings of independence and isolation whereby participants expressed sentiments, admissions, and beliefs. In particular (a) they admitted having a lack of knowledge of available career options (as compared to other fields). They realized that they were unaware of gaps in their career preparation as they were living through the educational process. Second, (b) they believed that if they do not seek out help, they would not get any help. In other words, they viewed educational and career processes to be self-guided and directed. Third, (c) they believed that other students in other fields with more professionalized disciplines had it easier than they did because others’ career pathways were more clear or obvious. First, student understandings related to career options are explored.
4.1.2.1 Lack of Knowledge of Available Career Options

The childhood dreams of what kids want to be when they grow up may or may not become a realization based on the educational and other choices that they make. These choices also are profoundly enhanced or circumscribed (delimited) by inheritances of class, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and so on (Inkson, 2006). For many there may a difference between wanting to be a first responder (such as a police officer, fire fighter, and paramedic), teacher, or movie star at age five and the reality of what one actually wants to do for the rest of his or her life. The options may seem endless at different points in individuals’ lives. These options are dependent on whether others and the students themselves engage in guidance and other forms of relational, informational, and material resource assistance.

If students were lucky enough to know their options and pursue them, the advice they received probably seemed direct, specific, actionable, and positive. For example, Oprah shared what might have become a soul-crushing moment was redeemed by advice that enabled her to set her course and achieve success. Oprah knew who to go to for advice and recounted her experience as very positive:

There was one faculty member in the political science department that was kind of the famous person to go to for career advice, because she was brutally honest. And you would say, "This is what I want to do," and she'd say, "You're not smart enough." She's awesome, though, because she would tell you how to become smart enough, too.

Oprah’s declaration that “this is what I want to do” provided the advisor with a direct path and an opportunity to give very specific advice on how to achieve career goals. It also highlighted Oprah’s need for her advisors to be “brutally honest” which suggests the need for more intimate relationships with advisors so both parties are comfortable with constructive feedback. Her remarks are framed as building confidence and expressing appreciation. Her remarks also indicate that she was grateful that she would not be wasting her time on paths that would not be productive.
She wanted to know exactly what to do and how to do it from someone with a reputation for good advice and straightforward talk.

For other students that were not as certain of their intended career trajectory, the lack of knowledge about options and direction was confusing. Blue, who came from a small private liberal arts college in the upper Mideast, stated that at her institution they were not allowed to declare majors until the spring semester of their sophomore year, “and so coming in to college, you didn't really hear about career choices.” Another participant, Chicago, who came from a private university in the southeast, said, “I was a student career advisor my sophomore year of college, and I was a – similarly to your experience, we weren't allowed to declare a major early on, so I thought it was kind of ironic that they were having sophomores talk about what they wanted to do next prior to having a major.” Besides expressing the nonsensical (to them) nature and sequencing of career planning and major direction, both Blue and Chicago implied that early rather than later direction in addition to presentation of options would be useful for students.

Ira shared a memory in one class that the assignment was to "do some research on what you want to do with your career and list potential options." Although he recalled the assignment as being somewhat helpful, other participants did not recall similar encouragement of and assignments devoted to career exploration. It is unclear if these opportunities happened or not, but it highlights that students do not recall the exploration activities occurring. Moreover, opportunities and learning were entangled relationally. Billy, a participant that had attended a large public institution in the Midwest, had shared he had considered changing majors several times and had sought advice while trying to figure it out. Prior to Billy’s final decision to change majors, there were issues of trust that arose between this student and his advisor:

I remember I talked to that engineering professor…And she had information, but I remember not really trusting that it was completely objective, because I was
thinking of doing engineering or doing all these other things. And it seemed like she was pretty dismissive of all the other paths and really focused on keeping me in the engineering program. So, I didn't find it very useful.

His feelings of distrust were framed as suspicion and skepticism that “she had information” but she was not “completely objective” and her attitude was “pretty dismissive.” These feelings and skepticism caused him to disregard the information altogether.

Students wanted to sketch out a roadmap with the assistance of trusted others. Dik and Shumzu’s (2018) recent research examines distinct types of calling as a road map to career. Rather than callings, most participants in this study expressed a need for more concrete career options with identifiable outcomes in terms of jobs and career trajectories. This first sub-theme highlighted the student’s lack of understanding of clear-cut trajectories within a path or track; this lack of ability to interpret information (Buzzanell, 1987) often contributed to their difficulty in transitioning into desirable full-time employment or launching a career upon graduation. Yet, the students also identified some structural reasons for their dissatisfaction with career advice.

According to the focus groups, the most common tracks identified by faculty were academia versus industry. This first response or heuristic implied that members of some disciplines would or should pursue the path of the Ph.D. and a life in the academy and others would seek non-academic options (that still might require additional training, education, or degrees in the future). Although both academic and industry courses function as viable pathways for graduates, it is rare for university representatives, outside of career development professionals, to describe higher education outcomes with the reflexive ability to prepare students for both pathways simultaneously. Furthermore, academic versus industry is framed as oppositional, exclusive, and non-equivalent options with rather vague descriptions that do not provide a lot of details to students as job seekers. One student said that her faculty advisor only “advised fellowships and academic opportunities” and then she added that for jobs outside of academia “he wasn't very useful.” There was consensus
that those sharing insight would “lump us all together and say these are typical career paths that somebody with your major would go on” to enact. The participants shared that they were unable to act upon this information. Other concerns were with being positioned for a path that was not suited to their interests. Blue shared,

I definitely thought they would tailor more to what I actually wanted to do, as opposed to forcing me in a specific route, and saying, you'll be well off, you'll make a lot of money, you'll be able to have valuable expertise here.

Blue knew what she did not want, even if she was unsure about what she did want. She used words like “tailor” to describe her need for personalization. She also used “forced” when talking about pathways. In this case, she was being routed to high paying jobs, not those in which she was most interested.

Issues of uncertainty and clarity on career path may also be an indication of low career competency, or the knowledge, skills, or abilities required to perform work or a job successfully. In these cases, students may be unable to makes connections between their career development and their self-perceived employability and marketability (De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011). Related to their career competency is their career self-efficacy. These participants as college graduates had difficulty acting on perceived career options because they felt unaware of what “industry” meant. Bandura’s (1977) thoughts on self-efficacy and Betz’s (2001) application of self-efficacy assumptions and implications about career highlight that personal beliefs about self and identity, along with fears and anxieties, can negatively impact students’ ability to complete goals or, in this case, to enact a proper career search. These beliefs about self also determine how much effort the participants put into achieving their goals and how long they would attempt the goal before giving up (Bandura, 1977; Betz, 2001). Not really knowing available career paths boils down to the basic question every career advisor has heard a thousand times “What can I do with this major?” It is not that that information is difficult to find (e.g., readily available is the
Occupational Outlook Handbook, USDOL, 2018), it is more that students were unclear what to do with the information when and if they got their hands on it and when to seek help.

Arthur, a student who had attended a private liberal arts college on the east coast and worked for a couple of years before coming back to graduate school shared,

...at the university, the idea is that you do really well, when all the firms come recruit, you've got a good GPA, you get an intern, you get a job. It's – that's very different from once you're out in the work force and you're trying to get a job. People aren't coming to you.

Arthur may have known what path or options were available but had difficulty in navigating the job search process once away from the university. Transitions were more challenging to him because the process was entirely self-directed. His concerns are framed as disillusionment, feeling let down by the difficulties of the process once he left the university. In the next section, a discussion about help seeking behaviors related to careers and job attainment.

4.1.2.2 Efforts to Secure Employment are Self-Guided

The notion that “unless you sought those things out, they were not presented to you” was mentioned in varying forms in multiple groups. As the researcher will discuss in RQ2, participants admitted upon reflection that there were lots of resources available, but in the moment, they felt that all elements of career development and preparation, including job seeking were autonomous activities. Participants either did not seek assistance or did not realize at the time that assistance was available. Comments like “there wasn’t direct involvement” or “it was all up to you. Nothing was really personalized.” Some even thought it was all about luck, crossing your fingers and hoping that “you'd get lucky and find something” or find out “through word-of-mouth from someone else.” There were also comments about self-initiative, referring to whether it was in their nature to seek out things left out by the university, “that wasn't something my university told me
about, that was something I found myself.” E.T. who had attended a medium-sized regional campus at a public university in the southeast shared,

There weren't any resources going around for us to be looking out for certain things. And if we should, I don't know, apply for this, apply for that. There was never any way for us to find out unless we did the research on it, by ourselves.

E.T. was looking for information to be shared in a direct way and specific indicators for what needed to be done. Her descriptions that there “weren’t any resources” and no one telling her when and where to apply signals a need for help in determining what steps or actions were required. Her concerns are framed as frustration over the lack of direction she received during this important process and confusion over not knowing what to do and over taking it on alone.

Karabenick and Knapp (1988) discussed help seeking behavior of students related to academic assistance in areas where they struggled. Students often failed to seek help from professors resulting in no improvement in their understanding of the material at hand. This deficient performance in the classroom contributed to feelings of helplessness and low self-worth. Similarly, if students do not seek help for career related issues, there will likely be no marked improvement in performance, leaving them lost in their self-guided reality. Sally, a first-generation student who had attended a private religious institution in the northwest, shared that seeking help is not a natural tendency,

I think partly the way I’ve been taught. I came from a very working-class family so it’s never, the idea that someone would help you is a foreign one. That you could go to someone that would help you.

Sally’s explanation is one of self-determination and shock. She was raised by her family to be independent and not need help, “to handle her business.” She seemed surprised or shocked (as did her parents) that services to help existed and even more so that there were people who actually wanted to help students through services, resources, and support.
In this second sub-theme, participants expressed their thoughts that the onus of responsibility lay on the students themselves, a “kind of up to you to figure that out” mentality. This belief may open the door for new programming options. Educators and administrators have spent a lot of time in developing college and career readiness programs. These programs were related specifically to Career and Technical Education for secondary education that was geared more for the transition to the workplace for those pursuing trades and other vocational programs and more for assuring employers that graduates were work ready (Hyslop, 2008). Employers were and are requiring some form of validation of skills.

For this very reason, many institutions of higher education, beyond the community colleges, are beginning to implement career readiness programs and standards. These programs are much different from college readiness as career readiness competency certificates, digital badges, targeted mapping, and other integrated plans embed skill development in the curriculum or to work alongside them (McWhorter & Delello, 2016; Seemiller, 2018). This type of structured program could eliminate students’ feelings of isolation and open up clearer pathways for students to seek help or identify when they have fallen off-track. Sally added,

I walked away with my degree thinking I did this all by myself because I felt like, it felt like nobody was really there to help and even though I know now, there were resources there. I just didn't, I didn't know what I was doing. So, I think that’s probably, the guidance part and just knowing where to go. Making that clear and communicated is really what was missing.

Feelings that “nobody was really there” indicated that she felt alone. “I didn’t know what I was doing” again reinforced the need for individual goal-setting and directed outreach.

One point that came up often during these focus groups was how following business and professional school career service delivery models could improve more generalized career preparation models. The resources allocated to business students seemed unfairly distributed, causing resentment by those mentioning it. The programs had strategically connected courses to
career in an easily observable way by onlookers studying other disciplines. They embedded the preparation piece within their coursework, required internships or experiential learning, and provided networking events that led to employment. Participants felt that those students were always better prepared and better connected when it came to finding work and launching into the world of work after college. Participants did not feel B-school students had to find their own way or self-direct anything.

4.1.2.3 Professional schools are more career-centered

Digging a little deeper in the third theme, the researcher discovered obvious feelings of resentment, envy, and jealousy (perhaps) over other fields that seem to have it a little easier in identifying trajectories and placement opportunities their view. Participants mentioned several times that very clear-cut pathways exist for some of their peers. For instance, engineers become engineers, nurses become nurses, with little need for difference as they enter entry-level pathways. They also felt schools with specialized career resources better served students, specifically the business schools. Oprah shared, “the business school had its own thing...they had their own career services thing that was a lot more in-your-face. Very proactive. But for everybody else who was not in the business school, it was not that way.” The need for disciplines to have their “own thing” when it came to career and approaches that were “in-your-face” or “very proactive “seemed to cause envy. Meryl shared that at her liberal arts institution there were similar services for the business school, she stated “there was the business school, and then pretty much everything else – even all the sciences, engineering, communication, etcetera, were all in social sciences. And we only had one career person for all of us.” Her comparison of the business school and “everything else” put the business school in a position of privilege which was reinforced by her reporting of large numbers of staff in the b-school and “one career person for all of us.”
Disciplines that offered undefined career pathways like the social sciences, humanities, or liberal arts seemed to have the most difficulty in attracting, retaining, and satisfying students. Feelings that services did not cater to their own needs but catered to the needs of everyone else also surfaced, “there was a career center, but it was primarily for other divisions [majors].” These feelings of being left out may not be objective insofar as there are specialized services for different divisions or majors, but students’ perceptions along with interactions with others would socially construct the realities that they reported. Statements about these beliefs that students felt left out offers helpful information that can inform how universities market services to students in the future.

There also seemed to be a present, underlying tension about what job search options or limits were available (exploration in terms of breadth and depth of options) and how to go about securing a job after graduation (action of narrowing down options and taking one path). Oprah shared great frustration at the idea that it “seems like the only industries that you can get an entry-level job straight out of college are finance and consulting, marketing, business school-type stuff.” Some reported they were forced or pushed toward positions or organizations with higher levels of status and prestige. This push to orient students toward status positions is often called “career funneling” and seems to occur more frequently at elite institutions than at others (Binder, Davis, & Bloom, 2015). Blue added,

even if you weren't in the business school, they had summer programs called the Summer Business Management Program, where it was for non-business majors that wanted to get a job in consulting or business, and so they allowed you to apply your other skills from your other major to business and consulting. So still kind of pushing us in that direction, even if we didn't pick that major.

This form of career direction may be because some advisors figure that if students are making good money, then they would not worry about meaningfulness, fulfillment, and passion in their work.
Although there are so many opportunities that are available for these students, without a strong history of informational interviewing, career exploration, experiential learning opportunities, and mentorship, those pathways seemed unrealistic and unknown to student research participants. Priest and Donley (2014) discusses alumni mentoring as a way to support student leadership skill development and infuse positive influences in the areas of career-related skills, personal growth and professional development, career transitions, and application to real-life. In the next theme, participants explored the process of job searching.

4.1.3 “I Was Shooting Blind”

In the third sub-theme, participants’ understandings revolved around their needs, frustrations, and difficulties with the job search process. They shared feelings of regret and anxiety with participants expressing (a) a need for early and continued intervention (“I wish someone would have told me”); (b) frustrations over employer-imposed requirements for work experience in entry-level job postings; and (c) difficulty in identifying their own transferable skills (“I didn’t know what I was doing”).

Need for early and continued intervention. There are many student resources and support services available to students on most campuses, but these services only help if the student steps up and seeks the extra help or can identify that a knowledge or skills gap exists. “I was shooting blind” reveals that participants feel unprepared for their job searches because they wanted more direction (specifically they felt that they were not really directed in their job search activities at all, and they felt frustrated and envious of others (specifically they expressed considerable frustration when watching some of their peers who knew exactly what was needed and exactly what they needed to do). For example, Ira shared, “I think there’s a lot of frustration about people who are just made for positions from the get-go and know every single competitive thing to have on their
resumé.” The belief that peers were “made for” certain positions and already “know” what is expected only points out what was missing in others’ career development. For many, especially first-generation students, navigating this space is foreign to them:

I don't know. Maybe with other students that aren't first gen, they kind of get that outside information from families or whatnot. I'm not sure. But going in there, going into it, basically shooting in the dark is what I felt occurred. It's like you have a slight idea, but not really.

“Shooting in the dark” in imagery that both provides insight into feelings of unfamiliarity with choices and actions, and the expressed need to do something even if they recognize that the behavior is not optimal. Oprah shared,

I just think the more contact I would've had my very first year …would've I think maybe gotten me in the right mindset. And just having more people that can actually spend time. … and talk with you for half an hour about, "I don't know what to do. Please look at my resumé." Getting time like that on…campus was next to impossible.

The need to get “in the right mindset” because “I don’t know what to do” speaks to feelings of confusion surrounding career. Additionally, the burden for advisors who “spend time” or “sit with you and talk” seems to require additional levels of engagement for which their increased advising loads might make impossible. As participants entered the job market before or after graduation, they felt the need to receive some formal assurances that they were on the right track. Unfortunately, since many were not help seeking and not already hypervigilant, their actions were based on observations of others and not on abilities or techniques to track and monitor themselves. Eden and Aviram (1993) discussed positive modeling behaviors as a key influence in helping the unemployed secure reemployment. The wrong or a negative role model could significantly impact students’ individual results and, based on their individual career plan, might not be able to offer the different approach to career needed. E, a first-generation college student who attended a private research institution in the upper east coast shared,
my parents didn't go to college. So, for me, this whole thing was just—“I don't know how to operate in this space.” And it wasn't necessarily that I needed someone to hold my hand, but I did need someone to say, “did you do this?” And yeah, then I'll go to do it, and I don't need anything beyond that. But it was kind of even just that prompting of now that you've done this, “did you send them a thank you email? Did you do this?” I really was flying blind, and just doing the best that I could, based on what I was perceiving others to do.

This statement highlights concerns framed as uncertainty and needs for assurance as the student tried to work out how to “operate in this space.” This student wanted simple exchanges, perhaps even checklists that enabled her to transfer or transition her knowledge and action from one part of the job search to another. What she wanted were simple directions, “did you do this?” These questions confirmed that the participant had and could enact necessary skills or experiences for a specific type of job or jobs and confirmed that she was able to undergo the actual process of enacting a job search (Eraut, 2009). This expressed need for career intervention was echoed by many participants recalling “vaguely” the existence of offerings of preparation assistance during orientation, or as a two-week section in a certain class. However, they never realized there might be required action on their part to become properly prepared.

Career interventions can take many forms: workshops, courses, services, and experiential learning. Savickas (2012) discussed a new paradigm of career interventions stating professors and advisors can better serve students in ‘designing their lives” related to the world of work by concentrating on “identity rather than personality, adaptability rather than maturity, intentionality rather than decidedness, and stories rather than scores (p.14). He proposed a new model involving interpretation of interests and self-understanding (construction, deconstruction, reconstruction, and co-construction) that ultimately leads to actionable activities related to career in the real world. The researcher revisits this topic in RQ2.

Participants, in general, and especially those who were first-generation felt that there was not enough guidance on how to use the resources that were available to them and that there were
too few touchpoints to insure their individual choices and actions were in line with understated institutional expectations. Not having the advantage of a family member and/or mentor to help guide them through the higher education process only perpetuated this perceived weakness or disadvantage, as it was unclear how to utilize resources put before them. George shared: “that's just a space that I don't know how to navigate, or like my network doesn't know…so it's like figuring it out as we go.” “Figuring it out” does not always happen and “as we go” does not seem to be a proactive or effective technique to aid in such an important transition. Students felt pressured to be self-starters and utilize personal initiative to secure employment. Students also realize that when it comes to finding a position in their field upon graduation they understand that there are no guarantees, even though they have spent all this time pursuing a diploma in their field of interest. What they can count on and trust is their own hard work and resiliency. Next, the frustrations over missed opportunities to gain experience are discussed.

4.1.3.1 Frustrations over needing experience (for entry-level jobs)

The second sub-theme showcased the reality of needing related experience and the ability to identify the development and acquisition of transferable skills when transitioning from college to career. Meryl, who had attended a private liberal arts institution on the west coast, shared, “I know a lot of people applying for jobs that I would be interested [in] straight from undergrad were told they didn't have enough experience.” This statement showed a disconnect between what they want to do (“jobs I would be interested [in]”) and what it takes to be prepared to do it (“experience”). Very often, the job search process was often much more difficult than anticipated and required a lot more work than students expected. This setback and expected-required-enacted tensions led to lack of self-confidence, additional stresses and anxieties, and an understanding (that
came too late) that related experience in the field through part-time work and various forms of experiential learning was required for quick entry into the workforce. Oprah shared:

I’ve spent two summers goofing around just making money babysitting, and not realizing that that would really kind of come back to haunt me when all of these other people have five million internships on their resumé when they’re applying to work at PWC [PriceWaterhouseCoopers] or something like that.

Oprah learned too late that very summer counted when students were trying to prepare for next steps in their career. Ira’s frustration was realizing too late in the process that there were wasted or spent opportunities to develop experience required by employers, Ira shared that “goofing around” would come back to “haunt me.” Suddenly, upon reflection, Ira now realized the value of internships.

Other participants shared great appreciation for experiential learning, but often lacked understanding until prompted that these were by-products of their educational training and meant to serve as skill-building and experience-building opportunities. Participants failed to make the connection between seemingly optional experiences, labor force preparation, and successful employment and careers. “Add-on” experiences that required active engagement and learning outside of the classroom such as those recommended by the National Society of Experiential Education (1998) such as internships, practicums, research, design projects, cultural immersion, volunteerism or service-learning, and cooperative education) were not meant to be optional.

Experiential education’s purpose is to develop experience with intention through structured planning to insure the activity is authentic and contributes to a student’s plan of study and personal career interests. These experiences are coupled with some form of reflection, so students may fully consider, think critically about, and process how the experience has provided tangible experience related to their career goals (NSEE, 1998). Identifying and translating those experiences can
happen immediately or greater reflection and understanding can occur with career maturity, the readiness to deal with career development tasks (Super & Hall, 1978).

Knowing what career paths are available is only one part of the puzzle when it comes to finding career success. Another necessary part is the ability to recognize opportunities to develop skills, apply experience, and sample the types of opportunities that are available. Sentiments around “I don’t know what I don’t know” rang consistently through the focus group talk. Internships (one form of experiential learning) are just as helpful in narrowing down options as discovering new ones. Some participants expressed regret and concern that they had wasted summers with unrelated jobs missing out on opportunities to build strong experiences into their résumé. Participants who could recall any form of experiential learning reported finding job success or job attainment at a faster pace and with greater ease than those participants who did not. Where students seemed most unclear was in realizing that varied experiences helped prepare them for the workplace. Most understood and equated internships with value, but they forgot that the other forms of experiential learning such as research, service learning, fellowships, volunteerism, and practicums, also helped to prepare them for the world of work.

Many students felt that the paths were academic or industry and that they had to choose. For example, if they were in a social sciences discipline, like Anthropology, and the academic path was the only option ever discussed and their interests or the job market changed over time, these students felt that they would be lost if that option was no longer a reality. Given today’s career outcomes, even those that go on for graduate degrees often choose alternative paths because of the shrinking job market; there are many more Ph.D. candidates in select disciplines on the job markets than there are jobs (Jaschik, 2016). This gap in how to make the leap from college to career was perceived as difficult when career-developmental options were not available. Ruby shared,
I actually found it very difficult…I wanted to get an internship …so many places told me that I was overqualified for internships, but then they wouldn't hire me for just a short period of time. So, I actually couldn't find anything, and I ended up nannying.

Ruby, a student who attended a private research institution in the Midwest, was attempting to secure an industry-based internship to complement several summers of research. An internship made sense to her because she felt she had no relevant experience. Experience is only valuable to employers if the candidate knows how to properly frame the experience. If the candidate cannot share the skills learned through research activities such as project management, data collection, analysis, and more then employer often cannot link activities to skills. Students may have simply misunderstood the value and transferability of the skills they acquired. Billy, who had attended a large public research institution in the Midwest, shared his insights over the value of his experiences, “the internships for those first couple summers can actually be really important, especially if you don't know what to do, to kind of narrow things down.” The next section takes a closer look at why students have difficulties with transferability of skills.

4.1.3.2 Difficulty Identifying Transferable Skills

Students understand that transferable skills exist, but they do not always know how to articulate these skills when on the job search. Many, far removed from “entry-level,” think these students are “smart” so they will get it (understand how to sell their skills), but it does not always happen, especially if they run into issues with placement.

Assiter (2017) focused on transferable skills development in higher education. Since the 1990s student-centered approaches to curriculum development and implementation as well as assessing learning outcomes are much more commonplace in higher education (Allen, 1996; Otter,
Employers demand and need these “soft skills\(^1\) and evidence of acquisition of such skills, but many students do not even know how to identify them. Soft skills might include work ethic, motivation, teamwork, organization, cultural awareness, and communication, to name a few (Ellis, Kisling, & Hackworth, 2014; Kyllonen, 2013). Additionally, employers seek social and emotional intelligence to handle day-to-day issues in the workplace. Also known as emotional quotient (EQ), emotional intelligence is the way people use emotions to handle everyday interactions and relationships (Caruso & Wolfe, 2001); EQ is extremely marketable, transferable, and considered a basic tool by many hiring managers and organizations.

Additionally, first generation college students acknowledged that there was a gap that existed, and there was a need for more attention on graduate school preparation and even workplace transition workshops. Just like first generation students need help adjusting to college life, the need for graduate school preparation was especially true for those studying disciplines that require a post-graduate degree beyond a bachelor’s degree. Students transitioning to graduate school felt disadvantaged moving into graduate school pointing out a language gap (unfamiliarity with jargon used in academia) and very often some of the basic skills required (writing, analysis and synthesis) needs improvement. First generation college students’ generalized notions that college is the ticket to success along with a lack of knowledge of existing resources and how to acquire and act upon the opportunities and services available to them may lead to closed doors and a lack of desire to continue for the less resilient. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, first-generation students are nearly 20% less likely to persist until graduation (USDOE, 2018). This retention issue should serve as a signal that not only must the professoriate do more to

\(^1\) Soft skills, sometimes called people skills, are commonly understood although humanities and social scientists who prepare students in soft skill areas dislike the term because of the association of soft with less important, weak, feminine, easy to attain, and less valuable when compared to hard skills like engineering and science
keep students in school, but also incorporate programs that assist in transitions from college to career.

The identification of transferable skills and the prospective opportunities to develop them is a critical learning stage for college students. Bloom (1956) and Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) developed and revised the Bloom Taxonomy of Learning. The stages of learning are remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Remembering is about one’s ability to retrieve or recall previously learned information that while understanding is more about one’s ability to comprehend the information. Applying takes learning to the next level, by taking recall and comprehension to an applicable situation that could not be solved without remembering and understanding of the new concept of learning. Analyzing deconstructs the new concept to allow understanding on a much deeper level and leading individuals to evaluate the concept. The last stage allows the learning to create or make new meaning of the concept. These stages create a solid foundation to true learning. It is not simply about memorizing the concept but about the ability to apply it to create new knowledge and meaning. This knowledge of transferable skill development is currently missing for most of the research participants. The next section considers responses to RQ2 on experience sharing, specifically how students recall access, availability, and applicability of career resources.

4.2 RQ2: How do students report or share these experiences with others?

The second research question (RQ2) asked: How do students report or share these experiences with others? There were three primary themes that emerged in response to this question. Participants expressed that information and resources surrounding career transitions were very general in nature and students often came upon the information after the fact in (1) “too general to be useful, too late to matter.” Here, participants reflected upon and acknowledged that
resources were available, but often were not taken advantage of by the student as they seemed like the services were meant for other disciplines. In addition, (2) “they were there, I just didn’t use them” recognized the harsh realizations that in competitive work environments (3) “there are no guarantees. First, an examination of thoughts on career information that was too general and often did not meet students’ needs.

4.2.1 Too General to Be Useful, Too Late to Matter

In our first primary theme, there are three sub-themes that highlights the students’ need for personal contact and specific and timely information. Participants expressed (a) a lack of intimacy with their advisors (both career and academic) sharing that “they don’t know who you are” or those who do provide “no personalization.” In the second sub-theme, they state faculty and staff share (b) no specific advice with regard to career paths and often staff hired to assist them are not experts in their field or discipline. Complicating it further, students felt let down when they visited resource centers for help and were assisted by their peers, who often were just as confused as they were. The third sub-theme focused on timeliness of resources as (c) they acknowledged that they often discovered services too late in their journey to take advantage of them. First, participants voiced the need for connectedness with advisors.

4.2.1.1 Lack of Intimacy with Advisors

Participants described different approaches when it came to advice. Whether it was academic or career advising, participants shared stories about brief encounters with the people who should be closest to them and know the most about them, to properly achieve their career goals. With insignificant variation and exception, many participants felt that they were viewed only as a “name and a number.” Participants described similar encounters where they would come in to the department every term “to schedule classes and get a different advisor every time, who basically
would check a box to make sure I had enough credits.” Similar concerns were raised over “walk-in advising,” advisors who “don’t know who you are,” and getting someone “different every time” while others shared the relationship existed only “via email.” Students feel the academic advisors’ purpose centered on being there to hear their career aspirations and help them to perfectly select the right classes to help them achieve their career goals. There was very little time spent on planning or advising and more time insuring that students took the correct number of courses to qualify for financial aid. “First-year advising was just walk-in advising,” Billy shared, “You'd have a different person every time. They don't know who you are.” Meryl added:

I think freshman year, I had to go and get my classes approved. And then every other semester after that, I would just email her with what classes I wanted to take, and she would just lift my hold. So, I never saw her after my freshman year. It was all via email.

Phrases like “never saw her” and “via email” indicated a very sterile hands-off approach to student advising. Students expressed a desire for more proactive or intrusive advising. Fowler and Boylan (2010) believed student success can be improved through intrusive advising, generally reserved for students with serious deficiencies in their foundational coursework. Through customized developmental educational methods and personalized services, students improved in the area of self-regulation with greater motivation, self-confidence and most importantly, connectedness (Fowler & Boylan, 2010). This proactive advising could also eliminate feelings that the advice they were receiving was “too general.” This need for specificity is explored further next.

4.2.1.2 No Specific Advice, No Experts in Their Field

In our second sub-theme, there was additional consensus over feelings of mistrust whereas when students did seek help from advisors, the information they received was too general in nature to be helpful with centralized services that offered no personalization and no expertise.
Participants repeatedly acknowledged that discussions occurred only about “typical pathways.” Alternative careers were never a point of discussion and rarely were discussions customized or personalized to help students achieve or realize their own personal career success. Recollections of career advising that focused on finding jobs that were closely related to their individual interests did not occur with most students. Additionally, when they were working with advisors they felt only a “general knowledge” and not very “specific knowledge” of any one field or discipline. They observed overtaxing and understaffing of staff members, student services and academic offices and other areas throughout the University. Meryl shared,

…we just had one person for all of the social sciences, so she didn't know much about what I wanted to do or even giving me, when I didn't know what I wanted to do, direction of where to look or anything. It was kind of – she just had so many students with so many different majors.

Statements like “she didn’t know much about what I wanted to do” showed students’ lack of confidence in the credibility of the appointed experts and “she just had so many students with so many different majors” prompted students’ feelings of being left out or left behind. They felt that the generality did not apply, they wanted to see people who could specifically help them in their school of interest or in their discipline and to help them find very specific careers.

Regarding career services, students expressed that they felt that centralized models were just “too big” to provide the type of service they were seeking. The career services at their institutions were either “really good” or “really bad.” Although at some point they realized that career offices were offering lots of opportunities to help them with resumé development, cover letters, interviewing skills, networking opportunities, and more, they just felt that they were getting a “one size fits all” type of response and what they really wanted was personalized attention and customized services versus an approach that they felt was too general. Another cause of mistrust involved several institutions that had “student workers” or “peer counselors” working in the offices
of career services. Students expressed that peer counseling was very undesirable and that they did not feel that they could benefit from this type of advising. Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz (1999) suggested exploratory activities to gain specific career information based on an individual student’s interests. For example, informational interviewing is a form of “planned happenstance” that can provide students access to experts in their field of interest and help students narrow down possible career options. This planned approach can be utilized in many different stages of career development and may lead to professional or personal connections and unexpected opportunities, including advancement. Working to develop strong ties and networks with professionals in the specific fields of interest would address student concerns in this area.

The students expressing the greatest satisfaction with resources or advice were those that had major specific career help versus the more centralized service models. Courses most appreciated were those that embedded the career component into the curriculum. For example, Sally mentioned that her institution offered,

…career-focused classes and that’s really where I learned the skills that I needed up putting on my resume. There was a public relations course that taught you how to draft. It was practical application. It was writing press releases or social media whatever, SEO.

Classes that prepared her for work were most helpful in her eyes. Phrases like “career-focused” and “practical application” describe a desire to be work ready. Her statement was framed with appreciation for receiving “skills that I needed.”

Parent-Johnson and Owens (2017) suggest approaching personalization of services by setting expectations, recognizing the whole person, and focusing on identifying an individual’s strengths stronger career outcomes are possible. Additionally, providing support services and encouraging active involvement can positively impact career and life goals. Additionally, this call for personalization and diverse sets of experts positioned within the disciplines (like the business
or professional schools) may encourage more student participation and overall engagement at an earlier time in students’ educational journey. Next, issues related to timeliness of services are discussed.

4.2.1.3 Services Discovered Too Late to Be Advantageous

As students made their way through the last years of their degree they may be too focused on fulfilling all requirements to realize career preparation requires strategic planning. After all, career work is an independent process in many cases with no one really monitoring how many applications each student is submitting or figuring out if the student is even qualified for the job. Many of the participants discussed becoming aware of resources well beyond the time when they felt they needed them the most. They had already started to navigate the job market and found themselves feeling behind. Many students felt that utilizing these resources in addition to their school work, home life, and outside work commitments were too consuming. There were just too many things in their life that were competing for their time and energy. One participant, E noted, “I just never got to the point of using it.” There was also acknowledgement that academic advisors, faculty, career advisors, and other staff were around, but often seemed too busy to provide the level of support and attention the student required or desired. What else became clear is that while students can check the boxes needed to complete requirements for degree completion, they are not always certain on actionable steps required to make positive strides toward career success and gainful employment. An unintended skills gap can now impact their ability to thrive in their selected profession. Meryl stated,

the other resource that they pointed us to was the network of alumni to search and try and figure out who was doing work that we liked. But again, there were no sessions on how to use that network, really. It was kind of--it was self-guided.
Meryl’s acknowledgement was that she was provided a resource but left to “try and figure out”. The lack of “how to use” the resources highlights an area of weakness for students. Thus, they felt unable to act independently on the information they were provided at that stage of their career development.

Community college transfer students also discussed difficulties in knowing how to access information and resources as they entered the four-year institution at a critical time in their journey. Assimilating to an unfamiliar environment often left them focused on coursework and less on career. Uncertainty surrounding actionable steps may also cause students to block out the unknown and focus on the work in the classroom that can be controlled. Students were not saying the services were not available, but that they just realized there was so much more available to them at a stage where they felt at a disadvantage because they were now aware of how much more could have been done in relations to career development and preparation. The lack of attention to such services may also be a result of not knowing their options and a loss of connectedness to career choice (Lizzio, 2006). Amundson, Borgan, Iaquinta, Butterfield, and Koert (2010) discussed connectedness and meaningful engagement as an integral part of career decision-making. Feelings of belonging and the ability to connect meaning to career while having the support of others can positively impact decision-making related to career. Another way to develop connectedness at an earlier stage in the process is via mentoring programs, specifically with alumni. Trevethan and Sandretto (2017), believed repositioning the way mentorship is viewed to a more “educative” process can contribute to less missed opportunities for students in the professional learning process. Participants expressed great value of alumni participation and feedback at different events. There is a great appreciation that students feel from getting to hear from alumni and believing there is a deep concern about their own personal successes and failures. In discussing mentorship, there was
strong consensus that there needs to be greater connections and understanding of crossovers between their skills and industry. This idea that the realization of career offerings became available too late for many students presents an opportunity for institutions to develop clearer touch points, connections, and mentorship. Uncertainty, specifically access to and engagement in career development resources and opportunities are covered next.

4.2.2 “They Were There, I Just Didn’t Use Them”

Student realizations that services and resources to prepare for and assist in career transition was reinforced in admissions that “they were there, I just didn’t use them,” whereas participants (a) acknowledged there was great variety in the resources and services available on-campus that they put off using or selectively chose to ignore due to competing responsibilities impacting their time allocation; (b) recalled touchpoints upon reflection, but failed to recognize important milestones in their higher education experience (i.e., experiential learning); and (c) admitted that because many career development programs were not required they seemed optional and participants felt there were too many other items on their to-do lists to worry about it at the time.

4.2.2.1 Underutilization of Available Resources and Services

There were mixed memories surrounding services and resources that intend to prepare students for life after college. Nearly half of the participants admitted they were very aware of the career services and related resources that their institution provided in one way or another but in many cases, they did not take advantage of the services or felt the services were not catering to their individual needs. They recalled websites, job boards, workshops, emails, recruitment events (for internships and full-time opportunities), and alumni networking opportunities as a few of the offerings provided by their institutions. They recollected more formalized institutional interventions such as New Student Orientation, First Year Experience courses, and other career
development courses with strong acknowledgement of occurrence, however students failed to make the connection that these services or programs existed to contribute to their career preparation and were in fact integral to their education and preparation. One participant, Jerry, who had attended a large public institution on the west coast, noted that the institution was committed to connecting students to careers and what could be done with a particular degree but felt they were not addressed in a personal way, “it was more just based on let's take all the stuff that you learned at the university, compile it into one thing, and send you on your way and hope you get something.” Another shared “there were resources that I was sort of aware of, and trying to utilize, but I wasn't equipped--and maybe that, again, is a personal thing--but I wasn't really equipped to take advantage of them.” This participant acknowledges there were attempts “trying to utilize” the resources, but the reality he “wasn’t really equipped” indicating their self-efficacy and career maturity were low. Fouad, Guillen, Harris-Hodge, Henry, Novakovic, Terry, and Kantamneni (2006) examined if there were contributing factors to career decision-making, resource awareness, and underutilization of service offerings. They found that the psychologically distressed were less aware of career services and even less likely to use the services. Lack of awareness and utilization of services or resources also contributes to our next sub-theme, the inability for many students to recognize career development opportunities.

4.2.2.2 Failure to Recognize Touchpoints and Important Milestones

Very often students did not understand how their educational preparation, including internships and other forms of experiential learning, connected to their career preparation. One participant, Steve, described the benefits of having a sibling who had attended college before him:

I saw how my brother did engineering, and then kind of had some regrets for not – and he did a very specific major. And he had some regrets about that, which I think made me a bit more careful for the first couple years, and also really pushed me to look for internships…
The advantages of experiential learning include not only gaining experience, but also narrowing career options. Steve was advantaged due to his ability to learn from his brother’s mistakes. He “had some regrets” but his education and career preparation made him “a little more careful” and created an internal drive that “pushed him” to take additional action. Another participant, Ira stated, “I know my roommates were biology and statistics. They always had internships or part-time employment, but for me maybe it was circulated one or two every now and then, but it was never even something I considered applying for perhaps because I don't even remember them.” Ira missed out on the opportunity to develop skills through experiential learning. Experiential learning is not just a learning style, but a way for students to explore career choice and connect skills development and transferability of those skills through reflection to the workplace (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Revisiting the academia versus industry discussion for a moment, participants also admitted that they did not see learning about “alternate pathways” an important activity if they felt they had already decided what their next step was. Ira, who entered graduate school this fall, stated, “I looked at jobs probably very briefly…but I think I always knew that after graduate school was when I would at least a master’s, perhaps a Ph.D. was when I would actually seriously look for jobs.” This statement is telling as to attitudes toward career. Many students may “tune out” these alternate paths because they believe their trajectory is already set. For example, one student shared, “it wasn't until I realized that maybe I should have a backup plan, that I started thinking about what I wanted to do in a more professional field, as opposed to an academic one. And that didn't really come about until senior year of college.” Frequently, students change their minds, or their minds are changed for them. After attempting graduate school, they decide a path in academia is not for them or possibly they did not get into their school of choice and decide to enter the workforce.
This is generally when most students recognize they have missed out on valuable milestones that were meant to prepare them for multiple pathways, not just one or the other.

4.2.2.3 Career Development Not Required and Seemed Optional

Participants also acknowledged that student services are presented in passive ways, “they sort of mention it in a large-scale way. But other than that, I don't really remember anybody kind of getting on me about career at all.” This statement highlighted that students viewed connections to career outcomes as something the university “sort of mention[ed]”. They followed up with a need for someone to track and measure progress when they shared that no one was “getting on me about career.” Another student stressed that these services were optional and did not demand action from the students, “you didn't actually have to go see them” indicating the resources and services offered were mere suggestions, not requirements. Meryl’s statement that "these resources exist if you want them" again made the process seem independent and optional, but not necessary.

The relationship between career advisors and students should be identified as team or group performance (Latane & Harkins, 1979). This vantage point allows the advisor to set joint goals to benefit individual student development in relation to career. Providing students with clear career goals, agreed upon by the student, motivates students to achievement (Dik, Sargent, & Steger, 2008). Career work can be divided up to reduce anxiety the student may feel if there is the perception that this is a solo act with many interconnected parts. Another consideration is implementation of more formalized plans to assist with leveraging of social capital. Drucker’s (1954,1995) Management by Objectives (MBO) method created specific objectives to be achieved in organizations. Drucker believed this method allowed organizations to achieve higher levels of commitment by employees resulting in better gains toward goal and greater personal or professional development. Tribus (1993) proposed implementing these objectives in higher
education, also referred to as *Quality Management* in higher education, that tracks goals as learning outcomes and encourages dialogue between advisors and students.

### 4.2.3 “There Are No Guarantees”

In this final theme, participant talk centered on degrees not guaranteeing job seekers much of anything these days. Participants (a) understood that degrees do not guarantee a good job and that intentionality and good choices matter; (b) received mixed messages from advisors about preferred trajectories; and (c) acknowledged that following one’s passion does not always pay the bills, as students were faced with economic pressures to take jobs that are unfulfilling personally but that paid bills and loans (Medved et al., 2006). The first subtheme examines job attainment and career choices.

#### 4.2.3.1 Degrees Alone Do Not Guarantee A Good Job

With all the preparation, skill development, and training that goes into a college education, students still struggled to find the right job, even if they secured the proper experiences. One participant stated in a flustered way by throwing her hands up: “I think that people nowadays like it’s almost like the diplomas that you receive don’t amount to anything. I mean you get it and you could still be an ice cream scooper at Baskin-Robbins.” What her statement shows is frustration about the time and work that goes into getting a degree and then the disappointment that one could end up with a job that does not require that credential. Jerry expressed resentment when he commented on his experience and career expectations,

> I think directly after graduating, I was mostly…sort of resentful that I wasn't already hired somewhere. I wasn't already in the industry, or I was just saying, "I can't wait to get out of here and just get to some real-life stuff, as opposed to just to taking these classes and having to do it for a class, and not for a real job.
Participants’ concerns were framed as shock, resentment, and even bewilderment that employment outcomes did not occur as quickly as they anticipated. Feelings of “resentment” over the reality that he “wasn’t already hired” punctuated unrealized career expectations. He had believed that after he received his degree, job attainment would be immediate. Underlying tensions arose as he expressed frustration for “a real job.”

Jones and Schmitt (2014) shared challenges faced by college graduates. Barriers to career success for college graduates included unemployment, underemployment, and low job quality. In 2013 the unemployment rate for all college graduates was 5.6% and 12.4 for black college graduates. In the competitive world of work, strategic career planning was needed at every turn. Every experience counted in making students more marketable to employers. Harvey (2000) warned that the academy and the workplace were not at odds but were complementing each other, in a rapidly changing world, graduates need to be lifelong learners. The primary role of higher education is increasingly to transform students by enhancing their knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities while simultaneously empowering them as lifelong critical, reflective learners. (p. 3)

The same is true of those going in to the professoriate. Even with publications and a Ph.D., there are no “sure things” when it comes to getting a job. With larger numbers of students taking on graduate education, specifically doctoral education, more and more of these graduates end up in non-academic fields (Neumann & Tan, 2011). Participants stressed competition and preparation.

4.2.4 Mixed messages about preferred trajectories

For those considering a life in the academy there have been confusing messages about their intended pathway. In the social sciences, for example, a student may need to attend graduate school to develop the proper research skills or to achieve a MA or Ph.D. The confusing messages were usually off-the-cuff remarks from professors or other advisors. For example, “you need a Ph.D.
for that job” and “think hard before choosing academia” seemed to provide knowledge that, on the one hand, a particular path required additional credentials and, on the other hand, a cautionary warning to “think hard” questioning if that is a path a student should really consider taking. In Basalla and Debelius (2014) attempted to answer the question “so what are you going to do with that?” They offered a step-by-step guide to transitioning to the world of work after graduate school tackling many of the same challenges participants perceived that they faced in their own transitions. Some participants who transitioned to the workforce learned additional life lessons in regard to income, advancement, and following their work-related passions and interests.

4.2.4.1 Following one’s calling does not always result in high pay

When students find a deeper connection to work, greater meaning, or follow their personal passions like feeding the hungry, changing policy, or providing some form of human or social service to refugees, they are often more fulfilled (Mirvis & Hackett, 1983). Additionally, working with a sense of purpose, often referred to as calling, results in higher levels of self-confidence, job satisfaction and psychological success (Hall & Chandler, 2005). Unfortunately, in a society where teachers, one of our most noble professions, make $50,000 a year and professional athletes make $50,000,000, meaning does not always “guarantee” a strong wage or employability security. Many students agreed that following one’s passion did not always pay the bills, indicating there was often a weak correlation between what students found most fulfilling and the positions that paid well. Hewlett and Luce (2006) discussed extreme jobs and the 70-hour work week. Based on feedback from the focus groups, many graduates today are not looking to take on extreme jobs and do not feel the need to do so, but they do want to be paid fairly for their “talents and gifts” regardless of industry or path.

Samantha commented,
I come from an upper-middle-class area...where basically everybody's parents worked on Wall Street, or in that sort of sector, or they were lawyers, or doctors, and they were quite high earners, and the expectation was that their children, and their children's friends, would go on and do – you know, go on to a top school, go out and do the same thing. And so, I think that it has been very hard to think about gainful employment with that background baggage.

Samantha described her desire to follow her calling in life and fight the divergent expectations of family and peers. Familial and socio-economic factors have put pressures to work in extreme jobs that guarantee high pay, status, and wealth. Her clear interest to find her own way was met with confusion over the mental “baggage” she felt compelled to entertain although she greatly wanted to break the cycle of a normative career path and legacy set by those who came before her. Important to this discussion is the next section on how students act as a result of their understandings.

4.3 RQ3: How Do Students Act Upon These Understandings, If at All?

The third research question (RQ3) asked: How do students act upon these understandings, if at all? To respond to this general question, there are three primary themes that unveil reflective learning and critical thinking around their educational experiences: (1) “I finally started to make connect the dots,” (2) “falling on one’s sword,” and (3) “going back to get it right.”

4.3.1 “I Finally Started to Make Connect the Dots”

Students who gained a little or a lot of experience in the workplace shared that they finally started to reflect on their higher education experiences and made connections between their studies and the workplace in “I started to make connections on my own.” Three sub-themes emerged as they reported (a) once on the job they often gained clarity on how their skills translated and how valuable internships, research, and workplace exposure were in aiding their transitions; (b) recognized that with more time, experience, and maturity they would have greater insight to their
skills and an ability to build connections and act upon their social network; and (c) shared increased need and appreciation for mentorship while in school and even after. In the next section, connections to preparation are explored.

*Clarity About Knowledge, Skills, Abilities on The Job.* When the hustle and bustle of classes, projects, and final exams come to an end, participants who had secured employment began to make connections and bridges from college to career. For example, Jason, who had attended a large public university, identified the value in extra-curricular activities, “being able to have that experience, that extracurricular leadership experience to be able to make those connections from the classroom to the real world were extraordinarily helpful.” Jason also shared,

I was finally able to take some of those skills and concepts that I’d been learning in the classroom that I’ve also been reading about and be able to actually apply them in a leadership setting. Being able to interact with business executives, being able to go to trade, academic conferences and present research findings and ideas and converse with leaders in academia and leaders in business and be able to see, so this is how what I’m learning in the classroom actually applied in the real world. And so, I started making those connections on my own.

As a student who had attended community college, transferred to a four-year institution, and then went on to graduate school, Jason was able to show a maturity in his thinking and actually applying “skills and concepts” he had learned in many classrooms. These statements were framed with hope, joy, excitement, and relief over the realization that the time and effort spent on higher education was beginning to produce positive outcomes. His ability to “interact” with professionals in a variety of settings also spoke to his comfort level and feelings of relief that he was not viewed as an imposter (Gardner & Holley, 2011). He was also joyful that the mental connections were done independently.

Others began to appreciate opportunities that were not valued at the time (i.e. experiential learning) and began making action plans for the future in reflective ways. The art of reflective learning is not a new concept, but it has been useful in helping students and recent graduates to
realize their career aspirations and move beyond dependence in the classroom to independence in the workplace (Edwards & McKinnell, 2007). For many this step to critically analyze past activities was self-transformative (Harvey, 2000). There also was greater awareness as more time had passed.

4.3.1.1 More Time, Experience, And Maturity Equaled Greater Insight

In addition to recognition of their skills, the further participants were from graduation also played an important role in their feelings toward their education and often provided greater insights. Taylor and Cheung (2010) discussed that continued practices of self-awareness and self-reflection can improve career outcomes, emotional stability (reduced stress and anxiety), promotes intellectual development, to name a few. Jason shared,

I think the longer that goes by, the more I value my – the time I had at community college… (and other institutions), the more thankful I am for the opportunities that I was given, and how each institution – it may not have been exactly what I wanted, yet it was what I needed at the time.

Jason’s appreciation for his education and what he learned at each institution were foundational and each presented the opportunity to continue to learn more and build on that foundation. While a student, the difference between “wants” and “needs” can sometimes be blurred. Time away for reflection provided greater insight into to knowledge, skills, abilities, and the value of education. George shared, “I've sort of come to a place where I can, with enough distance, say, "These are the actual valuable things that I learned. These are the things that are actually going to help me."

Again, the reflective process enabled George to see the transferability of his skills and how to apply them in his everyday life.
4.3.1.2  Need and Appreciation for Mentorship

Upon reflection, participants shared an increased appreciation for previous mentors and expressed a continued need to incorporate mentorship at different stages of their education. Mentorship provides supportive measures like coaching, role modeling, and problem solving as a means to address everyday challenges and contribute to student confidence, competence, and effectiveness (Luna & Cullen, 1998). Another participant, E, shared, “one of the reasons that I decided on the institution that I did, was because I knew that they would have great networks when I graduated. And I knew I would get a job.” Having access to “great networks” is often a motivating factor when selecting an institution of higher education. There is also a sense of relief if one feels the school can provide strong ties and social network. Mentorship often allows for students to act upon and capitalize on the use of those networks in hopes the work and effort results in the ability to “get a job. Students seek mentors, coaches, and experts in their field of interest to gain additional knowledge, secure internships, and make the transition to the world of work a little easier. Students in more than one focus group felt universities could benefit more students by “making sure that it's alumni who can step into that kind of intimate advising role so that they can make sure that freshmen and sophomores are having summer internships and stuff like that.”

As participants matured in their understanding of their career competency and self-reflect on their knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes they also shared revelations that employed or not, prepared or not, or satisfied or not with their current state of career progress, they were symbolically “falling on their sword.” This is a metaphorical acknowledgement that career success and failures were the result of self-inflicted wounds. They showcased (a) personal accountability both for self-accountability and self-reflection, (b) expressed need for and desire to gain additional skills, offered perceptions about (c) opportunities for improvement in higher education (i.e., what was missing).
4.3.1.3 Self-Reflection Brings Self-Accountability

Sometimes students were just too close to a situation to gain perspective. As previously discussed, time and distance from a given situation can bring clarity, a clearer understanding. Once graduates reflected on their career and educational challenges and success, they can take accountability for their actions and implement a proactive plan to right any wrongs they identify. Blue shared,

that financial strain and the constant worry of how am I going to afford my rent, and my loan payments, and can I buy groceries, or do I have to talk to Sally Mae – that was the biggest mark of failure.

Fears and vulnerability about the “financial strain” and “constant worry” about abilities to afford adulthood seemed to impact choices about next steps. Accountability for career success or failure was another point of discussion during these focus groups. Students gave credit to many people including friends, family, mentors, previous supervisors, professors, and others who had made a difference in their lives. But when it came to holding either the institution or someone else accountable for their career success or failures, many held themselves accountable and blamed only themselves. Only one student of the 25 students that participated in the focus groups said that they blamed the school if they did not find career success. This student felt that because he paid a large amount of money to the school to acquire skills for successful employment he deserved a positive outcome. If that outcome was not a high paying job, it was the school’s responsibility to help them secure employment.

4.3.1.4 Getting What Is Needed to Achieve Goals

With self-accountability came the need to achieve new goals and find ways to fill the gaps, if any existed. Evers, Rush, and Berdrow (1998) discussed how many recent graduates come to learn the bases of competence through self-management, workplace skills, and building on their
college training. This realization was often followed by recognition that lifelong learning was necessary in many ways to continue to advance and succeed in careers. Blue shared her worry over financial pressures impacting choices about next steps,

And it's why I chose to go back to grad school, because I was trying to reset and be able to try again, that whole launch, into a career that was both related to what I was interested in, and also it gave me some sort of economic security.

Her statements reflected a clear choice (“I chose”) to go back to graduate school as a way to start over or “reset” or get another chance to “launch” her career. This new attempt is approached with hope for “economic security.”

4.3.1.5 Opportunities for Improvement in Higher Education

As participants talked through missed opportunities for career development and preparation, they also shared thoughts on how higher education could improve current practices. Some of these opportunities were discussed in earlier sections such as earlier career interventions, skills reflection activities, and more consistent and possibly required touch points. Another opportunity for improvement in included dealing with transfer students and that generally applied to students who had attended a junior college prior to going on to a four-year institution. Students felt that they were somewhat had fallen behind or felt disconnected upon transfer. They appreciated the fact that the junior college let them ease into life as a college student and felt that, from an advising standpoint, many conversations and classes were specifically set up to prepare students to gain skills that were needed in the workplace.

But when they made the initial transfer often after completing an associate degree and moving on as a third or a fourth-year student to achieve a bachelors degree, they felt like they were at a large disadvantage. Other students had their first two years to acquire skills learning the lay of the land and all the resources that were available to them. Students who were transferring in felt
that it took them too long to learn what was available, what services were available, and how they could take the next step. Another concern was very often when they transferred in the credits didn’t lineup and it made it very difficult for them to achieve a next step completing that bachelor’s degree.

4.3.2 “Going Back to Get It Right”

Finally having a better idea of current skills and needed skills, many participants were ready for progress. Students shared they were now “going back to get it right.” In this theme, participants shared next steps or actionable goals that they believed would allow them to right the wrongs of the past. With new knowledge about skills gaps, personal values, and career expectations and life goals participants shared (a) “there’s more to an education than making money” sharing they felt empowered to put their foot down and accept no more tradeoffs; they also were committed to (b) taking on debt gains by going back to school to gain access to networks and opportunities that they missed the first time around; and (c) they acknowledged lifelong learning and advanced degrees were likely necessary for future advancement anyway. To begin, education now means more to them than job attainment.

4.3.2.1 *Education is worth more than a paycheck*

Student loan debt only adds to the pressures that students face as a result of their education. In these focus groups, some had debt, and some did not, but students overall felt that in the end the choice to secure employment often won out over holding out to follow their passion or calling on the job hunt. Introspectively, calling pushed students to follow guiding forces, look for strong organizational fit, and allow for selfless behavior in their daily work (Hunter, Dik, & Banning, 2010). In some cases, jobs that followed callings did not pay enough for them to pay back their student loans. As a result, they felt psychologically forced to take a position that paid more, even
though it did not align with their values. They felt this overwhelming need to repay their student loans or secure a job quickly, so that they would be less of a burden on their families. After spending time on the job, calling often pushed students to follow guiding forces, look for strong organizational fit, and allow for selfless behavior (Hunter et al., 2010). Chicago shared thoughts on this dilemma as a compromise,

there is a tradeoff between financial stability and being happy. But for me, I put more emphasis on being happy, and specifically deciding not to work at a place that doesn't value me, my body, or doesn't align with the principles that I have.

The “tradeoff” was the sense that there was choice about career, either money or happiness, but one cannot have both. Steve had completed both undergraduate and master’s degrees in the last three years by following his passions and believing success would follow if he stayed true to himself. Jason said,

success has always been about chasing after what I'm passionate about. It's been about trying to find that intersect where...what is it that the world so desperately needs, and what...are my passions?... wherein the two meet, where it's like I'm doing what I love, but I'm also finding a way to help other people and make the world better at the same time...

“Chasing” success and trying to “find” an “intersect” was his way of actively searching so that he did not settle for anything, even though he acknowledged that the two pathways crossed. His thoughts continued to center on being content through betterment of self and the world. He continued to want to “stretch and to grow as a person” and in the end, he wanted to “exhibit those gifts and those talents and those passions, while, of course, paying the bills.” “Paying the bills” is unavoidable. Even though Jason pointed out the need for earning a fair wage, he also reinforced his need to “do good” by sharing “there's more to life than just making money.”
4.3.2.2 Taking on Debt Gains Access to Networks and Opportunities

For participants feeling they might have missed key steps during their undergraduate experience, they expressed commitment to doing whatever it took to get employment. For some that meant taking on post-graduate internships to eliminate gaps, living at home so they could transition to a different position, or even going back to school for additional training. Ivan, who had attended a large public research institution and recently completed a graduate degree at an elite private school, shared disappointment with his transition from college to career, wondering if he school had been a “waste of time.” He stated, “I was pretty resentful and feeling that, "What did I even just spend time doing?" It felt like a waste of time.” He continued to share that if you could go back and do it over, there are “definitely things I would do differently if I could, going back.’

Some participants acknowledged they were willing to take on more student loan debt to go to a school that opened doors to certain networks and opportunities. Brewer, Eide, and Ehrenberg (1999) found a significant return on investment for attending private elite institutions of higher education, as one of our participants, E thought, “one of the main reasons I came here for grad school was just so that I had a leg up on other people applying to jobs.”

4.3.2.3 Advanced Degrees Needed for Future Advancement or Growth

Feelings of confusion, skepticism, and concern emerged about what level of education was or will be needed for advancement and growth in the workplace. Kristy shared skeptical concerns over debt and underemployment, “it makes me think like do I need this much education?” indicating tendencies to question outcomes and in the same breath stated, “on the other hand, it’s like, “Wow, I don’t even think this degree that I’m getting right now is enough.” Engbom and Moser (2017) examined if more advanced degrees increased earnings across employers finding that returns on investment are seen at the bachelor’s and master’s degree levels, but less so on the
doctorate level. What the degrees do provide is an entry-point into many organizations that then created a pathway for future high-paying jobs within a given firm. Oprah shared her feelings of surprise and anticipation arose,

...just looking at a lot of job postings, it'll – the idea of having 10 years of experience or a graduate degree. When you see that, it kind of makes you think, "Well, I can kind of get a jumpstart on my life if I have a graduate degree."

Trying to be proactive about future demands, she explored jobs of interest for her future self and “a graduate degree”. She interpreted this twofold search for jobs or graduate degrees as a sign to “get a jumpstart” on her life by not waiting, attending school now. These understandings led to more unintended debt. However, a large number of employers offer some form of tuition assistance as an employee benefit, reducing the need to take on more debt or forgoing the job hunt.

4.4 RQ4: What Are the Discourse, Or Cultural Formations, Underlying Students’ Perspectives About the Relationships Between Career and Higher Education?

The fourth research question (RQ4) asked: What are the Discourse, or cultural formations, underlying students’ perspectives about the relationships between career and higher education? To respond to this general question, three primary themes uncovered underlying tensions resulting from differences in micro/macro Discourses around the purpose of education. In the first sub-theme, (1) “I came to get an education” highlighted the juxtaposition between macro Discourse about job placement and the micro discourse of what education meant to students; in (2) “is college even worth it;” participants shared concerns over the intrinsic value and increasing extrinsic value of education to remain competitive in the workplace; and in the final theme, students shared insights into what (3) “career success is….” and identify clear differences in understandings and perspectives of what career is all about. First, this discussion examines what it means to get an education.
4.4.1 “I Came to Get an Education”

There were three sub-themes that focused on diverse understandings of what it means “to get an education” or be “gainfully employed” whereas the larger institutional Discourse was lost on students as they (a) hold no understanding of GE Disclosures; share that their (b) career choices are often compromised by pressures to secure employment; and an acknowledgement that education as an intellectual experience is complicated with (c) increasing pressures that degrees lead to jobs.

4.4.1.1 Hold No Understanding of GE Disclosures

One of the predominant macro Discourses in higher education surrounds the contentious Gainful Employment. Federal Student Aid, an office of the U.S. Department of Education, regulates the GE rules associated with the Higher Education Act Title IV student assistance programs. In short, the program states that educational programs at non-profit or public institutions must lead to a degree that prepares students for “gainful employment in a recognized occupation” (USDOE, 2014). Issues like loan debt, job placement, and earnings are relevant. GE is really about insuring tax payer money used for student loans is paid back. During the financial aid process GE disclosures are shared with students using words like income-based repayment, debt-to-earnings ratio, and discretionary income. Recent proposed changes to the rule could possibly require all institutions to participate in reporting. GE has been a trending topic in higher education for nearly a decade, with disclosures being provided on university websites for the past few years to prospective students in the form of consumer information in efforts to be transparent.

When talking about Gainful Employment (GE) with students, especially in the regulatory sense, policymakers should come to some consensus on the intended meaning and understanding of the term by the audience it was designed to protect. One participant described it in a matter of
fact fashion like “to be gainfully employed, you just need to be making gains.” When pressed for more detail and clarification, there was no thick description indicating a thorough understanding of the concept. Instead, based on the majority of responses by the focus group participants, recent students and graduates have little to no knowledge or understanding of what GE is or what it means, as it meant something different to every student.

About half of the participants shared they had never even heard of the term gainful employment before, which is concerning since most had graduated with some level of student loan debt resulting in required signatures from the student as an endorsement of their understanding of the term. Only two remembered GE might have had something to do with financial aid paperwork, but felt it was very formal, not really translating to their understandings of career success. Ben recalled reading about GE when “I was signing my student loans and student loan documents. It's one of the only places I've heard the phrase, I think. Except for--it's also a very official phrase--it doesn't feel like anything anyone would actually say.” The other of the two shared an even vaguer memory of a similar event, but added “but we signed so much, I really can’t recall.” This lack of recall could signify to administrators that students simply gloss over the paperwork associated with securing financial aid and never have a full understanding of their future obligations when facing the overwhelming mound of paperwork to secure financial aid. All the added paperwork and disclosures are rarely conceptualized forcing students to go through the motions as some form of defense mechanism to help them cope with the reality ahead of them. A few participants described GE as a topic they remembered hearing on television. For example, if one were to attempt to secure loans or credit when buying a car or furniture the announcer might add the disclaimer that, “borrowers must be gainfully employed to qualify.”
The remaining 80% of participants believed GE was not at all related to positive career outcomes, but rather shared misunderstandings and negative connotations when describing the term. Participants felt GE was achieving the “bare minimum” or “just getting by” or describing the work as “something that I could've got without this degree, a job that isn't directly correlating to what I've been learning here (at college).” Another described it as “just like anything that will get food on the table, even if it's nowhere near what you want to be doing with your life.” The term GE for most participants symbolized underachievement in many ways, a way to pay bills or meet financial aid obligations, but not as part of the journey to career success. Feelings of failure and an inability to secure work in their field of training while taking on work that is menial also emerged: “I'm used to thinking of the idea of like gainful employment as just like what you do to get by until something you want to do actually comes up.” Another considered GE as a job where he was being underutilized or not working to his “fullest capacity” and ashamed to say it but doing things that others might view as “beneath him.”

When comparing the term GE to career success, participants agreed that the term was “official” or “kind of cold” while career success was more of a personal achievement, something they deemed as “satisfying”, and “fulfilling,” even describing career success as something coveted and owned, something “just for them” while gainful employment was for “society.” Participants even acknowledged tuning out talk about gainful employment or purposefully ignoring it as it was not representative of how they wanted to view their reality. E.T. shared, “Gainful employment is more kind of the bottom line of what I would deem acceptable for myself and my own opinions, and career success would be thriving.” Since so many of the understandings of GE seemed to reflect the ability to survive, it was not shocking to hear anti-capitalistic discourse such as Jason’s
comments “when I hear gainful employment, I just kind of tune it out. I don't really care so much, because I go, you know, there's more to life than just making money.”

What is clear is that GE is not at all a salient term for these participants and those they represent, even though the bureaucracy that controls policy, federal regulations, and higher educational compliance insist it should be.

4.4.1.2 Choices Compromised by Pressures to Secure Employment

Career Choice is often influenced and impacted by social, political, familial, and economic choices (Buzzanell & Lucas, 2016; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2006). Participants were active in the student loan process but were not always fully aware of how to navigate the responsibility of paying back student loans. In 2017, the United States reported that 68% of all college graduates in 2015 had student loan debt with an average balance of $30,000 (Project on Student Debt, 2017). Chicago shared she was aware of the process as she was an active loan participant stating, “Like I knew my parents were helping me take them out.” The realities of how much she would owe and the feelings of pressure to pay would come later:

You know, I received financial aid, but it didn't really come to – or become a reality until I started owing. And so, I didn't really mind as much when it was – when it was happening. And it wasn't until six months after graduating when I got that first letter. And they're like, "Hey, knock, knock. You owe us." And I was like, "Well, I don't have a full-time job, so I'm not quite sure how to navigate this space."

Chicago’s realizations did not really set in until she “started owing” and received the “first letter” and that she was active as the loans were being accrued, but the stress and pressure that followed was unexpected. Houle and Warner (2017) examined the impacts of rising student loan debt and found many graduates move home with parents to help with the gap between their income and the burden of debt. Paul who had attended a public community college and a private research institution in the Midwest shared, “Perhaps I’ve been jaded a little bit. And I think it’s because of
this concern about getting a job that I’m qualified for and paying off loans.” Paul shared feelings of being “jaded” as her concerns switched from student to adult as it was time to “pay the bills.”

Repeated concerns framed as fear, disappointment and vulnerability taxed these participants as talk about securing employment that provided enough of an income to pay student loans, taking on more than one job, working in positions that only require a high school diploma caused a sense of failure. Blue shared,

in the immediate short term, career success for me was making enough money to cover my student loan payments. And I did not achieve that, which is why I work two jobs. And so for me, that felt like a big career failure, that I had come out of my university, and I had a full time job, and I was also working as a bartender.

Settling for higher paying employment was what happened to Chicago. Realizations about the utility of a job were always on her mind and because of that utility she was willing to forego fulfillment in her job for the financial benefits, she added,

Because at the end of the day, you can survive without happiness. It's harder to survive when you have $500 in student loans a month, and you can't pay that. So, you do make allowances and sacrifices that may not align with that you studied, or what you're interested in, or what you thought you were doing.

Disappointment and feelings of unhappiness would eventually impact Blue, even though she had secured employment, her expectations were not met. She talked about,

for me, even though I was employed, and I was living by myself, and for some people those might have been marks of success, but I felt really dejected about how I had gone to this institution that I thought was going to launch me into something that was not only fulfilling in some way, but also financially stable.

Being employed but feeling dejected and unfulfilled is a yet another example of students making compromises because of financial concerns. Next, a look at neoliberalist views on what work should accomplish provides an ideological basis for student’s talk.

Increasing Pressures That Degrees Lead to Jobs. Neoliberalism plays a role in the increased focus on the extrinsic outcomes of higher education (Foster, 2017). There are conflicting
messages about the purpose of higher education. On one hand, societal messages preach that people should follow their passion and do what they love. On the other hand, societal messages want students to make good choices that will lead to a high paying job that affords the ability to pay their bills. Baez (2007) stated, “The U.S. neoliberalism re-defines the social as an economic domain, governed by the ‘rational choices’ of entrepreneurial individuals who see everything they do in terms of maximizing their ‘human capital’” (p. 7). In other words, if the position that gives personal fulfillment does not allow a student to launch into adulthood, it should no longer be viewed as a logical choice.

George, a participant that had attended community college before going on to a four-year private liberal arts college in the west, recalled there were many discussions about how his degree would lead to next steps, gainful employment. He shared very direct conversations with his advisor, who would ask pointed questions like “what are you doing with your associates degree, and what's that going to lead to?” and “are you going to transfer to a four-year institution? Well, how are you going to transfer?” George called these conversations “very instrumental” and admitted this intrusive approach was “definitely always part of my conversations.”

Once he had completed his associates degree, he moved on to a four-year institution to pursue a bachelor’s degree and had contemplated graduate school. He recalled that “people [were] pulling me away from conversations explicitly about what's next.” This made sense to him as he perceived that he should be focused on developing research skills and preparing for graduate school. But he also recalled others discouraging “an instrumental attachment to my education” implying that the job he gets after graduation may be more about the pay and less about what he studied. This push and pull can be confusing: although societal messages pressure students to take on high paying jobs that may compromise their values and interests, passion is still more important
to the job seeker and the employer. Howard, Partridge, Hughes, and Oliver (2016) examined future skills requirements in museum work. Although employers still value common and universal skills like critical thinking, communication, and problem solving, they identified understanding of field and passion for the field as most important.

Chicago had attended a private liberal arts college for her undergraduate studies and worked in the career center for a time. She shared her feelings based on what she had witnessed and observed during that time in the career center,

there's an increasing pressure on education in the U.S. that your undergraduate experience needs to lead directly to a job, it needs to translate directly into skills that you can hit on the ground right away. And that makes you, well, “I'm going to be an economist, so I have to take all economics classes” or,” I'm going to be a nurse, and so I need to go to nursing school.” And so, it's very…professionalization of education.

Chicago’s view of the “increasing pressure” that degrees “lead directly to a job” and education results “directly into skills’ may be a direct result of GE. Many have claimed over the years that “professionalism of education” had begun. In 2011, at the height of GE implementation, Sparks and Waits (2011) shared goals for states to raise expectations for higher education to improve economic outlooks (during a time when the recession was still bouncing back, and student loan default rates were extremely high). They recommended that governors “set clear expectations for higher education's role in economic development” using labor market data to better define state goals and “encourage employers' input in higher education” to ensure degrees were leading to marketable skills (p. 1). Additionally, as representatives for the National Governors Association recommended requirements from higher education institutions to “collect and publicly report impacts” with performance outcomes as an “essential factor in funding.” Chicago’s assessment on the “professionalization of education” may not be unfounded. She continued,

the conversations that I was having, was thinking less about education as a means to an end, but as an end in itself. Education for me, and for my own personal
development doesn't require me attaching it to some position that I get outside, or job that I get afterwards…fulfilling myself with education is enough of a goal.

Chicago stated clearly that education was not a “means to an end”, that this form of education and GE were never her intention. The goal to education was about the journey, the intellectualism, “personal development” and “fulfillment,” whereas policy makers and government leaders view the “goal” as an economic driver, a “position” or “job” or “an end itself.”

Reinforcing the idea that neoliberalism may be a driving force behind these increasing pressures to change the purpose of education is the resistance to it. E, who attended an elite private university shared her experience, “there was kind of this super liberal idea of you aren't what you produce, don't feed into the capitalist machine.” She continued in response to Chicago’s statements during their focus group that “education…is an end of itself. And so, there's almost like an intentional de-emphasis, I felt like.” This flexibility to deemphasize job placement at a time when other universities were asked to produce results to economic development or risk the loss of state funding may be because she attended a private institution, where funding is not provided by taxpayer dollars, with the exception of student loans. In the next theme, the discussion about perspectives on the value of an education focus on worth.

4.4.2 “Is College Even Worth It?”

The second theme considered whether all the work that goes into degree attainment in “is college even worth it” where participants grapple with three sub-themes including (a) the shifting in the value of education that includes a tension between monetary costs and employer expectations; (b) the belief that “you get what you pay for” and the determination and resiliency of doing whatever it takes to succeed, including the willingness to pay for big results; and (c) expressed desires for affordability in higher education.
4.4.2.1 Shift in The Perceived Value of Education

Society can examine education through different lenses to further understand how students view the value education. Participants expressed different understandings of “value” sometimes sharing concerns or monetary and emotional “cost” which can have very different answers based on each person’s individual circumstances. For example, they considered whether the pursuit was worth the time, money, and emotional labor. Although much was based on their personal experience, frames of reference, and outcomes, the answers to questions surrounding time to job attainment, earnings, and debt matter.

Marchand and Gutierrez (2017) discussed that there are diverse types of values to education: (1) an intrinsic value to education that refers to the enjoyment, fulfillment or pleasure one gets; (2) an attainment value to education that is about personal performance or completion of a program; and (3) a utility value to education, meaning it is useful.

When first considering intrinsic value and personal fulfillment, there was consensus among participants that education was “important” from an intellectual point of view. Blue shared, “I have really come to understand there was more value to just the art of being a student and going back and learning and applying it to your life.” The cliché phrases like “expanding your horizons” or learning to “think outside the box” all apply. Blue recognized the experience as one that is unique and personal. Sharing her understanding that there is an “art” to “learning” and “growing” in an uncontested way and more value when applying new knowledge to “your life”. Next, in considering the attainment value, Blue’s experience was more about personal growth or positioning the goal to complete a degree as one that is a personal performance measure. Over time, the marketization and professionalization of higher education has also altered perceptions on the value of education, viewing it as a commodity (utility value) and turning student into consumer (McMillan & Cheney, 1996; Tomlinson, 2017). When considering the utility value or usefulness
of education, additional thoughts from Blue are considered. Blue was a twin and she attended a private university whereas her sister attended a large public university. She shared that the two of them always debated about which was more valuable, public or private post-secondary education. Blue shared, “I think that I definitely came out with, like, a different educational experience. Like I think I thought deeper about things.” To Blue, the advantages of the higher price of her education was that she learned to think ‘deeper.’ Overall as she compared skill development, she admitted “I think we have the same skill set, in that we could potentially get the same type of job.” The major difference between the two outcomes is that Blue admits that her twin “has a lot less like student loan debt.” As she continued to think through whether debt has impacted her view on the value of education, she explained that when you consider career and jobs specifically, she felt the higher cost of her education, resulting in much higher student debt was “not worth it.” Her understanding was more about the monetary costs. With regard to the ability to meet employer expectations, she explained, “…you get the same skill set.” Blue felt paying more for similar career outcomes to “get the same skills” and results changed not necessarily how she viewed education (as a whole experience), but the high cost of the educational institution she chose made her question the ‘worth’ of that choice.

Other participants questioned “worth” or utility value as they shared thoughts on the value of education and their ability to meet employer expectations. Oprah shared,

it’s just like you hear…on TV often of how it’s just like the bachelor’s degree is almost equal to like a high school diploma now… it’s important, but I think the cost aspect of it… is just like, you’ve got to be forced to know…or …consider for yourself is it worth it?

Oprah recognized that employers are expecting degrees and believed that attainment expectations are increasing without the promise of huge financial gains from the employer. The burden to
complete and pay for education fell on those seeking the credentials. Another participant, Kristy, in a separate focus group echoed Oprah’s response,

> Like it’s important but is it worth it? it makes me think like do I need this much education? But then on the other hand it’s like wow, I don’t even think this degree that I’m getting right now is enough

Kristy stated that education is viewed as “important” but raised questions about “worth” and “need.” She questioned how much education is required and how much education is enough and for whom is it needed. Again, this internal tension arose as she followed up her pondering with the thought that her current pursuit of a MA degree may not still be enough. Whether the value of education was viewed as intrinsic, attainment, or utility-based, it was shifting all the time. Next, some participants expressed willingness to do whatever it took to succeed in the path they desired.

**4.4.2.2 Willing to Pay Big for Big Results**

The belief that “you get what you pay for” may or may not be true in education. Questions about “pay” in this sense are constructed socially for everyone. Buzzanell (2010) spoke about people’s abilities to “bounce back,” adjust, and “reintegrate” (p. 2). Specifically, she suggested routinizing interactions and talking realities into being to craft a new normal, affirming identity anchors, maintaining and using communication networks and supports, implementing reframings of the situation in ways that make sense, taking accountability for negative outcomes and allowing for positive productive action, all which can be applied to those in career transition willing to “pay” for results.

For some the price to attend college was a monetary investment to gain a specific return, mostly access to the right networks. For others the price was one of determination to do whatever it took to gain the skills necessary to achieve the successful outcome they desired, an action that may not have occurred upon completing their undergraduate studies.
There can be on an emotional roller coaster after failing to achieve optimal career expectations. This roller coaster can include stress, anxiety, depression, sadness, and feelings of loss. At the same time, these emotions can bring out a resilience that is often unexpected. Creating a new normal might include making the decision to go back to school, deferring student loans, or moving home with parents. As participants attempted to affirm anchoring identities, they might reflect on their student role to make sense of their adult world. As they attempt to maintain and use their networks, or create new ones, they may make choices about the best way to achieve their goals. Making choices to pay for an elite education either for bachelor’s or master’s degrees is generally done with intention. Statements about going to a private school for a “fancy education” or an expensive public one seemed to be influenced by the perceived access to influence and social network. Participants talked about getting a “leg up” or access to “connections,” “networks,” or “circles” as a pathway to gain achieve career aspirations. E, a first-generation student commented, 

Instead of having like familial connections, I was looking for like institutional connections. So it wasn't like the--I was paying for the value of my education, but more than that I was paying to kind of like get a ticket in to the kind of circles of like wealth, and affluence, and influence that I thought I needed to be in to achieve the kind of career success, or gainful employment that I ultimately was striving for.

Lack of familial connections and the fear of missing out on the right networks encouraged this participant to “pay” to get a “ticket” to “wealth and influence.” Another participant shared perceptions of disadvantage that motivated her actions to take on high amounts of student debt, “I was in the out group like where my parents weren't in a network that would help me achieve what I wanted to achieve.” Feelings of isolation and lack of social network by being in the “out group” in order to achieve intended results was normative. George shared “similar motivations,

“they had like connections, and like--they had like a network, or an alumni network, and you could connect with people, and like, you know, people would tell me like the, "Well, that's why you go to like these fancy education institutions, because of their networks and things like that." And I was like, "OK, yeah, that sounds really good."
George’s statement also spoke to access to “connections,” “networks,” and “alumni” who could provide influence or access to higher “tiers of success.” Other participants described “being in the right rooms” presumably with the right people as motivation. Students felt that the “reputation” or “brand” of an institution often equaled “quality.” In essence, participants have been resilient by reframing their entire situation to one of opportunity and access to build off of a negative situation to create a brand new one for positive career outcomes. They were willing to pay the price of admission and felt the high tuition, was worth every penny, if it paid off. So, if an elite school offered a student the opportunity to utilize the network and it resulted in job opportunities, they felt that the high loan debt would pay off in the long term.

One participant, Oprah disagreed, feeling that if you cannot afford to attend one of these institutions it may not be worth it, she shared,

I've met people here in graduate school who have crazy amounts of debt from undergrad, and now are here in graduate school taking on crazy amounts of debt again. And for me, whereas maybe when I was in high school I would've thought, "Oh, it's worth it. I'll go to work and pay it off," now I would say absolutely not.

Oprah shared how time and perspective on how taking on large student debt or “crazy amounts” is not worth it. She reflected that her younger self might have agreed to take on the burden and then just “work to pay it off”. with greater clarity and experience, she has changed her mindset, likely as a result of her personal experience. Other participants acknowledged there are no guarantees the investment will pay off and use language such as “taking a gamble” or “nothing’s sure in life” or feeling the chance to actualize career goals was a “smart wager” or “smart investment.”

For participants in this study, “paying the price” can also be viewed as one of determination, optimism, and resiliency to do “whatever it takes” to gain the skills necessary to achieve the successful outcome they desired. For many participants it meant seeking out additional training,
experience, or credentials through internships, entry-level jobs, or advanced degrees. A repeated thought when discussing career success included ideas that a bachelor’s degree is just not “good enough” and so ultimately to achieve their long-term career success it would require a “commitment to lifelong learning and continued education.” Talk about the impetus to “return to school” or “go back” or “get it right” spoke to their career resilience and their willingness to pay for results.

4.4.2.3 Desire Greater Affordability

There has been a lot of talk in higher education to make it more affordable and find a solution to the student loan debt crisis. Ideas like performance funding (Dougherty, Jones, Lahr, Pheatt, Natow, & Reddy, 2016), risk sharing (Kelly, 2015), massive open online courses (Dillahunt, Wang, & Teasley, 2014), dual credit in secondary education (Irvine, 2017), and proposals for free community college (Pingel, Parker, & Sisneros, 2016) have all been proposed as possible steps to help future students. In this sub-theme, the researcher explores participants expressed desires for affordability in higher education. Feelings of fear, dejection, indignation, dismissiveness, and even helplessness can all be found in talk around debt. Chicago shared,

It was more just like, "Well, I'm gonna be paying this until I'm 30. That's kinda the price I pay for this education." And I don't really regret it. I don't agree with it, but at the same time, it's what--and it is what it is.

Chicago had this indignant but matter of fact tone as she acknowledged that student loans will follow her well beyond her young adult years as she realized she will be paying “until I’m 30.” There is also the acceptance that the debt was unavoidable as she comes to terms and justifies the expense with “that’s kinda the price of education.” Her dismissiveness of the importance of the debt followed by her anger and disagreement with the system became acceptance and helplessness.
as she stated, “it is what it is.” This final statement is her way of acknowledging she can carry on despite the financial challenges.

There were additional factors that contributed to desires for greater affordability. One was the anxiety of needing additional education and training in the future. Feelings that current degrees might not be “enough” to meet employer expectations was another issue resulting in consensus among the groups.: “A bachelors degree is no longer enough.” Advanced degrees and experience as pre-requisites made the job market increasingly difficult. Oprah explained understandings of future need in the workplace, “I feel like graduate education now--bachelors for professional jobs is almost seen as compulsory, the way that a high school diploma used to be.” Many students were willing to take on extra work to find the right opportunity or advance their careers. Others with high student loan debt believed currently that their education was not worth the price tag. While those that were fortunate enough to not have student loans or to receive scholarships for their education recognized that this was a gift-- a high valued education at no cost--that they greatly appreciated. Those who quickly acknowledged that they increasingly valued their education over time and upon reflection were students who had been out of school for extended periods of time or who had graduated from a master’s program versus a bachelor’s or associate degree program during the time of this focus group. They could see that, from job-to-job and from experience-to-experience, each experience built on others with a strong educational foundation. Again, students acknowledged that the value of their education existed however there are no assurances and no guarantees for long-term success.

4.4.3 “Career Success is…”

Success is really a subjective term that has different meaning to different people (Inkson, 2006). In the last theme, participants related understandings of what “career success is…” and
even what it is not, whereas in the current theme participants expressed the need for more from employment than a place to go five days a week. They needed (a) more than just job, but a career; they also expressed needs for something other than a tool to pay the bills; they needed (b) more than a salary, but also benefits (Medical, Retirement, Tuition Assistance, Advancement), and, most importantly, they needed (c) an opportunity for contribution, purpose or meaningful work.

4.4.3.1 More Than A Salary, But Also Includes Medical, and Retirement

As an independent term, career success resulted in multiple understandings. Specifically, these definitions represented both pragmatic and idealistic views. Participants agreed with almost complete consensus that career success was a job that included a salary versus hourly wage and provided suitable medical and retirement benefits. They added that it meant the job had to provide the ability to pay the bills (not just student loans) and the opportunity to be self-sufficient (supporting oneself without help from others). It allowed them the freedom to choose to live where they wanted (not with mom and dad). In this view, they did not really view career success as a journey but equated it more to a singular job in the present. All definitions included financial stability and forms of independence (Clair, 1996).

4.4.3.2 More Than Just A Job, But A Career

Although compensation as a whole was most talked about, some participants expressed idealistic understandings of career success that seemingly echo many of Clair’s (1996) findings on Generation X. Clair (1996) found that “a real job” includes utilization of education, advancement opportunity, and work that is enjoyable. O’Connor and Raile’s (2015) replication of Claire’s work on Millennials found a real job to include financial autonomy, employer benefits, utilization of degree, and enjoyment, passion, and job fulfillment. Like a real job, participants expressed that in addition to compensatory needs, career success required an opportunity to contribute in some way
“in a space where you can grow and make a difference,” find satisfaction or a sense of purpose, or achieve “fulfillment as a human and a professional.” Feeling “qualified” for a “challenging role” allowed for them to imagine a future with the organization with visions of upward “mobility” or a “comprehensive trajectory.” Participant notions about finding a long-term position (not contract work) gave them peace of mind or a sense of security minimizing some of their anxieties and feelings of stress.

4.4.3.3 Desire Meaningful Work

The desire for meaningful work can often become problematic as underlying tensions exist (as previously discussed) in choosing between pay or passion in work life. Work itself was a critical component in how individuals find meaning/meaningfulness and also allows for identity development through career selection (Kuhn, Jorgenson, Buzzanell, Berkelaar, Kisselburgh, Kleinman, & Cruz, 2008; Cheney, et al, 2008; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). Concepts of meaning can refer to organizational practices such as flexibility, autonomy, and creativity, but can also be more connected to an emotion. For example, participants in this study found meaning and sense of career success through positions that that were “enjoyable,” presumably with an organization where they felt a connection or “passion” for the company mission, a job they were “proud to have” or “serves a function in some way” or one that allows them to “contribute” or “make the world better.” Jason shared career success as,

To be better every single day. Whatever – and whatever that might be, that bettered me – may be intellectually, that may be better in terms of having a better character, better emotionally, being able to self-regulate myself and deal with difficult people, and so that really forces me to stretch and to grow as a person, and totally, not just in my career, but allows me, again, exhibit those gifts and those talents and those passions, while, of course, paying the bills.

Other participants agreed that motivation to follow paths of passion were important but viewed success as this external measure that came to fruition if one could “find continued meaning in the
work.” Career success included not only a solid compensation package (more than salary), professional development and personal growth (more than a job), and meaningfulness.

In summary, this chapter presented findings related to students’ identifications and portrayals related to careers and gainful employment. Feelings of fear, vulnerability, and suspicion were just a few of the emotions contributing to the work associated with achieving successful career outcomes. These questions bridge the Discourses by bringing together participants’ talk impacted by the broader embedded talk and assumed understandings in societal and institutional structures.

In our next tier of analysis, a critical perspective is applied. Specifically, a critical look at higher education d/Discourses through everyday practices and talk around careers and compliance to offers yet another view on participants talk and the societal formations they evoke.

4.4.4 Critical Discourse Analysis

Moving on to the second tier of analysis, the researcher utilized a critical lens to unveil the micro/macro level tensions among students and institutions of higher education related to career.

4.5 RQ5: How Do D/Discourses Among Students and Institutions of Higher Education Related to Career Reveal Deep Power Relations and Whose Interests Are Reconstituted Communicatively?

This analysis examined inherent tensions surrounding higher education, specifically around notions of the purpose of education, definitions of career success, career development, and placement. Micro-level discourse is examined from the individual or student perspective. Macro-level Discourse is examined from the institutional perspective because underlying tensions resulting from current and proposed GE changes relate to how institutions of higher education approach their work and frame the institution internally and externally. The analysis identifies and
explains these hidden tensions from both levels of the d/Discourse and provides suggestions on how to communicatively bridge the gap between the two perspectives.

Emphases in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) are on the dialectic nature of power as manifest through discursive production and consumption. CDA centers on the textual (language) and discursive and material practices that include institutional, relational and societal contexts within broader social considerations and their relationships to theories of career, employability, higher education, and labor (Fairclough, 1993). The goal is social change. To offer critique and directions for change, the site of analysis is how texts are produced and consumed. Language and modes of understanding might be transferred or “imported for use within a different, perhaps inappropriate social domain” with examples of monetarized exchange being imported to many life domains (Discenna, 2016, p. 441). In the following CDA, higher education is seen as a means of creating employability, a particular meaning that eclipses other meanings and discourages voices of students who attempt to articulate alternative meanings. Institutions then are sites of contestation about the corporatization of higher education, and students are subjects who focus on minimization of debt and on majors that lead directly to jobs so that they can fulfill dual societal roles as laborers efficiently and immediately and as consumers with money to spend on products and service (rather than repayment of loans). Discourses of education are linked to specific occupations (see also Zanoni & Janssens, 2015). For humanities and social sciences, education would broaden students beyond technical skills into soft skills, a secondary goal in the institutional scheme aligned with gainful employment. Students learn that they must seek and create opportunities for translating their studies into work-related skills. Social relationships between professors and students and between students and their own parents and relations are framed and consumed in terms of utility. For example, first generation students remark that their parents and family members lack the social
capital and wherewithal to help direct them into internships, to connect them with professionals, to connect learning with job skills, and so on. Presumably these changes in texts, discursive and material practices, and reconfigurations of social practices and understandings of institutional missions would benefit students but a closer examination through CDA reveals that the contestation benefits the business of education, student roles as consumers, professors’ responsibilities to guide students toward employability. Overarching micro-level and macro-level d/Discourses is the nature and importance of career with calling downplayed and employment elevated.

4.5.1 Micro Level Tensions

This analysis examined inherent tensions in higher education, specifically how students recall, share, and act upon their understandings framed around notions of the (1) purpose of education, (2) definitions of career success, (3) career development and placement. The micro level (little d) discourses, included talk in social practice from individual or student perspective versus that of the larger system (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). Table 4.3 highlights these tensions.
Table 4.2 Micro Macro Level Themes and Tensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MICRO (STUDENT)</th>
<th>TENSION</th>
<th>MACRO (INSTITUTION)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To achieve personal growth</td>
<td>Purpose of Education</td>
<td>To achieve gainful employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To achieve gainful employment</td>
<td>Definitions of Career Success</td>
<td>To secure placement in major paying well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To do meaningful work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make good money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To do meaningful work even if not profitable immediately</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To pursue job search processes alone (viewed as strength)</td>
<td>Career Development &amp; Placement</td>
<td>To provide successful placement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To seek help from others (viewed as weakness)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To focus on career development practices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.5.1.1 Tension 1: Purpose of Higher Education

The key issue with the first tension is in the intended purpose of higher education from the student point of view: Is higher education meant to prepare students for gainful employment or to allow for personal growth and development benefitting the individual and society? George, a recent graduate, explained:

Education for me, and for my own personal development doesn't require me attaching it to some position that I get outside, or job that I get afterwards. I can just – fulfilling myself with education is enough of a goal.

In George’s statement, the notion that education was not about getting a job is interesting. The close association that education is more for the whole self instead of a singular identity connected to the working world is understandable, but confusing, as a job is required by most for graduates
to thrive in adulthood, unless they were independently wealthy or planning to live with their parents for extended periods of time. It is true that there are choices between the paths one takes but a job that can viewed as one part of a successful career seems appropriate. In the end, the need for income and personal growth were seen as competing goals versus complementary ones. George’s are not unique as many of the participants shared similar thoughts, they are however, a representation of the pushing and pulling students and graduates with whom they when they choose to attend college. For the short term, they viewed college as a place where the realities of life can be tucked away for a short time as they experienced immense personal growth and intellectual maturity. For the long term, an awakening occurred that prepared them for work, whatever work may mean to each individual. The main consideration is that education is connected to work and where students can mature and prepare themselves for work.

Tension 2: Determinants of Career Success. The key issue in the second tension is in contested understandings of what is or is not career success. These tensions centered on personal, workplace, financial, and transitional needs. Chicago defined career success as:

Kind of hitting being fulfilled as a human, and professional, and feeling like you're in a space where you can grow and make a difference in whatever that means to you. And also, be able to save, and pay rent, and your loans, and your parents back, and all of these things that you didn't realize you were gonna be responsible for when you were 18 and starting college. Then all of a sudden, you're like, I need renters insurance? What?

Being fulfilled as a human and as a professional contributed to the participant’s need to be more than their job, more than a singular identity. This is reinforced by the talk about different spaces. The desire to acknowledge growth and making a difference in a personalized way “whatever that means to you” was the participants’ way of being inclusive of others. There was also this tension because it must pay well. Ivan also described the realization that adulthood required a pragmatic
approach to sustain oneself. Success was the ability to check all the boxes. Expanding on that notion, Ivan shared,

I think it's maybe unrealistic to say you'll find some job you love every day and you always look forward to going to it. I think there's always going to be days where you don't want to do that. But something that I feel like I'm constantly either learning new things all the time, or it's an opportunity for me to explore growing skills in different ways.

These intrinsic rewards associated with work and career success put the power on the side of the individual, the competing extrinsic rewards of paying bills and loans met the individuals’ physiological needs for food and shelter. The desire for continued learning and personal growth resulted in sustained knowledge retained and controlled by the individual. The need to pay the bills shifted the power to the institution. This reality check is where the tension lies. Success is personal but there are many outside definitions crafted by others (e.g., family, lenders) that influenced them to see education as a means to gain “security” through employment so they can “support themselves” and “pay the bills” like the majority of society that would then represent success.

During conversations, there was talk about GE and career success. Ben who attended a large public research institution in the west explained it best, “It's like career success is mine, but gainful employment is for society.”

_Tension 3: Career Development and Placement._ The key issue in the third tension was in the career development and preparation practices. Very often the individual felt in control when they took the initiative to pursue a job search. Depending on the socially constructed beliefs of the students they may take all the burden on themselves while trying to silence the need to seek help. Steven, who attended a public research institution in the upper Midwest, shared,

I think that the university then can only do so much. They can offer all these resources. But if the student isn't that focused or isn't displaying that kind of initiative to go out there and really to seek the information, then I'm not sure what the university can do then.
As a result, recent graduates called upon a variety of discourses as they attempted to make sense of the tensions to go it alone or seek help. Asking for help might feel like weakness to students and recent graduates already struggling with the transition to adulthood. The thoughts that career development is self-directed or unnecessary is in contention with the feelings that one really needs help, but they are unsure who to ask shows the constant tension at the micro level.

4.5.2 Macro Level Tensions

The macro level Discourse included emerging tensions as a result of current and proposed GE changes related to how institutions of higher education align goals, negotiate or utilize programs/practices with faculty and students, negotiate choices, coordinate activities, and communicate change surrounding academic programmatic focus and curriculum design, position and craft institutional messaging internally and externally as a result of regulatory issues more specifically framed around notions of (1) the purpose of education, (2) career success, (3) career development and placement. The macro level (big D) Discourses, includes general enduring systems of thought from institutional perspectives versus that of the individual or student (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004).

4.5.2.1 Tension 1: Purpose of Higher Education

The first tension at the system level is the purpose of higher education. As institutions set and align goals and strive to constantly improve, they are constantly evaluating and reevaluating course and degree offerings and strategic expectations to be carried out by faculty and staff. There is constant change occurring behind the scenes in an institution related to regulatory compliance, funding, and accreditation. Like the micro level discourse, the key issue in the macro Discourse is that there is multilayered talk surrounding whether higher education is meant to prepare students for gainful employment, or the enduring systemic thought that believes its purpose is to allow for
personal growth and development benefitting the individual and society. Language choices used for collateral (promotional materials) viewed by the public gives the institution an identity or voice, allowing prospective students to align their own values with the institution and make school selections. The difference in language choice is highlighted in Table 4.4. Different institutions have slightly different voices, but the tension remains, some institutions heavily value a purpose situated in intellectualism and some heavily value a purpose of job preparation. The researcher took into consideration the type of institution as an independent organization, reviewed language usage, by reviewing a series of texts including brochures, websites, and other promotional materials presented to prospective students captured in the recruitment cycle for academic year 2018-2019 in order to construct the descriptors.

Table 4.3 Descriptors in “About Us” Section of Institutional Websites by Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Descriptors (Language Choice)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Junior College (Large Associate’s C&amp;T)</td>
<td>-Programs, Pathways, Careers, World Class Education&lt;br&gt;-Locations, Accessible, Local&lt;br&gt;-Student Success, Fast&lt;br&gt;-Stronger State, Community, Economy&lt;br&gt;-Transfer, Save Money, Affordable&lt;br&gt;-Training, Hands-on Experience, Adaptive Learning&lt;br&gt;-Workforce, Economic Transformation, Prosperity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public University (Large Research)</td>
<td>-History, Traditions, Storybook Experience&lt;br&gt;-Achievements, Milestones, Opportunities, Legacy&lt;br&gt;-Innovation, Creativity, Academic Freedom, Revolutionary Ideas&lt;br&gt;-Impact the State, Nation, and World, Global Experiences&lt;br&gt;-Open-mindedness, Forward-thinking&lt;br&gt;-Career-Focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private University (Large Research)</td>
<td>-Intellectual Destination&lt;br&gt;-Community of Scholars&lt;br&gt;-Distinctive and Empowering Education&lt;br&gt;-New Ways of Thinking, Challenge Conventional Thinking&lt;br&gt;-Free and Open Inquiry, Ideas Are Born&lt;br&gt;-Challenge and Change the World&lt;br&gt;-Empowering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For-Profit University (Large Master’s C &amp; U; Research)</td>
<td>-Prepare, Reshape, Solve, Advance, Connect, Achieve&lt;br&gt;-Flexible, Affordable, Better Suited, Quality, Online&lt;br&gt;-Career Ambitions, Connect Education to Career&lt;br&gt;-Innovate, Try New Things, Look at Challenges in New Ways&lt;br&gt;-Understand the Ever-Changing Business World</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For example, the public junior college in Table 4.4, which is currently identified as a GE institution, uses words like “programs,” “pathways,” and “student success” to draw a map to successful outcomes through choice. Being that junior colleges were open access to most students expressing an interest, the push to be represented as a place that is an open system with choices for all and even offers free applications for admissions. Further increasing expectations that this site is open to all, the emphasis on multiple “locations” is appealing because it fulfills a need to attend school near home. As an organization that receives substantial funding from state government and well connected to vocational training, the institution highlights its ability to contribute to “building a stronger state and community.” The word “building” creates a visualization that is hands-on, blue collar, rather than white-collar work. Additionally, the ability to “shape” their curriculum with the “needs of local communities in mind” pays close attention to contributions to the local economy. Very important to students attending the junior college is “transferring” credits to future institutions and the opportunity to “save money.” Saving money touches on socioeconomic issues, appealing to the working class versus the privileged. The need to keep the choice “affordable” and “accessible” makes the choice appealing for many. One’s ability to transfer credits by not losing time or money. Keywords that are often affiliated with the world of work in “training” and “workforce” sending a subtle message that because of attending students will be work ready. The site also made mention of how this choice leads to economic growth and transformation and prosperity, all visionary words to help students achieve success.

Moving on, a traditional four-year public university (Table 4.4), not currently identified as a GE institution, but offering a handful of certificate programs that may require some reporting. A word use focuses on the institution’s “history” and “traditions” allowing prospective students to be comforted by a long and prestigious past or a “legacy.” The institution focuses on
“achievements” and “milestones” indicating progress. The impact with this institution branches out much further than the junior college by talking about the ability to “impact the state, nation, and world.” The national and global spin indicate a reach that the junior college does not provide.

A different picture emerges with the elite four-year private university in Table 4, also not currently identified as a GE institution offering. The word use focuses on it being an “intellectual destination” implying it is only for the best and brightest and creates a feeling of closeness as it refers to itself as a “community of scholars.” As it references what type of education one can expect, the focus is not centered on job preparation because it describes its culture as “distinctive and empowering education” with “new ways of thinking” and promises “free and open inquiry,” and the opportunity to challenge conventional thinking.” At this institution, they profess that “ideas are born” that will allow the student to be “empowered” while they “challenge and change the world.”

Finally, the for-profit four-year university again uses words that align them more for the world of work. Word use about its ability to “prepare” the student for work and provide skills to “solve” problems. Problem-solving in the workplace is a very desirable skill. The institution also touts the ability to allow students to “innovate” and “try new things” and of course “look at challenges in new ways.” This push for gainful employment preparation is reinforced as it promises the opportunity to “understand the ever-changing business world.”

GE seems to have had an impact on the Discourse of several types of institutions. Those held to GE tend to be more pragmatic and work oriented (junior college and for-profit schools), while others not impacted by the current rule use language that is more philosophical in nature (private and public four-year schools). As a key mechanism for student recruitment, the motivations of these schools reflect what the government contends they may or may not be doing.
4.5.2.2  Tension 2: Determinants of Career Success

The key issue in the second tension is in contested understandings of what is or is not career success. These tensions center on financial and workplace issues, specifically job attainment, salary, and other considerations due to GE and the college scorecard and the possibility that future rulings will require additional changes. These governmental pressures force institutions to communicate changes and choices through academic programming and curriculum design as a result of regulatory issues. There could be arguments that the institution is engaging on the meso level as it reacts to higher level Discourse, and the government is working on the macro level, but for this study, they are coupled as a shared voice with higher education as a whole representing enduring systems of thought. The GE rule states:

Generally, in order to be eligible for funding under the Higher Education Act Title IV student assistance programs, an educational program must lead to a degree at a non-profit or public institution or it must prepare students for "gainful employment in a recognized occupation." Therefore, with very few exceptions, any non-degree program offered by non-profit or public institutions and all educational programs offered at for-profit institutions must lead to gainful employment. (USDOE, 2014)

The policy is stated in a clear manner but the use of the word ‘generally” can imply uncertainty. Words like “must” imply power or authority over those required to abide by the rule. The term “gainful employment” has yet to be defined by the policymakers, even after nine years of debating the issue. Talk about “funding” also implies that the policymakers foreground money above outcomes, withholding money for poor outcomes which include one’s ability to pay back their loans also creates a power struggle that money is the primary success factor. In this example, career success to the institution is finding a job that pays well enough to payback your loans in a related occupation.

The discussion that really comes out of this analysis is that even though under previous administrations all institutions of higher education were not held to this ruling, bi-partisanship and
differing political opinions and agendas can push for more “equitable measures” that hold all institutions to the same standards (Delisle, 2018). Fain (2018) pointed out that the Trump administration has already proposed changes to this ruling to require the same type of reporting for all institutions regardless of status, this would also mean that career outcomes like placement and debt-to-earnings ratios will be compared across the board. Administrators and faculty should pay attention. If all institutions are held to these rules, wanting to “look good” on paper can often unintentionally influence or preference certain fields that tend to produce stronger outcomes, like business management. This slippery slope puts the institution in a place of power as they plan long-term goals for the institution around academic and student affairs including what disciplines to offer and what learning outcomes are most important. The additional underlying tension that exists for all types of institutions is funding. Whether the institution receives private funding or public dollars, the institution will benefit, and the students may suffer as a result.

4.5.2.3 Tension 3: Career Development and Placement

The key issue in the third tension is in the career development and preparation practices. Institutions are being pressured by policymakers to show that regardless of their beliefs in the purpose of education or definitions of career success, they must show successful placement outcomes. Since most of the regulatory pressure surrounds placement upon graduation, the institution highly values these metrics. Policymakers believe that consumers of education or prospective students also value these outcomes overall else. Institutions are enduring budget crises at the same time, therefore they cannot simply increase spending to improve employer relations that result in job placements for their students and often the career centers are understaffed with reduced budgets. Some institutions have started pushing an agenda that placement center models, not unlike workforce development, are the best way to serve students. On the other hand, career
development is not optional. Reducing attention on career development models in lieu of placement center models may assist students as they transition to entry level positions (although unlikely) but puts them at a significant disadvantage as they try to navigate future career transitions with less career competency skills. Chan and Derry (2013) offer a crowdsourced open letter to higher education influencers is a strong example of the tension and ongoing Discourse:

While important, first destination results cannot be the sole metric used to measure an institution’s preparation of students for the world of work. We must look beyond first destination results and strive to teach the mindset and skills required for lifetime employability in this very dynamic and ever-changing world. Based on what we have seen in our own lifetimes, we know that many of the future jobs of our college graduates do not even exist today. Coupled with the fact that generational experts expect current students to have over twenty jobs in their lifetimes, the mission of the personal and career development industry must be to educate and equip students to strategically and successfully navigate transitions. If we focus too heavily on short term placement and first destination results, we will mislead and fail ourselves, our students and other constituents.

The institution has the power as they can choose how to spend resources and choose to put greater emphasis on the outcome or “sole metric” rather than student learning, the journey. There has been great confusion over how to transform career centers, but most agree a comprehensive change is needed. The tension between placement center or career development center is real. The answer may be somewhere in the middle.

4.6 Bridging the Gap

In summary, the researcher finds that multiple tensions arose from the focus groups that highlight the micro and macro Discourse levels. At both levels there are similar tensions like whether the purpose of education is for intellectualism or work preparation; whether career success can be defined intrinsically or extrinsically; and whether the long-term success is better achieved through career development or job placement measures. In order to bridge these gaps a more strategic communication plan is needed throughout the institution.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

Discursive analyses uncovered (a) participants’ understandings of their roles as proper students and of gainful employment and (b) societal contestations of higher education as macroDiscourses of and practices surrounding employability, career, and consumption that privileged particular students with social capital, and certain majors with direct pipelines to jobs and occupations. Ironically students who sought education for learning were discouraged from diverse pathways and those who already had resources for constructing a linear trajectory from college entry to graduation and jobs were elevated as ideal and manageable students. Students who did not comprehend the effort it would take them to utilize institutional services and personnel invested further in educational credentials after attaining their undergraduate degrees. Overall, despite societal initiatives to develop talent, encourage underserved students’ college degree attainment, and instill life-long learning capacities, this project demonstrates for whose interests and for what higher education is oriented, noting that that those who already are privileged retain their status and prestige. For those students who operated from disadvantaged positions, the rules, routines, opportunities, and practices of higher education remained confusing, contradictory, ambiguous, and mysterious.

To display how the theoretical contributions founded on d/Discourse analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) noted above were developed in this dissertation project, this chapter provides a (a) brief summary of the findings of this study, discusses (b) theoretical contributions further, poses (c) limitations of this study, explores (d) theoretical and pragmatic implications, and offers a (e) conclusion to this work.
5.1 Summary

The purpose of this study was to draw on multiple d/Discourses occurring throughout institutions of higher education and understand the impact of the GE rule on student understandings. The research examined how students, more specifically recent graduates, (RQ1) understand or portray their perspectives based on career conversations and experiences; (RQ2) report or share these experiences with others; (RQ3) act upon these understandings, if at all; (RQ4) identify what are the Discourse, or cultural formations, underlying students’ perspectives about the relationships between career and higher education; and (RQ5) how d/Discourses among students and institutions of higher education related to career reveal deep power relations and whose interests are reconstituted communicatively?. Next, a summary of some findings is offered as an overview and as support for the contributions of this study.

Some of the key insights that emerged as a result of this study in relation to RQ1 include that students understand their perspectives in seemingly misguided ways from one perspective, but useful ways from an institution’s perspective insofar as these views pull in students through recruitment, selection, retention, promotion, and graduation. First, they have often been socialized by family members and influential actors in their lives to believe that higher education alone is a guaranteed pathway to career success. Because of this notion of insurance, students often disregard or do not make use of critical services, resources and milestones of importance in their career development and building of social networks, leaving them disadvantaged. Some of these students actually go to extremes to prepare themselves for fear of continued disadvantage. Very often students have feelings of being lost and isolated as they are unclear in how to approach their careers or even what options are available. As a result, they approach career preparation and job attainment independently through self-guided and uninformed ways, unfortunately remaining unemployed or underemployed due to reduced career competency and the unknown. Realizations occur that
additional preparation and work experience above and beyond the degree are a requirement for successful transition to the workplace, even for entry-level jobs. They also discover that they are not equipped to properly reflect upon and identify skills most sought by employers and often fail to recognize skills they already or how to verbalize them to hiring managers while on the job market. In many respects, those with the connections and understandings of what higher education can and does bring to the employability table fare better in terms of extracurricular, high impact, networking, and class learnings such that those already advantaged continue to be so.

In relation to RQ2, this study discovered that very often students do not report or share experiences with others as they are uncertain how to or who to approach to share their experiences because of a lack of personal connection to key advisors affiliated with the institutions. In rare cases, students forged strong connections with one or two people on their campus, usually faculty. This was more likely the case if the student had expressed interest in pursuit of an academic career or going to graduate school for future studies and preparation. Additional hesitations to connect with key advisors occurred because students felt when they did seek help there was very little personalized career advice. The generalized approach may have been considered efficient and effective to institutional members and students who already understood the system, but the services provided were of no interest to many students who lack the advisors who help them acquire and interpret information.

These initial interactions may have been a contributing factor as to whether students sought additional help or services as many shared services were discovered too late in their job search process to be advantageous. Opportunities like mentorship, informational interviews, and experiential learning opportunities that can provide significant insight and career-related experiences are not always recognized for their long-term value and potential to develop social
capital and needed workplace proficiencies. The misunderstanding that career development and preparation was an optional or preferred activity as opposed to a required one leaves students once again disadvantaged. Additional confusion surrounding possible trajectories upon graduation or learning that subjective choices about following interests over income continue to contribute to students’ inabilities to launch.

This study also uncovered how students act upon their understandings of career and the associated actualities (RQ3). The more distance students get from their educational training, the more likely they are to reflect positively and with greater maturity in their identification of knowledge, skills, abilities, and transferable competencies. With consideration, they also recognize the value for mentorship as a career preparation tool. Additional time to reflect and workplace savvy helps them to identify missed opportunities and to acknowledge personal failings that contributed to unmet career expectations. This time also provides students an opportunity to self-assess and take inventory of what action steps need to be taken to achieve career goals that were previously unfulfilled. This time is also viewed as a rebirth to develop new skills that will better prepare them in coordination with new knowledge, as they revisit the job search process. For some this means seeking out graduate programs. Returning to school acts as a restart button for many and provides a fresh start to entering the job market a second time around. Additional actions that occur as a result of their career understandings is clarity into what is meaningful and what is valuable. They view education as a journey that does not end with job attainment, however self-actualization and enrichment. During this period, students are willing to do whatever it takes to achieve their goals and gain access to the types of opportunities that did not appear initially. Some students have taken on additional debt to attend elite institutions to aid in this pursuit. This
return to the institution is not bothersome for many as they recognize continued skill development and advanced degrees as needed skills for their future.

In RQ4, this study brought clarity to Discourses, cultural formations and underlying student realities about the relationships that exist between career and higher education. The larger Discourse of GE holds no meaning for students except the increased pressure to achieve gainful employment in a way that meets definitions of success determined by the legislators enacting the related federal policies. Defining success in this way is in the best interest of legislatures because it provides a universal metric that can be applied to all institutions in an equal manner. Additionally, it is a way to hold boards of trustees and top officers’ accountable for retention, graduation rates, and promises of successful outcomes with consequences for institutional failure. As a result of high student loan debt and the need to begin repayment in a timely fashion, students often concede to the need for high paying jobs and find themselves accepting work that is less related to their interests or has less meaning to be in a position of financial stability. As a result of these concessions, graduates became more likely to forego repayment and take on additional debt to create the opportunity for the rebirth of their careers. Graduates viewed these additional economic burdens, as worthy of the investment as they plan to reap great returns with their increase career capital. While some graduates contemplated whether the journey was worth the time, energy, and expense, they also expressed they would see additional value in education if it were a more affordable venture. Students with less debt or no debt tended to perceive greater value in their education and appeared more content in their choices regardless of current career outcomes. Just as students were able to identify affordability as an emerging and continuing conversation for our society, they also became more in tune with how they define career success, which is very different from the GE rule. Graduates recognize the need for more than just a wage or salary but full
compensation that includes strong medical and retirement plans. Additionally, they want more than a job, but a path or trajectory that contributes to a career with opportunities to advance and progress as well as secure professional and personal growth. Most importantly, they identified a clear desire to find meaningfulness in their work, wanting their work to provide an outlet for contribution to others. In summary, they define career success as much more than job attainment six months after graduation. In the next section, theoretical contributions are expanded upon.

Lastly, in RQ5, a critical discourse analysis of focus group data and institutional texts such as websites and other promotional materials geared toward prospective students identified multiple tensions in the micro and macro discourse levels. At both levels there are similar tensions like whether the purpose of education is for intellectualism or work preparation; whether career success can be defined intrinsically or extrinsically; and whether the long-term success is better achieved through career development or job placement measures.

5.1.1 Theoretical Contributions

Changes are occurring in higher education every day. Sometimes change occurs in the at the highest level of government in the form of policy or regulatory compliance that impacts the administration as an organization and sometimes it occurs in the classroom in the form of curriculum or pedagogy that impacts students and their career outcomes. In addition to directions for future research, this study makes several contributions to the existing literature on (1) Gainful Employment (GE) from a qualitative perspective, (2) pedagogical practices in higher education, and (3) best practices for applied learning from college to career.

First, my participants were students or recent graduates who had attended college and universities throughout the United States during the implementation of Gainful Employment (GE), a federal rule impacting higher education institutions. Specifically, GE and the college scorecard
(a replacement for the federal college rating system) were implemented to provide consumers of education tools to aid in decision making when comparing one institution to another. This program instituted by the Department of Education and fully endorsed by the Obama administration in 2010 also aimed at better identification of failing programs whereby reducing risk associated with student choice and creating transparency for prospective students. Additionally, this ruling was poised to reduce student loan default rates by ensuring educational preparation offered by career colleges and training programs better prepared students for gainful employment. The program significantly impacts career and vocational colleges, however, recent proposals to the program call for changes to include all institutions of higher education moving forward, making the insights in this study even more relevant to current conversations.

Although there has been a large amount of research on the compliance measures associated with the rule and the impact to proprietary institutions, along with bi-partisan arguments related to the fairness of the rule, there has been very little work completed on students’ understandings and attitudes related to the rule. Additionally, participants of this study, current and former students of higher education during the implementation of the GE policies, were asked to define GE. The researcher provided no direction as to how to define the term. What became clear throughout the study is that students and recent graduates have no knowledge of the language, rationale, or regulatory policies surrounding GE. The understanding and transparency it professes to generate are lost on the population it was created to protect. There is a disconnect between their expectations and what they experience. This study contributes to the ongoing conversations, related to educational policy as it brings student voices to a conversation where their voices are currently missing.
Second, this study confirms and expands on existing pedagogical practices in higher education by reinforcing needs to better design courses with skills development and identification or student learning outcomes in mind. Current institutions offering first year experience courses and other required career exploration activities to provide edification on career options throughout their educational journey, regardless of intended outcomes, are likely to provide evidence of stronger career achievement by graduates. Chan and Derry (2013) offers steps to aid institutions as they take on this transformation:

- develop a bold vision and mission for personal career development; secure backing from institutional leadership; strategically position the personal and career development leadership role; strategically transform, build and align personal and career development organization and staff; gather and report personal and career development outcome data to all constituents; and engage and equip a college-to-career community of influencers with a focus on faculty and parents. (pp. 20-27)

Third, and closely connected to pedagogical practices, these findings also support and add to ongoing conversations about best practices for applied learning from college to career. These conversations have wide reach as they are not just career counselors or career centers but anyone in the institution providing career advice or guidance. Institutions have the tools to make change to improve career outcomes by adding mentorship programs, required experiential learning programs (i.e., research, practicum, service learning, internships, cultural immersion) and career readiness programs. Unfortunately, many of programs go unrealized as institutions are not fully, nor consistently, implementing programs such as these with consistency and effectiveness.

Finally, the findings of this study should attract policymakers and administrators in achieving student knowledge of Gainful Employment (GE) from a qualitative perspective,
improving pedagogical practices in higher education and best practices for applied learning from
college to career that result in stronger career outcomes and lifelong career competency. These
findings identify gaps in current knowledge and allow for policymakers and administrators to
reflect on current practices and proposes a step-by-step guide to tangible application of new and
improved methods. As such, this appeal to policy and policymakers to review and iteratively
reconstitute policy to benefit the parties for which such policy was intended aligns well with
current attention in organizational communication to policy as a structurational process (Canary et
al., 2018).

5.1.2 Limitations

There were certain limitations with this study. Many of the students in this study had
recently attended or were currently attending graduate school and were heavily concentrated in the
social sciences. Although groups were not entirely homogenous, with moderate levels of diversity
and input from the junior college community, it is fair to say that those that were prepared for
STEM fields or vocational training as an end point might lend a different perspective as would
graduates of satellite campuses, historically black colleges or universities, Hispanic institutions,
online programs or career colleges in the proprietary sector.

Some contextual issues that may have affected the findings in this study is the researcher’s
inherent or unintended biases. Although the researcher has diverse experience in public and private
universities in the non-profit sector and experience in a proprietary school in the for-profit sector,
this insider knowledge both adds to and takes away from an objective point of view. However,
given the social constructionist and critical approach underlying this study, the insider-outsider
views available to the researcher aided in delving deeply into participants’ and institutions’ micro-
level and broader societal understandings and interests portrayed by the findings. Additionally,
expanding the participant pool to include proprietary school graduates would definitely add layers of depth and breadth to these findings. Lastly, adding the process of member checks would also help to solidify the findings and ensure that the themes that emerged from this study were properly interpreted. In this case, member checks were not possible as participants were guaranteed personal contact information would not be stored and their anonymity would be protected. An alternative validation could occur if themes were shared with additional focus groups.

Future research could explore alternative research settings that include more diverse participants from other disciplines including STEM fields. For example, adding more interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives from student development, career theory, and organizational communication could also improve upon current research. Past research has focused on what “a real job” is but future research could seek to full define what “a real career” may be. Next, implications extend the theoretical and practical applications of this study.

5.1.3 Implications

Critical discourse analysis and more interpretive d/Discourse analyses using constant comparative techniques provided opportunities to delve deeply into the data to extend discussions of theoretical and pragmatic implications.

Theoretical Implications of the Study

The theoretical implications of this study reinforce previous work in the areas of emotional labor or work, sensemaking, and resilience. Additional areas of study for which there were glimpses of possibilities in the data and findings included meaningful work and career competency.

5.1.3.1 Emotional Labor/Emotional Work/Emotional Cost

In organizational literature, emotional labor and emotion work refer to the efforts that individuals enact to manage their feelings to be appropriate in public and private contexts,
respectively (e.g., Buzzanell & Turner, 2003). Most scholarship talks about individuals being in the process of emotion management, regulation, or effort as well as the outcomes that can occur if individuals are unable to reconcile their authentic and expressed feelings (e.g., Hochschild, 1983). In the current study, the emotional labor occurs prior to the time that individuals are in their jobs and is salient at every step of the educational and career decision-making processes. Emotional expressions are particularly poignant when research participants perceived themselves confused or at a loss about how to navigate institutional systems and develop the career resources needed at present and for the future.

The findings in this research are in line with those of previous studies. For example, Buzzanell and Turner (2003) connects emotion to work and situates the theory in relation to job loss. By re-associating the concept of emotional labor to job seeking behaviors or transitions to the workplace similarities are easily found. Consistent with the literature, there is great emotional commitment as students work to become graduates. With their journey to achieve a degree, they might experience a range of emotions including joy, anticipation, surprise, anticipation, and expectation whereas when they graduate and attempt to launch into adulthood and career they are often met with fears, suspicion, skepticism, trust, vulnerability, anger, resentment, indignation related to securing employment and achieving career success. The ability to manage or control emotion related to job search is often done in private but there is also the need to display appropriate emotions to others during the process such as family and hiring managers. Whether through surface acting or deep acting, conscious monitoring and self-regulation of emotions is happening by students and job seekers alike (Hochschild, 1983).
Many of the research participants entered higher education with perfect or almost perfect standardized test and GRE scores. Their own and others’ expectations of them were that since they are smart, they would know aspects of higher education or career and, if they did not already know certain practices or processes, that they would easily be able to locate information and respond to situations. This was not necessarily the case especially when participants were confronted by situations that seemed highly equivocal to them. Moreover, even if they sought out and obtained career information, this did not mean that they were able to piece together the data in ways that made sense to them. In other words, just because they were smart and could locate information, these characteristics did not mean that they were able to interpret information (see Buzzanell, 1987). They expressed confusion and frustration at processes that were, to them, mysterious. Learning how to extract cues about what was important and to note that career services, networking, and internship opportunities were not optional took time and reflection on their parts.

In other words, there seemed to be a disconnect between what information sources such as peers, others in the university, and family members said and expected and what they were doing or thought that they should be doing. Research participants had assumed a linear path toward degree completion and employment. But there were a lot of competing messages that made the sensemaking process challenging for them. These challenges may have been heightened if the students did not enroll in coursework that had experiential learning components. In experiential learning, the application component enables students to connect extracurricular, volunteer, readings, and work experiences with learning and apply their learnings to the real world. Being able to make sense of their experiences would occur by having students go outside of the classroom, reflect on what they are learning, and apply these learnings. For the participants in this study, the students realized, with hindsight, that they did not understand higher education. Such retrospective
sensemaking prompted them to reassess their situations and often enter into further educational programs to remedy that which they considered missing (Weick, 1979, 1995).

In particular, Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as a process of making meaning or more formally, ‘the making of sense” (p.4). Sensemaking focuses on how and why participants understand through their personal and socially constructed point of view or frame of reference. Every choice students make is impacted by the world view they have constructed and continues to construct around why they go to school, what they learn and why, how they act upon that knowledge, and ultimately how they approach career and related milestones. At the same time, institutions must also utilize sensemaking as they interpret policy and implement new or revise existing programs as a result of the implied contracts that exist between the institutions and government and the institutions and students and society. Sensemaking occurs personally and socially and is unique to every graduate. Although themes emerged about participant understandings, they each struggle with what to do with the knowledge as they make sense of their career training and preparation and related job search processes. These findings contribute to existing literature as sensemaking impacts communicative processes involving both students individually, as groups, and institutions as a whole.

5.1.3.3 Resilience.

Resilience is the defined in the processes whereby people and organizations initiate productive change during and after setbacks, losses, and tragedies. This can include career issues like unemployment or underemployment, materialistic losses, catastrophes, or other losses, trauma, and barriers (Buzzanell, 2010). Buzzanell (2018) discusses the need to adapt and transform when loss occurs which can be impacted by factors she calls disruptive trigger points, event structures, and the nature of the occurrence. For example, for recent graduates who are not or did not meet
expected career goals or job attainment after graduation. This would be a temporary non-permanent loss or disruption, that is likely a single event, and unexpected in nature. Friends, family, and network provide support during the time of loss.

There are both proactive and protective support factors at play. An example of a proactive factor might include a family member assisting with bills at the time of need. This charitable act can be viewed as compensatory support to counteract effects of unemployment or underemployment. While protective factors might include the graduate going back to school to buffer the loss and gain access to social network, alumni connections, and reduce disadvantage thereby protecting self from a similar occurrence. All of these factors provide feelings of normalcy in order to adapt, cope, recover, and/or reengage from the event. Actions that lead to recovery and normalcy are considered guiding factors in resilience. Along similar lines, Collard, Epperheime and Saign (1996) define career resilience as one’s ability to adapt to change even when the change is disruptive or discouraging. In the world of work, changing and adapting to develop skills through lifelong learning is critical to future job attainment and the health of one’s career. Fourie and Van Vuuren (1998) identified four factors that measure career resilience as the ability to: believe in self, disregard routine constructs of career success, be self-reliant, and be open to change. Such measures compliment the communication theory of resilience (Buzanell, 2010) and dovetail with materials presented in this dissertation. The entire process of bouncing back by taking steps to reset, gain additional knowledge and skills, and then try again. The jobseekers are not settling for failure but proactively regrouping to create and craft a new and improved normal

5.1.3.4 Meaningful Work.

The meanings of work and meaningfulness of work take on different connotations from those typically discussed in popular and scholarly accounts. Communication scholars note how
such meanings/meaningfulness is constituted communicatively and related to well-being, calling, and work and life satisfactions (e.g., Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Cheney, Zorn, Planalp, & Lair, 2008). Even work that might not traditionally be considered meaningful, such as dirty work that may be stigmatized and physically or morally tainted, is constructed and framed intersubjectively as meaningful personally or as holding societal value by occupational participants (e.g., Meisenbach, 2010). In the case of GE, students’ discourses, and meaningfulness, there seemed to be ebbs and flows of meaningfulness with the meanings of their education and of educational activities shifting as they progressed through institutional systems and began to understand more fully how they were advantaged and disadvantaged. In particular, particular opportunities, such as career services visits and internships became meaningful in hindsight. How processes of meaningfulness in general are constructed, deconstructed, reconstructed, amended, and resisted deserve attention, as does the meaningfulness of students as producers and consumers of educational discourses of career, employability, and related considerations.

5.1.3.5 Career Competency

The findings of this study indicate that implementing timelines, required experiential learning, and are just a few ways institutions and practitioners in higher education can enhance individual career competency. De Vos, De Hauw, and Van der Heijden (2011) examines connections between skill development, employability or marketability, and career satisfaction and success. A student or recent graduate’s own understandings of options, transferable skills, and how to approach the job search influences self-awareness and employability. Once on the job this knowledge can contribute to easier transitions and mobility throughout their career. In the next section, a discussion on important pragmatic implications.
5.1.3.6 Pragmatic Implications of the Study

The results of this study are critical for current and future practitioners. This research has shown that there are practical implications of this study, specifically for policymakers, institutions of higher education, and students. These implications revolve around practices coinciding with current regulatory policies, pedagogical and curriculum, career development, and preparation. The way students process meaning and act upon those understandings may be quite different than expected.

Policymakers facing GE implementation may not be aware that students do not understand GE and therefore do not value the disclosures associated with the data reported. Additional attempts at transparency may require some formal outreach so that students are aware of its intent.

Faculty and governance groups may want to evaluate current curriculum to ensure that there are transferable skills sets embedded in the courses. Additionally, designing courses with reflective exercises as part of the course will ensure transfer of knowledge and assist students in skill identification once on the job market.

Career development professionals and other career advisors throughout the institution should seek to transform current practices to ensure opportunities for mentorship and experiential learning as ways to create needed experience required in the workplace, making students more competitive. Additionally, implementation of career readiness programming to assist with the college to career transition that includes clear milestones for achievement will ensure career competency in the future. These clear objectives that hold students accountable, not only for degree attainment, but also career development will likely contribute to successful career outcomes in the future.

Furthermore, pedagogical and curriculum implications point members of higher education toward greater transparency in employability rationales, greater development of steps and targeted
appeals to students of particular degree-to-job steps, and more spaces for students to engage more personally with instructors so that students can seek information or advice in non-threatening venues. Student learning outcomes can be developed through use of management by objectives approaches which might systematize students’ own goal-development and accountabilities.

Finally, career development and preparation demand that students undertake self-assessments, map out how and why certain learnings, experiential exercises, and extracurricular or volunteer activities contribute skills for job interviews and employment regardless of sector. Students want and require accountability for their career preparation to create some insurance around successful career outcomes.

5.2 Conclusion

Talk in and out of the academy related to gainful employment, scorecards, rankings, student loans, funding, enrollment management, career outcomes and more fill the halls and the Chronicle on a daily basis. Changes to federal policy, curriculum, and institutional practices can occur just as fast and sometimes without stakeholder understanding as to why the changes are happening. This study exposed students’ understandings, shared experiences, and resulting actions related to career. The findings of this study showed students approach education in diverse ways, but all believe a degree, almost any degree is a golden ticket to success. That belief may lead to failed or missed opportunities for career intervention. These misses leave students feeling career development is all up to them and they must do it alone. The independence then turns to feelings of helpless and vulnerability when students graduate and learn employers expect more than just a degree. These expectations of job related experience and the ability for recent graduates to communicate the transferability of their skills leads to concerns over unemployment, underemployment, and sometimes unfulfilling employment just so they can get a job that pays the
bills, specifically student loans. As recent graduates begin to mature in their careers, they start to gain clarity surrounding their preparation and self-accountability for missed opportunities. Many found themselves going back to graduate school to get the career launch right, the second time around. With this process comes a reflective period where graduates contemplate the purpose of education, its worth, and what career success really is to them. Although students and recent graduates seem to hold little to no understanding of GE, the micro macro d/Discourses in higher education serve as a playbook for what discussions should come next as well as actionable plans to improve career education and outcomes. As advocates for education, the continual assessment and improvement of our current practices needs to be done, because it is what is best for the development of our students, not because there is a mandate to do it. In the end, policymakers, institutions, administrators, and faculty all have the same goal to help students succeed.

This study began with interest in the discursive and material tensions surrounding Gainful Employment in the United States at this particular time. One version of GE is that it protects students and their families from overextension in educational loans and encourages institutions to connect class materials with skill acquisition and employability outcomes. However, student and institutional discourse or talk and interaction and Discourses or cultural formations indicate that GE is neither understood nor helpful to students, that educational institutions’ communication about educational and employability opportunities is neither readily apparent nor valued, and that those members of higher education who construct and utilize such policies and the infrastructures designed to support and assess policy enactment are increasingly and contradictorily designed to advantage those already privileged in society.
REFERENCES


http://publications.nasfaa.org/jsfa/vol44/iss1/4


MacQueen, G. (2012). Closing doors: The gainful employment rule as over-regulation of for-profit higher education that will restrict access to higher education for America's poor. *Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy, 19*, 309.


APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT FLYER

VOLUNTEERS WANTED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY

Communicating the Importance of Careers: Gainful Employment, Organizational Discourse, and the Role of Higher Education

Have you graduated from a university or junior college between the years of 2014-2017? Do you have any loan debt because of your education? Did you graduate from your program in no more than six years? If you said yes to all three questions, we are conducting a research study about career conversations in higher education and are looking for your input! We are seeking participants for focus group that should last between 60 minutes.

Participants will receive a $10 gift card for their participation in the focus group.

This research is being conducted under the direction of Dr. Patrice Buzzanell, Brian Lamb School of Communication

IRB Protocol 1705019175 (PI: BUZZANELL, PATRICE M) - APPROVED
APPENDIX B. RECRUITMENT EMAIL

VOLUNTEERS WANTED
FOR A RESEARCH STUDY

Communicating the Importance of Careers: Gainful Employment, Organizational Discourse, and the Role of Higher Education

Greetings.

My name is Shelly L. Robinson and I am a PhD candidate working on my dissertation under Dr. Patrice Buzzanell, Professor in the Brian Lamb School of Communication at Purdue University. I am conducting a research study about career conversations in higher education as a result of the gainful employment rule. I am emailing to ask if you would like to take part in a 60-90-minute focus group for this research project. Participation is completely voluntary, and your answers will be anonymous.

To qualify, you must have graduated from a university or junior college between the years of 2014-2017, have or have had some student loan debt, and have graduated from your program in no more than six years.

Participants will receive a $10 gift card for their participation in the focus group.

If you are interested or have questions, please call 219.776.8219 or contact me via email at slrobins@purdue.edu.

IRB Protocol 1705019175 (PI: BUZZANELL, PATRICE M) - APPROVED

Thank you for your time.

Shelly Robinson
PhD Candidate, Purdue University
APPENDIX C. CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
Communicating the Importance of Careers:
Gainful Employment, Organizational Discourse, and the Role of Higher Education
Shelly L. Robinson
School of Communication
Purdue University

What is the purpose of this study?
This research study seeks to gain understanding on how colleges and universities plan, implement, and market their programs while stressing the importance of career placement (also known as gainful employment). Additionally, the research study seeks insight into how recent college graduates recall, understand, and share career conversations and experiences and how they use this information.

You are being asked to participate as a recent college graduate that has incurred some form of student loan debt as a result of completing your college or university degree in the last three years. There will be 50 participants in this study.

What will I do if I choose to be in this study?
- If you are chosen for the study and elect to participate, you will be asked to attend a facilitated group discussion on the research topic. The group discussion will consist of 5-10 members.
- It is estimated the discussion will last 60-90 minutes.
- The focus group discussion will be facilitated by someone on the research team.
- A fake name will be used attached to refer to participants. You will select the name you prefer and that name and will wear a nametag during the event with the fake name.
- The fake name will be attached temporarily to an email address of your choosing. These emails will be collected to distribute the $10 gift card awarded to participants but will be deleted immediately after you receive the electronic gift card. (Please note researchers cannot guarantee the confidentiality of subjects in a focus group discussion setting, as researchers cannot control what subjects might share outside of the research environment)
- Questions will be asked about your memories related to career conversations and preparation during undergraduate study.

How long will I be in the study?
- Participation will require 1 meeting in the evening on the University of Chicago campus.
- The meeting will last 60-90 minutes.
- The time will be between 6pm-8pm on a weekday.
- Exact dates and times are to be determined.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?
The research risk for participation in this study is minimal and no greater than everyday activities. The only risk is related to confidentiality because we ask for your email address at the end of the focus group discussion in order to send you compensation for participation (i.e., a $10 Amazon gift card). At no point will your name or other identifying information be collected during the focus group process. Additionally, we will only refer to you by the fake name during
the session. Email addresses will be deleted within a week of you receiving your gift card. At this point, no information will remain that connects you to the research other than your fake name.

**Are there any potential benefits?**
There are no direct benefits for the participants. However, knowledge gained from participation in the study may have the potential to impact practices and lend insight into the role of career development, on college campuses, specifically. where it begins, where it ends, and ultimately who is held accountable for the outcomes.

**Are there costs to me for participation?**
No.

**Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?**
The project's research records may be reviewed by departments at Purdue University responsible for regulatory and research oversight. The transcribed recordings will remain in a secure location with only the researchers associated with this study having access.

Please note researchers cannot guarantee the confidentiality of subjects in a focus group setting, as researchers cannot control what subjects might share outside of the research environment.

**What are my rights if I take part in this study?**
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or, if you agree to participate, you can withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Who can I contact if I have questions about the study?**
If you have questions, comments or concerns about this research project, you can talk to one of the researchers. Please contact Patrice Buzzanell, Professor of Communication, Beering Hall, 765-494-3317, buzzanel@purdue.edu or Shelly L. Robinson, Graduate Student, Communication Department, Off-campus, 219.776.8219, slrobins@purdue.edu.

If you have questions about your rights while taking part in the study or have concerns about the treatment of research participants, please call the Human Research Protection Program at (765) 494-5942, email (irb@purdue.edu) or write to:
Human Research Protection Program - Purdue University
Ernest C. Young Hall, Room 1032
155 S. Grant St.,
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2114

**Documentation of Informed Consent**
I have had the opportunity to read this consent form and have the research study explained. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research study, and my questions have been answered. I am prepared to participate in the research study described above. I have received a copy of this consent form in advance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant’s Name</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher’s Signature</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D. FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION SCRIPT

Welcome

Good evening and welcome to our session. Thanks for taking the time to join me to talk about career conversations in higher education in the US. My name is Shelly Robinson and I am a PhD candidate at Purdue University.

Overview of Topic

I am completing my dissertation and would like to learn more about your personal and shared experiences and recalled memories surrounding your career trajectories, preparation, and placement. Additionally, I want to know what you liked, what you didn't like, and how career education in college can improve. We are having discussions like this with several groups from different parts of the county. You were invited because you have graduated from an institution of higher education within the last three years, completed a degree program within six years from beginning to end, and carry or have carried some level of student loan debt.

Ground Rules

There are no wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. Keep in mind that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful. The session is being recorded and will later be transcribed. This is because I don't want to miss any of your comments. People often say very helpful things in these discussions and we can't write fast enough to get them all down. We will be on a first name basis tonight, and I won't use any real names in my findings. You may be assured of complete anonymity.

First Question

Well, let's begin. I've placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember each other's names. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the table. Tell us your name, where you went to college and what you studied.
APPENDIX E. FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Focus Group Questions

1. Thinking back to undergrad, what are some of the career conversations you recall from faculty and staff at your college or university?

2. Provide examples of how the college or university prepared you for gainful employment. What most prepared you? What was missing in this preparation?

3. Who do you hold accountable for your career success? Why?

4. Share with us your definition of career success? Gainful employment?

5. Were the terms gainful employment related to careers and student loans ever used?

6. Since graduating has your view on the value of your education changed? Has loan debt impacted that view?

Research Questions

RQ1: How do students understand or portray their realities based on career conversations and experiences?

RQ2: How do students report or share these experiences with others?

RQ3: How do students act upon these understandings, if at all?

RQ4: What are the Discourse, or cultural formations, underlying students’ realities about the relationships between career and higher education?

RQ5: How do d/discourses among students and institutions of higher education related to career reveal deep power relations and whose interests are reconstituted communicatively?
APPENDIX F. CURRICULUM VITAE

SHELLY L. ROBINSON

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

• Demonstrated leader 15 years of progressive experience in Higher Education: Strategic Planning, Operations, Program Development & Management, Communication & Outreach, Leadership Initiatives, and Student Engagement
• Research Interests: Organizational Communication, Diversity & Inclusion, Careers and Workplace Issues
• Technical Proficiencies: Microsoft Office Suite, Database Management, Qualtrics & SurveyMonkey, SAP, Banner, Degreeworks, Salesforce, CMS: WordPress & Drupal, Mailchimp, EventBrite, Guidebook, iMovie, Social Media, and ADA Compliance

EDUCATION

Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN
Doctor of Philosophy in Organizational Communication - May 2018
Master of Arts in Communication - December 2002
Bachelor of Arts in Communication - December 1993

HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL (September 2015 – Present)
Director of Career Services and Senior Program Development Officer
• Provide direct career services and career-related programming to three terminal masters programs: MA Program in Social Science, Committee on International Relations, and Computational Social Science (400 students)
• Manage alumni association outreach, employer relations, and job and internship development
• Oversee social media campaigns, maintain websites; Create promotional items for events
• Facilitate bi-weekly career lectures series; Collaborate with outside speakers for Mentor in Residence Program; Coordinate graduate level career and social programming in collaboration with other departments
• Supervise staff to ensure achievement of strategic goals
• Manage employer relations; Identify new partnerships; Develop job and internship opportunities

DeVry University, Merrillville, IN (April 2014–September 2015)
Center Dean
• Led and managed day-to-day operations including: Admissions, Student Success/Retention, Financial Administration, Local Projects, and Human Capital Development
• Met growth and profitability goals through the proper management of University’s resources with sustained enrollment of undergraduate and graduate programs (250 students)
• Ensured graduate and undergraduate curricula for the center is relevant to local and national needs, recommend changes to academic management and develop academic strategies
• Hired faculty with appropriate credentials; Scheduled classes/monitor class sizes
• Ensured quality of instruction via periodic evaluations/audits on effectiveness of programs
• Developed/implemented growth initiatives in line with mission and values of University
• Provided sound business, managerial and financial guidance to subordinates
• Facilitated effective communication daily to reinforce teamwork/information sharing
• Met with students to resolve questions or concerns affecting their educational experience
• Ensured compliance with all regulatory and statutory regulations; Amended existing policies/procedures as needed
• Reviewed forecasts, proposed capital expenditures, and approved departmental budgets
• Served on executive leadership committee for Metro and other committees/task forces
• Created and implemented strategic local marketing and community outreach plans
• Built relationships with local high schools, community colleges, and organizations
• Developed and coordinated special student, alumni, and community events and programming

Purdue University, Hammond, IN (March 2005 – January 2014)
Director of Career Services (formerly Center for Career and Leadership Development)
• Directed day-to-day operations and strategic direction of unit: personnel, CAS Standards, fiscal oversight, and marketing
• Collaborated with New Student Orientation and First Year Experience courses to increase recruitment and retention
• Provided personal service to students, alumni, and community in the areas of career preparation, development and counseling; exploring alternative employment options; job search assistance (nearly 10,000 students)
• Oversaw development of implementation of programs, fairs, events and workshops
• Cultivated relationships w/business partners; Identified career and internship opportunities
• Developed effective working relationships (students, faculty/staff, alumni, recruiters)
• Planned/provided strategic direction for department in alignment with the university mission
• Created / distributed annual first destination survey; Implemented new technologies; Evaluated / assessed offerings
• Promoted to Director after 18 months as Associate Director

RESEARCH & TEACHING EXPERIENCE
Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN (2015-2018)
Graduate Student Researcher, PhD Dissertation, 2016 – Present
• Managed all aspects of independent research study: proposal, research design, literature reviews, data collection, and analysis
Research Assistant, Dr. Patrice Buzzanell & Dr. Rahul Mitra, NCA Project, 2015
• Co-Aauthored summary report for National Communication Association funded research

DeVry University, Merrillville, IN (2015)
Adjunct Faculty, General Studies, 2015
• Instructed students in Critical Thinking & Problem Solving (COLL148)

Purdue University, Hammond, IN (1999 – 2003 & 2009 – 2013)
Adjunct Faculty, College of Business, 2009 – 2013
Adjunct Faculty, Department of Communication and Creative Arts, 1999 – 2003
• Engaged students in lectures /activities in core course, Speech Communication (COM114)
• Facilitated lectures, interactive activities, and career related events in required course, Career Lectures (BUSN301)

Purdue University, Hammond, IN (2002)
Research Assistant, Dr. Lisa Goodnight, Communication: Embracing Difference Textbook, 2002
• Conducted research for speech communication textbook

OTHER NON-ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE
Vanguard Services, Inc., Indianapolis, IN (2003 –2005)
District Operations Manager (Closed)
• Managed local district employee leasing office independently with responsibilities in 4 states
• Coordinated human resource functions (recruitment, pre-employment applicant processing, employee orientations, safety training, milestone recognition
• Handled Accident/Workman’s Compensation investigations, and progressive discipline for 25-250 employees assigned to various accounts in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin
• Managed workers in both union and non-union environments
• Handled inquiries/follow up (EEOC, FMLA, drug testing, Workman’s Comp)
• Facilitated account administration including customer relations/account maintenance, DOT file maintenance and compliance; Resolved any customer concerns
• Completed full sales cycle in new business development (prospecting, mass marketing, sales presentations, contract negotiation)

Enterprise RAC / Holdings, Chicago Group, Multiple Locations (1995 –1999)
Regional Recruiting Supervisor / Human Resources Coordinator
• Developed relationships with placement offices and faculty as means of talent acquisition
• Recruited top management candidates and interns from various college campuses throughout Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Michigan for over 20 branches in Chicagoland; Secured 75-100 recruits per year
• Handled departmental management including: training, development, forecasting, meeting quotas, budgeting, retention, and secondary generalist responsibilities in human resources
• Managed customer services, sales, marketing, and general administration for department
• Coordinated regional Sales Management Internship Program recruiting 20 interns nationally
• Acted as back-up to Human Resources Supervisor handling an employee issues, questions, concerns including benefits, compensation, policy clarification, FMLA and other leaves, etc.
• Achieved sales goals and quotas while in branch (insurance, upgrades, referrals, etc.)
• Promoted four (4) times in less than five (5) years

Account Executive
• Sold advertising and increased revenues through suggestive selling techniques
• Coordinated client radio advertising campaigns; Wrote copy based on client objectives
• Built sales relationships with clients; Developed strong rapport through quality service
• Developed new business in selected markets and managed accounts; Achieved revenue goals; Recognized for performance
UNIVERSITY COMMITTEES/APPOINTMENTS

- Member – Graduate Administrators Working Group on Diversity, 2016 - Present
- Member - Executive Committee (Tinley Park Metro), 2014-2015
- Member - First-Year Experience Committee, 2014-2015
- Chair - Administrative and Professional Staff Advisory Committee (Governance), 2011-2014
- Member – Community Standards Board (Judicial Affairs/Student Discipline), 2012 - 2014
- Member - Strategic Marketing Council, 2011 – 2014
- Ambassador - New Hire / On-Boarding (Human Resources), 2009 – 2014
- Trainer - Service Pack 3 (SP3) (Customer Service Standards), 2009 - 2014
- Member - Multicultural Campus Council (Diversity and Inclusion), 2006-2014
- Chair-Professional Development Sub-Committee, 2006-2014
- Member - Chancellor’s Board on Equity, 2006-2014
- Member – AQIP Committee on Alumni Information, 2013
- Member - Academic Learning Center Task Force (Strategic Planning), 2010 - 2011
- Member - Human Resources Budget and Payroll Task Force, 2006-2008
- Student Affairs Newsletter Writing Team, Contributing Author, 2007-2008, 2010 - 2011
- Student Affairs Assessment Committee (CAS), 2007-2011
- Member - AQIP Committee on Customer Service, 2009
- Facilitator/Trainer - Supervise for Success, 2007

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

- Member, National Communication Association, 2011-Present
- Member, National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2005 – 2014, 2017-Present
- Board Member – CTE Advisory Board, Hanover Central High School, 2011 - 2016
- Past – President and Member, Career Development Professionals of Indiana, 2005-2014
- Member, Midwest Association of Colleges and Employers, 1996-1999, 2005-2014
- Member, Government College Relations Council, 2007-2014
- Marketing Chair, Indiana Council for Internships and Cooperative Education, 2006-2012
- Marketing Chair, Northwest Indiana University Leadership Consortium, 2006-2010
- Member, Northwest Indiana Council for Community Partnerships, 2007-2008

ACADEMIC & PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS


PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS

- Panelist, Purdue Calumet Platinum Speakers Series, 2013
- Presenter, Gary Urban Planning League, 2012
- Trainer, Center for Workforce Development, “Resumes”, 2011
- Speaker, “Finding Your Passion”, Lake Central HS, Department of Business, 2008
• Presenter, Backpacs to Briefcases Career Development Workshops, PUC, 2005-2008 (Resumes, Social Networking, Job Search, Salary Negotiations, Interviewing, Professional Etiquette, Dining Etiquette, Ethics, Compensation, Transitioning to Life After College)
• Guest Speaker, City of Hammond Job Fair, 2007
• Guest Speaker, Lake Station High School, DECA, 2007
• Presenter, Offender Re-entry Program, Career Night, 2005, 2006
• Presenter, Inspired Leaders Series, 2005, 2006
• Guest Speaker, Southern Illinois University, Dept. of Marketing, “A Day in the Life”, 1999
• Keynote Speaker, Ball State Career Center, “Transitioning to the World of Work”, 1998
• Panelist, Purdue University, Krannert School of Management “Forum”, 1998

AWARDS/HONORS
• Distinguished Service Award, Career Development Professionals of Indiana, 2010
• Outstanding New Professional Award, Career Development Professionals of Indiana, 2008
• Outstanding Graduate Teaching Award, Communications Department, PUC, 2002