PERCEIVED DEGREE VALUE AMONGST TWO-YEAR TECHNICAL SCHOOL GRADUATES, AND REGIONAL EMPLOYERS: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Jonathan Dale Hartwell

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how graduates of Zion Mountain Institute of Technology (pseudonym), perceive the value of their two-year technical degrees as it relates to job satisfaction. In this research, job satisfaction is defined as the perceived value of the associate degree awarded. The theories that guided this study were Herzberg's two-factor theory and Holland's theory of vocational choice, as they both relate to job satisfaction or perceived degree value due to the correlation between employability, hygiene issues, motivators, and personality characteristics. The participant sample consisted of 10 recent graduates from a technical college in the southeastern United States. Individual interviews, focus groups, and a letter-writing assignment were used to collect data from these recent graduates, to understand their perspectives on the value of a two-year technical degree. All collected data were analyzed independently, and then collectively configured and arranged through NVivo to enable comparisons, such as defining themes, procuring participant backgrounds, and developing coded excerpts with relevant data points on the focus of the study. The primary themes developed from the research highlight key theoretical implications concerning two-year technical degrees, including Herzberg's theory of motivation, which was reflected in the high levels of job satisfaction and intrinsic motivation reported by graduates. Additionally, Holland's theory of vocational choice aligned with the strong personality fit and career fulfillment experienced by many participants. Each theme underscores significant findings from the study and aligns with or extends existing theoretical frameworks in the field.

Keywords: employability, job satisfaction, degree value, affordability, labor market

Copyright Page

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my three incredible children: Zackery, Sylar, and Zylah.

To Zackery, Sylar, and Zylah,

You are my greatest joy and my most profound source of inspiration. Through this journey, I have learned that with perseverance, dedication, and a steadfast belief in oneself, anything is possible. I want you to always remember that you can achieve your dreams, no matter how big or small they may seem. May this work serve as a testament to the power of hard work and the endless possibilities that lie ahead when you put your mind and heart into anything you do.

Acknowledgments

I am profoundly grateful for and want to honor the extraordinary character of my wife, Pamela, and her unwavering support and boundless love. Your loyalty, selflessness, and wholehearted commitment to my aspirations have been a guiding light in my life and the bedrock of my journey. You have provided me with a level of confidence and encouragement that I never had, believing in my potential even when I struggle to do so myself. Through it all, we have faced adversity with courage and determination, emerging stronger and more connected than ever before. I will forever cherish the moments of struggle, for they have tested and forged us into the unbreakable force we are today.

To my father, whose unwavering, relentless pursuit of excellence and expectations has been a driving force behind my will to succeed, igniting a fire within me to strive for the highest standards in everything I undertake, for which I will forever be grateful.

To my mother, whose incalculable drive and uncompromising perseverance have been an inspiration and an instrumental influence for the cornerstone of my work ethic. Having put her academic ambitions to an end to raise a family with my father, her belief in my potential has been a guiding force. For this, I share this academic achievement with you.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my brother, Joshua, whose unwavering presence, and indomitable spirit have been the foundation of my spirituality. Growing up, we found ourselves relying on each other in the face of adversity, and together we found solace in each other's company, and the memories we created together are etched in my heart forever.

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List of Abbreviations

Associate of Applied Science (AAS)

Associate of Arts (AA)

Baccalaureate of Applied Science (BAS)

Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)

Career and Technical Education (CTE)

Community and Technical College System (CTCS)

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

Job Pursuit Intention (JPI)

Organization Attractiveness (OA)

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT).

Socio-economic Status (SES)

Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics (STEAM)

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)

Work-Based Learning (WBL)

Workforce Education and Development (WED)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Upward mobility is a crucial consideration when choosing a place of employment, and understanding the entry-level requirements of employers can provide students, graduates, and employees with insights into preparing for future opportunities. This preparation is often aligned with traditional employment skills acquired through technical education. Two-year technical colleges offer Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degrees, emphasizing hands-on learning through laboratory work and clinical experiences tailored to the demands of various industries (Barnow et al., 2021). In this study, I explored student perspectives on the value of their two-year technical degree programs and investigated the potential connection between regional employers' interest and support for educational pathways. The following sections delve into the historical context of this issue, how graduate unemployment has evolved, the societal implications, and the theoretical underpinnings of related research.

Background

Many individuals seeking long-term, lucrative careers contemplate attending college to achieve their goals. However, deciding which college to choose, one that equips them with the necessary skills aligned with employers' expectations, remains a complex matter. Conversations surrounding guaranteed employment after graduation, financing options, the practicality and perceived worth of a two-year degree, and student debt influence the decision-making process regarding technical education (Lobo & Burke-Smalley, 2018; Okolie et al., 2019). Conversely, those without educational backgrounds, especially younger individuals with financial instability, might accept low-paying jobs with limited opportunities for career advancement (Somers et al.,

2019). Therefore, the choice of educational path should align with an individual's immediate or long-term employment and career aspirations.

Ensuring gainful employment is essential for individuals seeking financial stability for themselves and their families. However, many young residents of West Virginia believe that leaving the state for employment or education is their only option for financial security (Badger, 2021; Marberry & Werner, 2022; Shribman, 2021). To address concerns about local job prospects upon completing a program, graduates may question the benefits of pursuing a two-year degree in technical education. Choosing an educational path closely linked to high-demand skilled professions can alleviate uncertainties about job placement upon graduation and the burden of substantial student loans (Lally & Gatz, 2020).

Historical Context

Historically, the emphasis on college education grew at a time when influential figures, including employers, parents, and high school counselors, believed that obtaining a four-year degree was the only path to secure a successful career (Jüttler et al., 2021; Murrar et al., 2022). Several years ago, college tuition was much lower than today's standards. For example, in 1960, the average cost for college tuition, room, and board ranged from $1,450 to $2,015, equivalent to $11,800 to $16,400 today (Rothman, 2016). Over time, tuition rates increased as graduates faced challenges securing employment post-graduation, especially in technical fields where advancements into supervisory or managerial roles were often tied to educational backgrounds (Grubbs, 2021). A four-year college program may be the right choice for those seeking higher-status professional roles (Bettencourt et al., 2022). However, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020) indicates that individuals aged 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher had a 2.0% unemployment rate, compared to the 3.6% national average. Faculty influence also

plays a significant role, as faculty communication and engagement can boost the confidence and determination of two-year college students (Kujawa, 2013).

Technical education has become a viable option for those not destined for university education (Barnow et al., 2021), offering a pathway that reduces uncertainties about employment status after graduation (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2021; Holzer & Xu, 2021). Graduates often struggle to find employment solely based on their educational background and may reluctantly accept jobs they initially sought to avoid (Witteveen & Attewell, 2021). While technical or community colleges cannot guarantee immediate job placement, employers often value a two-year degree in a specific discipline that aligns with industry labor requirements (Murrar et al., 2022). Two-year students acquire technical skills and confidence in their chosen field of study, priming them for immediate employment upon degree completion (Milovanska-Farrington, 2023). However, if local employers fail to recognize the relevance of two-year technical degrees and do not express their intent to hire graduates, students may be less motivated to complete their programs (Grosz et al., 2022).

Social Context

The inability to secure employment has broad societal implications. If industry leaders struggle to fill skilled labor positions, why are college graduates still unemployed? For employers, the challenge of filling positions can lead to decreased production and increased labor demand (Gabriela, 2022; Ng & Stanton, 2023). On an individual level, unemployment brings financial hardships, inconsistent income, and lower living standards. Additionally, it imposes a cost on society through reduced output, lower tax revenues, weaker economic growth, higher crime rates, and the reallocation of tax dollars to support those receiving government assistance (Nasrudin, 2022; Wisman & Cauvel, 2021). The decision to pursue higher education is often

associated with the accumulation of debt, which may seem less worthwhile for long-term financial stability.

Professional guidance and support in pursuing tertiary education play a crucial role in helping individuals make informed decisions (Clotilda, 2019). This support ensures that borrowers understand loan agreements, repayment policies, and the long-term benefits of additional education, both professionally and economically (Fletcher & Dumford, 2021). Student affairs departments within colleges provide valuable guidance to students in two-year technical programs, helping them chart a more straightforward career path (Atwell et al., 2022). Such guidance can also reduce student attrition (Hoyt, 2021). For individuals not attending a two-year college, opportunities for professional advice and guidance outside their immediate circles may be limited.

Theoretical Context

From 2008 to 2009, the United States experienced a severe economic downturn known as the Great Recession, marking one of the most significant economic declines since the Great Depression of 1920 (Paulsen, 2022). During this period, the unemployment rate soared to over 10%, and college graduates experienced unemployment rates notably higher than the national average (Nunley et al., 2017). The economic imbalances and high unemployment rates raised student concerns about entering the job market. Graduates who secured employment during this challenging period often accepted positions that didn't fully utilize their education and skills (Abel et al., 2014).

While unemployment and underemployment are complex issues influenced by various factors, Cunningham (2016) conducted an analysis using a Marxist perspective to examine the relationship between higher education and the workforce. His study revealed that college

graduate unemployment is not merely coincidental but rather a result of interactions between higher education and the dynamics of a capitalist economy (Cunningham, 2016). Between 2020 and 2021, the global COVID-19 pandemic led to millions of workers losing their jobs (Bateson, 2023). Although graduate unemployment had already been a persistent issue, the pandemic added a stigma to employment gaps during this crisis (Bateson, 2023). Furthermore, the perception among regional employers that the knowledge acquired through career and technical education often falls short of industry expectations is a factor contributing to college graduate unemployment (Hack-Polay, 2021).

Recent studies emphasize the need for a stronger connection between higher education and the workforce to establish clear employment pathways (D'Amico et al., 2022; Soliz et al., 2023). This proposed study aims to expand our understanding of this issue by examining a broader region in West Virginia. This study also seeks to understand whether the causes of college graduate unemployment can be traced back to a disconnect between higher education institutions and industry leaders. The insights gained from this study may reveal specific actions that educational institutions and industry leaders in this region can take to address graduate unemployment, which has received limited attention until now.

Problem Statement

The problem is that graduates of two-year technical degree programs have difficulty securing employment in a state in the southeastern United States (Helvey et al., 2021). Moreover, an increasing number of younger graduates are experiencing unemployment or horizontal skills mismatch, whereby a discrepancy is evident between the person's current employment position and their educational credentials (Somers et al., 2019). The diminishing availability of employment opportunities primarily drives this struggle (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). As

employers leave the state, recent graduates from a two-year technical college may not clearly understand the degree's value and are potentially becoming discouraged with their endeavors to secure a position of employment in their program of study (Kim & Tamborini, 2019).

With a combination of the perceived value of the degree and minimal interest or buy-in from regional employers who remain in the state, there may also be a lack of active partnerships or opportunities for internships with the college's student population, as some employers indicate the skill sets obtained from these educational institutions do not live up to the expectations of the industry (Fuller & Raman, 2022). Therefore, if students do not see an opportunity for employment or interest in degree completion from regional employers, their interpretation or perception of the degree's value may diminish. Furthermore, current students may interpret the value of the degree in the same manner through conversational sharing of experiences, which may persuade them to withdraw or not complete their program, subsequently adding to statistical attrition (Schanzenbach & Turner, 2022). For two-year technical college students, the course and program withdrawal rates are excessively more significant than that of four-year college students due to a variety of reasons in addition to the perception of degree value, including full-time employment, family responsibilities, transportation, and financial constraints (McKinney et al., 2019).

This research focused on examining the perceived degree value of two-year technical school graduates to determine if the time and efforts spent toward earning a degree provided leverage toward employability and job satisfaction. For example, traditional conceptions of two-year technical college students are based on the motivation of a desire to earn a degree with subsequent skill sets to enhance the probability of earning potential (VanOra, 2019). For this, these two-year community and technical colleges may implement strategic enrollment

management, which is designed to support students and community college goals, and standing theories of retention to understand why students drop out or remain enrolled through degree completion (LaShure et al., 2019). The population sample consisted of two-year technical school graduates, whether employed in their field of study or not, to gain perspective on the usefulness and practicality of the degree they earned as it pertains to the relationship with job placement and satisfaction. Additionally, a comprehensive interpretation of the reasons behind the withdrawals helped identify a relationship between the job placement satisfaction of the dropouts and the graduates who were successful at gaining employment in their intended field.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how graduates of Zion Mountain Institute of Technology perceive the value of their two-year technical degrees as it relates to job satisfaction. At this stage in the research, the perceived value of the associate degree awarded will be generally defined as job satisfaction.

Significance of the Study

The declining population in West Virginia, driven by residents seeking opportunities elsewhere, presents a significant societal concern (Shribman, 2021). The state's population decline, exacerbated by economic imbalances and lower birth rates, has far-reaching implications for employment, education, and healthcare (Badger, 2021; Marberry & Werner, 2022). West Virginia's loss of a congressional seat after the 2020 census highlights the severity of this issue, as it experienced the most substantial population decline in the United States (Saunders, 2021). The state's population dropped by approximately 3.2% between 2010 and 2020, amounting to roughly 59,000 individuals (Mays, 2021). As of July 2022, an estimated 16.8% of West Virginia's population of 1,775,156 lived in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts, n.d.-b).

Theoretical

This study was theoretically grounded in the context of individuals having the motivation to work in a region that may be experiencing a disconnect between industry leaders and employment pathways. Additionally, West Virginia's population decline, driven by factors such as lower birth rates and economic challenges, resulted in a significant outmigration of residents in search of opportunities (Badger, 2021; Marberry & Werner, 2022). The departure of leading employers from the state (Watson et al., 2023; Young, 2020) further compounds the issue, reducing the demand for skilled workers (Bell & York, 2010; Lannom, 2017). These dynamics are likely to affect the job satisfaction of the remaining residents and influence the perceived value of a two-year technical degree for students aspiring to enter skilled trades. Additionally, the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have introduced a social stigma associated with employment gaps (Bateson, 2023), making it essential to explore the employment prospects for two-year technical college graduates in this challenging context.

Empirical

Building on empirical evidence suggesting a disconnect between the knowledge acquired through career and technical education and industry expectations (Hack-Polay, 2021), this study aimed to provide data that shed light on the unemployment rates of college graduates in the region. It examined graduates' and their employers' perceived value of two-year technical college degrees during pre-employment evaluations. By identifying potential gaps between employer expectations and institutional technical instruction, this research aligned with the findings of D'Amico et al. (2022), who emphasized the importance of establishing effective connections between industry leaders and higher education institutions to optimize financial interests and retention. This study contributed to this body of knowledge by sampling a more

extensive geographic region in West Virginia, examining whether the phenomenon of college graduate unemployment is linked to similar disconnects between higher education and regional employers.

Practical

While this study primarily assessed the value of two-year technical degrees among graduates, the data collected serves as a valuable institutional indicator for colleges. This data collection process can assist colleges in understanding the reasons behind non-completion, as some students may opt for moderately sustainable employment outside their chosen field before completing their degrees (Lysenko & Wang, 2023). Additionally, the study's results provide practical insights for technical colleges to collaborate with industry leaders in the community, facilitating the development of employment pathways based on direct feedback from graduates and employees. Given the limited empirical research on the perceived value of two-year technical college degrees in West Virginia, this study filled this gap by providing qualitative data that supports the theoretical framework outlined in the problem statement. Furthermore, the study aspires to help other two-year technical colleges understand how their graduates assess the value of their degrees in terms of job satisfaction upon entering the workforce. The insights derived from the analysis of results can inform the development and implementation of action plans for positive organizational change.

Research Questions

The following research questions have been developed following an extensive review of the associated literature, which revealed an informational gap therein for the demographic location the study was administered. Each question is directly linked to both the problem and

purpose statements to understand student, employer, and institutional involvement with the phenomenon of graduate unemployment, underemployment, and a horizontal skills mismatch.

Central Research Question

How do students who graduate with a two-year degree from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology perceive its value when searching for employment?

Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of two-year technical school graduates with job placement upon successfully completing their program?

Sub-Question Two

What are the experiences of students' job placement opportunities while enrolled in their career-driven program?

Sub-Question Three

How do employers perceive students who have completed a two-year technical degree in terms of their candidacy for employment or promotions within their chosen industry?

Definitions

1. *Career and technical education* – A scholastic arrangement that combines academic and technical skills with comprehensive training required to succeed professionally and is often associated with individuals destined for a skilled trade rather than a four-year college (Kim et al., 2021).
2. *Community and technical college system* – An organized system that coordinates community and technical colleges and partners with local businesses to ensure a meaningful education for students while meeting the needs of workforce demands (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

3. *Corporate social responsibility* – Labor practices that accompany a safe work environment, equality, a diverse and inclusive workforce, and human resource development for employees and the community (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022).
4. *Gross domestic product* – A monetary measure for the market value of all final goods and services produced within a specific timeframe, generally on an annual basis (Hernández-Ramírez et al., 2021)
5. *Horizontal mismatch* – The discrepancy between a person's current occupational status as compared to their educational credentials or previous experiences or qualifications (Somers et al., 2019).
6. *Job pursuit intention* – The concept depicting individuals' active research into organizational information, such as their business structure, working atmosphere, and occupational opportunities, before applying for employment (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022).
7. *Job satisfaction* – The measurement of workers' occupational contentedness, whether derived from the nature of work performed, the atmosphere, colleague interactions, or a culmination of all components (Herzberg et al., 1959).
8. *Organization attractiveness* – A reference that describes the intuitive and attitudinal opinions individuals display about organizations they see as potential locations to become employed (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022).
9. *Socio-economic status* – A socio-economic position of an individual or group determined by income, education, the prestige of occupation, residence, ethnic origins, and religious backgrounds (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

10. *Work-based learning* – A form of collective learning incorporating classroom or industry-based instruction, on-the-job training, and apprenticeships or professional mentorships to prepare students for a specific career (Anderson & Keily, 2021).
11. *Workforce education and development* – Educational programs specifically designed to prepare students for in-demand jobs, which are often non-credit bearing and with shorter completion times than typical for-credit offerings (Moreno, 2023)

Summary

The problem is that graduates of two-year technical degree programs have difficulty securing employment in a state in the southeastern United States. Moreover, an increasing number of younger graduates are experiencing unemployment or horizontal skills mismatch, whereby a discrepancy is evident between the person's current employment position and their educational credentials. This struggle is primarily driven by the diminishing availability of employment opportunities. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how graduates of Zion Mountain Institute of Technology perceive the value of their two-year technical degrees.

Historically, there has been a strong emphasis on pursuing four-year college degrees as the key to a successful career, driven by parental and high school counselor influences. However, the results of this study indicated that individuals inclined towards skilled trades might find a better fit in completing a two-year degree in a specific discipline. The departure of employers from the state has led younger residents of West Virginia to believe that their only path to financial sustainability lies in leaving the state for work or education. While technical education does not guarantee immediate job placement upon graduation, it offers a more viable option that reduces the uncertainty surrounding employment prospects upon degree completion. Graduate

unemployment has been a recurring issue, particularly in regions struggling to provide residents with occupational opportunities. This study explored the active involvement of regional employers in shaping career pathways, as outlined by local higher education institutions, to gain deeper insights into this phenomenon. In essence, this research examined how graduates of two-year technical programs perceive the value of their degrees and whether their educational efforts translated into enhanced employability and job satisfaction.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

During a systematic review of the related literature, I explored the problem of students who graduate from a two-year technical college in the southeastern United States who are having difficulty securing gainful employment in the general focus of their degree earned. This chapter reviews the current literature related to this topic of study, beginning with a discussion of the theory of vocational choice and the two-factor theory. Next, the region's labor market, employer expectations, and employment availability are introduced. Discussed are the themes relevant to non-graduates, the attrition of workforce candidates, and the various reasons limiting degree attainment, including both affordability and accessibility issues as having a direct impact on student retention and attrition. Moreover, the institutional alignments with industry standards along with the employability skills instilled throughout the educational instruction, are explored. After this, a synthesis of recent literature concerning the cause and effect of job satisfaction concerning a degree earned in the field of technical education is presented. Finally, the need for the current study is addressed by identifying a gap in the literature regarding students' perception of the value of their two-year degree and whether concepts and skills relevant to industry needs were narrowly communicated or missing from the program, which may have otherwise aided students in obtaining their desired employment.

Theoretical Framework

Certain factors in the workplace lead to job satisfaction among individuals who may perceive their employment as a positive or negative experience, leading to either employee retention or attrition. The theoretical framework for this study includes the two-factor theory and the theory of vocational choice. Within the two-factor theory (Herzberg et al., 1959), job-attitude

factors are separated by a first, and second-level, which is defined through objective elements of a situation whereby the respondent identifies the source of their positive or negative feelings about the specifics of the job (Herzberg et al., 1959). The theory of vocational choice (Holland, 1959), is parallel to the two-factor theory in that individuals will channel their personality characteristics into determining job satisfaction, which may or may not align with their current employment position. Identifying one's personality characteristics in comparison with current employment duties will also correlate with the two-factor theory because employees can then identify the specific satisfaction or dissatisfaction triggers through typical organizational operations and proceedings that render their motivation to pursue a career in that field open for exploration.

Two-Factor Theory

Herzberg et al. (1959) developed a theory based on two interview questions, which led to the interpretation that there are two dimensions to job satisfaction, whereby the theory distinguishes the elements of and separates the satisfaction rating between hygiene issues (dissatisfiers) and motivators (satisfiers). This qualitative study indicated that people were dissatisfied with their working environments or the extrinsic nature of the job. Therefore, the infrequent satisfaction with work environments was classified as hygiene issues, which include administrative policies, salary, supervision, and working conditions, as the motivators include employee achievement, recognition, responsibility, and advancement (Herzberg et al., 1959). Outside of internal affairs within the hygiene and motivator factors, immediate employment may also be determined by the demographic demand of a chosen profession and the correlation between personality characteristics, collaborative technical or vocational teaching, work engagement, and occupational environments (Park & Johnson, 2019; Wang et al., 2019).

Subsequently, the two-factor theory was chosen to guide the research on job placement satisfaction amongst two-year technical school graduates due to the correlation between employability, hygiene issues, motivators, and the drive to meet industry requirements, presumably achieved through technical degrees.

Salary is often expressed as a hygiene issue, primarily due to the perception of individuals and their interpretation of unfair compensation, which ultimately leads to dissatisfaction. For example, graduates may seemingly gain leverage toward employment through their degree earned, although employer salaries may be equivalent to those employees who do not possess a degree in the field. To alleviate these concerns, the organization may need to take the necessary action toward clarifying or updating these policies to ensure fair treatment across the board (Lee et al., 2022). Since Herzberg's theory was formulated in 1959, his participants were from an era much different than what exists today. Over the next several decades, along with the economic status, the interests and priorities of the current generation entering the workforce have shown a significant change in comparison to the participants of the original study and theory development (Bhatt et al., 2022). In this instance, the personal expectations of individuals may not environmentally align with the desired field of employment due to the salary dissatisfier mentioned in Herzberg's two-factor theory, which would play an instrumental role in the student's decision to continue with a degree program they quickly realize may lead to an undesired financial result.

Pedraza and Chen (2022) reported findings from their study examining motivator factors and persistence of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) students using the two-factor theory, which revealed the motivator factors predicted persistence in the STEM, or Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics (STEAM) majors, while the hygiene

factors generalized the student persistence in college completion. Although STEM or STEAM components are widely apparent within most educational institutions, little is known about how these introductory notions are conceptualized within a K-12 setting (Navy et al., 2021). Nor is there extensive research on how the interests of students are portrayed by the time a decision must be made, whether to further one's knowledge in technical education through two-year college offerings or to immediately enter the workforce without a skilled concentration when selecting a career pathway (Navy et al., 2021). For this, further investigation into studying a specific pool of participants is merited based on these circumstances concerning how job placement and job satisfaction are linked to the perceived degree value amongst two-year technical school graduates. Although the intended research involves understanding whether students feel the two-year degree provided employment leverage, other factors exist, such as those presented in the theory of vocational choice.

Vocational Choice Theory

Identifying the dissatisfaction outside of the hygiene issues mentioned in Herzberg's (1959) two-factor theory, the theory of vocational choice explores personal characteristics and preferences. The theory of vocational choice predicts that the more similar levels between the individual and the characteristics of the occupational standards, the more likely the individual will perceive their career-related outcomes as positive and motivating events, such as satisfaction and achievement (Holland, 1959). Holland's (1959) theory also suggests that people possess one of six modal personality types. Accordingly, six modal occupational environments correspond with these elemental personality properties and are represented as realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional (RIASEC). Overall, Holland related coherence to codes associated with individual vocational aspirations and developed "The Holland Hexagon" to

describe the different types of personalities, their descriptions, and typical examples of occupations one may pursue in correlation with the personality types exhibited (Hartmann et al., 2021).

Holland (1959) further suggested that people use their personality characteristics to search for the type of atmosphere that will allow them to excel and become successful in their environment, leading to a more satisfactory element in their occupations. For example, this theory suggests that when choosing a career, they will often follow leads on positions that will harbor other individuals who display the same characteristics as themselves (Jüttler et al., 2021). Moreover, Rocconi et al. (2020) indicated that the same principles apply to the students of Career and Technical Education (CTE) or Workforce Education and Development (WED), as their characteristics and personality types were linked directly to person-environment fit. As people enter an atmosphere or environment that conflicts with their personality characteristics and traits, dissatisfaction overcomes these positive outlooks, and therefore, individual performances within occupational expectations may decline rapidly.

Related Literature

There are two recurring factors in the literature concerning the perception of job satisfaction amongst the residents of West Virginia. These include the financial feasibility of attending a two-year technical school to gain employment and the realistic probability that these two-year technical college graduates will become employed in their field of study upon program completion. The attrition of workforce candidates is partly accredited to the rapid decline in available skilled workers, the loss of employment opportunities due to various reasons, and the number of remaining job openings in West Virginia without the interest of human capital to fill them (Saunders, 2021). Therefore, the available positions do not meet the salary expectations of

graduates quickly transitioning into financial debt repayment plans (Shribman, 2021). Additional contributions to this attrition include students who do not finish the degree they enrolled in due to employment opportunities offered before the program is completed, whether in the field of study or not (LaShure et al., 2019). Under the direction of industry leaders, these program enhancements would strengthen the employability of graduates and further prepare them to meet the industry's employment criteria and qualifications when entering the workforce in the student's chosen field.

Alternative initiatives are explored in the institutional alignment heading to ensure student retention and organizational finance sustainability. These initiatives, such as internships and other apprenticeship programs, serve as motivators, which are embedded into technical programs to satisfy student expectations of having a direct pathway toward employment (Ertelt et al., 2021). With the implementation of such initiatives and upon program completion, students will have a clear vision of their future employment, which will ultimately induce a perception of job satisfaction, or in this case, the value of the degree earned. Otherwise, degree value may yield different perceptions if individuals become unmotivated and are influenced to withdraw from college or not complete all graduation requirements to become immediately employed out of necessity rather than aspiration (Lackner, 2023). Therefore, directly and continuously linking local employers to students enrolled in technical programs will provide constant engagement and has the potential to assist with the reversal of the attrition of students and workforce candidates (Voeller, 2022).

Labor Market

The current labor market cannot be represented accurately without mentioning the decline in available jobs and the increase in unemployment since the inception of the COVID-19

pandemic. The United States labor market has continued to recover from the 2021 recession caused by the coronavirus pandemic of 2019 (Pastore & Choudhry, 2022), although labor market statistics, such as unemployment rates, are still above pre-pandemic levels (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.-b). However, the national unemployment rate for individuals aged 16 – 24 has shown a slight decrease of 3.6 percentage points over the year (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.-c). The national employment-population ratio increased by 1.8 percentage points to 59.2% after a few years of lying dormant due to a global catastrophe (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.-a). With the unemployment rate decreasing for individuals within the typical age group of enrolled students of community, career, and technical colleges, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics implies that the labor market is on a steady track to economic revitalization following the labor market improvements of 2021.

On the other hand, just because the unemployment rate was decreasing, this does not mean the employment vacancies were filled with individuals working in a field backed by their academic credentials, thus, the implications of job dissatisfaction. For the state of West Virginia, the unemployment rates tell a different story. Some professions that once required “on-site” attendance are now being replaced by industrial robots and automated mechanical substitutes (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020). Additionally, Gurchiek (2021) reported that many workers are becoming more insecure in their professions due to the looming assumption that most industrialized professions are on the verge of automation. Understandably, modern technology is becoming more of a characterization of the global economy and workforce, as elements such as artificial intelligence, computer-aided design, robotics, and machine learning have proven useful tools for human labor alternatives.

In contrast, the supply of workers with Bachelor of Arts degrees is overshadowed by the pressing demand for a skilled workforce. Hendricks et al. (2021) supported the claim that this demand has grown since 1980. Undoubtedly, the United States economy has faced a shortage of labor and skilled workers in recent years, as significant blame may be placed on the repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic (Baublitz, 2020; Cebula & Foley, 2022). However, pre-pandemic reports indicated that technical and skilled trade positions were in high demand with fewer people available to fill them (Sublett & Tovar, 2021). This statement leads the researcher to believe an issue with filling job vacancies may not point directly at the global crisis exclusively and may lie within the individual's personalities, circumstances, motivations, expectations, and preferences.

Current delineations indicate that only a little over half of all West Virginians who are physically able to work actively participate and contribute to the state's workforce. Reports (2021) attest that out of all West Virginians of working age and eligible for employment, only 53.2% make up the labor force participation rate at the time of the report. On the other hand, the large-scale transition to remote work during the beginning months of the pandemic created an alternative to the typical demands of "in-person" work (Ng & Stanton, 2023). As individuals choose to quit their jobs rather than return to their physical sites due to flexibility and balance, remote work is becoming more of a priority (Ng & Stanton, 2023). In relation, Yu et al. (2020) reported evidence in their study addressing the labor force participation rate response to an epidemic revealed that such widespread illnesses alter human behavior, which subsequently has a direct effect on the labor force participation rate. Reflecting on the theory of vocational choice, a portion of the unemployed may be in a transitioning phase brought on by the pandemic, which prompted them to pursue new careers via technical education programs as an attempt to fulfill

their personality types and needs (The Hunt Institute, 2021). In perspective, the caviling problem for working West Virginians is the labor participation rate, whereby the number of people who can work and are not actively working or attempting to find employment outweighs those who are and do.

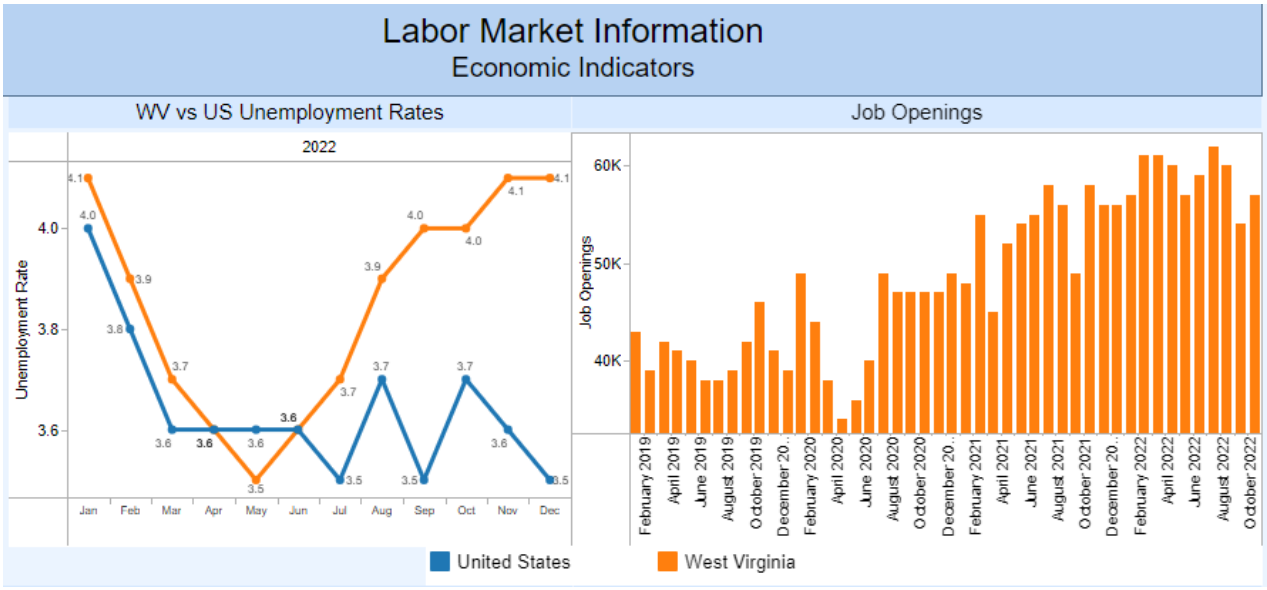
The unfortunate trend of declining employment opportunities continues to solidify the necessity to search for sustainable employment outside West Virginia amongst future generations. Throughout the entire United States, West Virginia has one of the oldest populations; therefore, the future sustainability of the state's workforce and economy lies in the hands of the youth (Saunders, 2021). However, some labor shortage explanations include accusations of a lack of work ethics in Generation Z (de Boer & Bordoloi, 2022; Leslie et al., 2021). A newer generation is reportedly contributing to the lack of individuals formally trained and qualified to perform the specific duties and necessary skills required by their regional employers (Sublett & Tovar, 2021). Subsequently, without an explicit interest among the newest individuals entering the workforce in pursuing any career, especially in a technical field, the demand for skilled workers will incessantly increase if industry employers cannot establish a method to retain them (Jayathilake et al., 2021). For this, I am led to further investigate the causation of this lack of interest in pursuing technical careers from the newest generation entering the workforce.

Several logical and equitable theories and explanations have developed as to why the repetitious increase in job openings, the demand for technical and skilled laborers, and the decrease in available people to fill them. However, specific, or definitive causation for the employment gap and understanding why, remains unbridged. No matter the reasons for the decrease in skilled labor participation, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.-d) reported a

national unemployment average of 4.5% in February 2022 for individuals over the age of 25 with only a high school diploma, while the total unemployment rate for all West Virginians was 4.1%. Throughout the year, some positive changes were recorded, as residents of the state who were able to work eventually returned to the workforce in some respect or another, although some employees were still unwilling to return to "in-person" employment (Cork, 2022; Ng & Lam, 2021). However, by the end of the year 2022, Workforce West Virginia LMI (n.d.) reported that in comparison to the United States' total unemployment rate average of 3.5%, West Virginia reported a spike back to 4.1% at the end of October 2022, while the available job openings reported exceeded 57,000, as shown in Figure 1. With this, one may interpret this visual representation with perplexity, as the imbalance of the current labor market in West Virginia depicts an enigma, while the available job openings greatly outweigh the unemployed individuals.

Figure 1

Labor Market Economic Indicators



Note. This graph and chart indicate the relationship between job openings and unemployment rates by comparison between the United States and West Virginia from February 2019 to December 2022. Workforce West Virginia LMI (n.d.)

Employment Availability

The best-known export of West Virginia is coal and has always most commonly been associated with the coal industry and the railroad as a source of livelihood for the residents of the state (Watson et al., 2023). However, due to the results of recent environmental regulations and competitive natural gas costs, West Virginia has lost over half of its jobs over the past 12 years (Shribman, 2021). More specifically, the southwestern coal-oriented counties, such as McDowell, Wyoming, Boone, Logan, and Mingo, have lost at least one-fourth of their jobs over the last six years (Shribman, 2021). McDowell County is among two counties in the state that reported an increased unemployment rate greater than 16% in 2020, while Mingo County reported the highest at 18.2% (Young, 2020). For the residents of West Virginia, this loss of available employment opportunities has made it difficult to sustain a financially promising future for the residents of this region.

Additionally, the coal industry has historically been identified predominantly as a male profession. Due to recent economic transitions with the increasing costs of mining production and the lower prices of alternative fuel sources, such as natural gas and propane, what was once a financially sustainable career for the residents of Appalachia has now led to displaced workers and social unrest (Watson et al., 2023). Subsequently, the loss of these mining jobs contributed to the statistical increase in high school dropout rates among women and forced females dependent on this profession to prepare for the workforce to supplement this financial loss (Brodie, 2020). With the less attractive combination of job loss, poverty, and opioid addiction, it

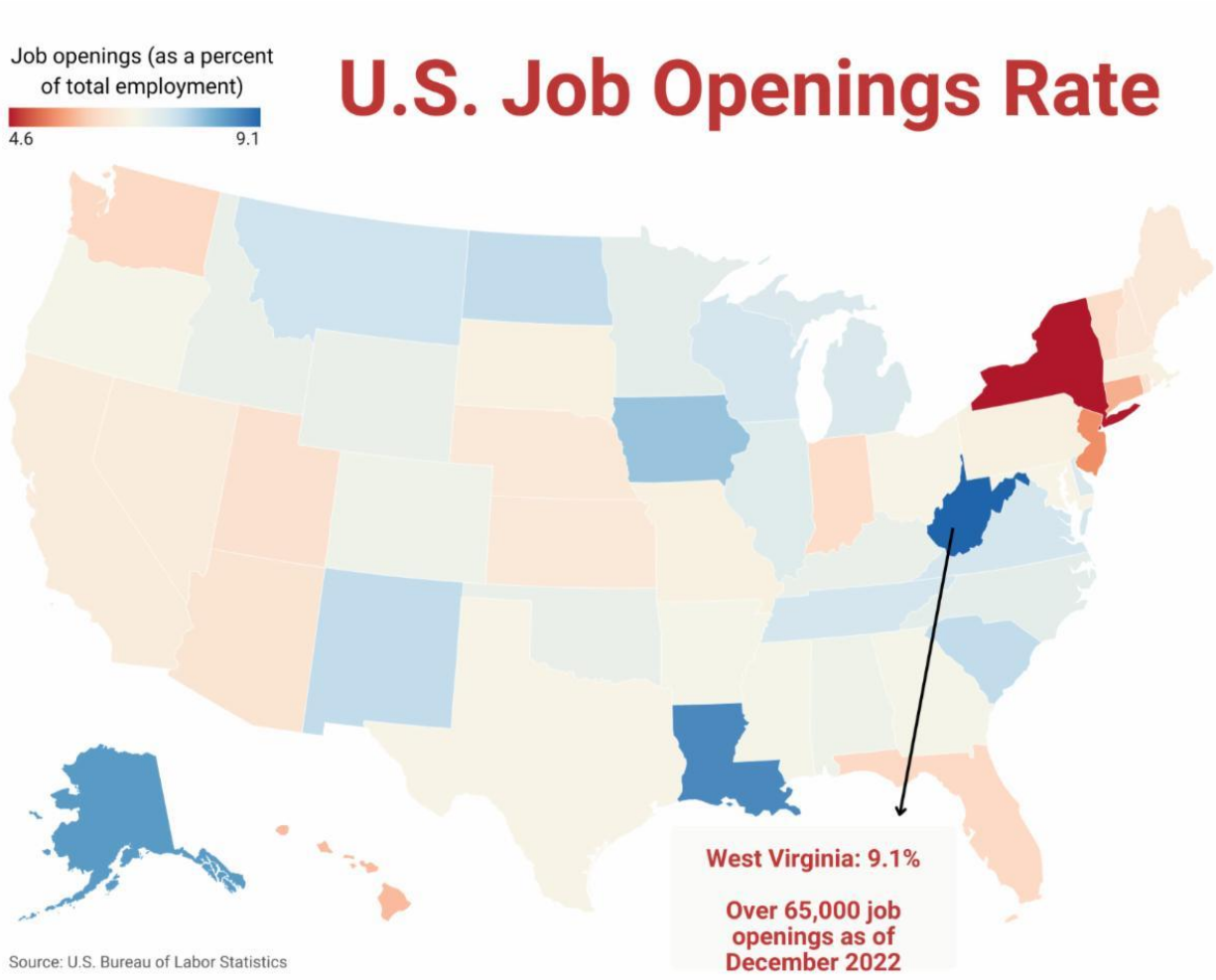
is evident that new businesses may be pushed or persuaded away from the region to pursue business opportunities in other states where the economic outlook may be perceived as more viable (Badger, 2021). For this, the residents of West Virginia who do not relocate out of state for employment opportunities may have a much different perspective on job satisfaction compared to those who make the conscious decision to transplant their livelihood out of necessity to follow these jobs as they slowly leave the state.

Although the social distancing implications of the coronavirus began to subside in general, the pandemic created an ideal impetus as the resignation of employment continued to grow (Klotz, 2022). While the outlook for employment availability in West Virginia has previously seemed unpromising for its residents, the end of 2022 continued to provide over 57,000 available jobs throughout the state. Moreover, the number of West Virginia residents who quit their jobs as of November 2022 exceeded 24,000, contributing to this end-of-year statistic (Workforce West Virginia LMI, n.d.). Despite media attempts at elucidating their perceptions of the reasons and causes for this phenomenon, the global pandemic created additional stress among existing workplace demands, the struggle to accommodate work demands with children's remote schooling schedules, and overall employee dissatisfaction (Gabriela, 2022; Ng & Stanton, 2023;). Gittleman (2022) suggested the contributing factors of employee dissatisfaction included lower wages among the younger and less educated individuals working in food service or retail. Nonetheless, in comparison with Workforce West Virginia LMI to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.-b), the end of December 2022 indicated the number of available jobs in West Virginia exceeded 65,000 openings, which at 9.1% was the largest percentile in the nation, as shown in Figure 2. Granted, not all these reported openings were new positions brought to the

state, and it is reasonable to suspect many of these positions are still unfilled due to the layoffs experienced in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic.

Figure 2

U.S. Job Openings Rate



Note. This chart depicts the national comparison by state and the rate of job openings at the end of December 2022. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.-b).

In perspective relevance to the coronavirus pandemic, specific employment opportunities experienced an increasing demand with fewer people to fill them, such as nurses and other medical care professionals. Notably, Workforce West Virginia (n.d.) reported that out of the top

industry employers in the state, hospitals were, and still are, among the top 25 employers in West Virginia. Comparably, the top 100 industry employers also include coal mining, despite the recent decline in the industry (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.-d). Therefore, there are still available technical jobs in the mining industry that require a skill set, such as automation and programmers, diesel technicians, electricians, and welders, to name a few (Paredes & Fleming-Muñoz, 2021). With these positions in mind, most of these skill sets are only retrieved through years of experience or obtained through formal technical programs administered by institutions of higher learning, which, in part, is a prerequisite or an expectation for employment consideration of industry employers.

Expectations

Now that a clear view of the labor market has been presented for the state of West Virginia, the focus has shifted to the expectations of the regional employers and their perceptions of the ideal workforce candidate. Workforce West Virginia is an organized resource center catering to workforce development and is designed to serve those actively searching for employment but also assist local businesses and industry partners in searching for and hiring skilled workers for their industry (Workforce West Virginia LMI, n.d.). With the assistance of this resource center, the first step toward employment from the employer's perspective is to find qualified workers (Workforce West Virginia, n.d.). In connection to higher education, Workforce West Virginia allows local businesses to partner with the state's Community and Technical College System (CTCS) by providing tuition assistance through grants designed to assist low-income individuals. (Kern, 2019). Concomitantly, due to the unprecedented labor shortages, Finley (2021) indicated employers are leaning more heavily on community and technical colleges to produce skilled workers upon degree completion to alleviate the decline in human

capital. From these institutional connections, employers may expect that recent graduates would possess the necessary skills required to perform entry-level duties of the position, although, without collaboration and active participation, the skills gaps would seemingly continue to grow.

Employers are looking for employees who have developed and matured in their knowledge and soft skills integration, which would only be improved upon through collaboration and expressing these expectations with local colleges. Furthermore, researchers in the technology sector have attested that the employer expectancies of recent graduates show fewer students skilled in communication and more skilled in technology and the field they are studying (Lisá et al., 2019). Meanwhile, Gauthier (2020b) indicated that employers are looking for candidates who can easily be integrated into the workforce and have obtained job-related competencies through two-year technical degree programs. From these discussions, institutions are influenced to promote curriculum enhancements and new curriculum developments by incorporating the significant relationship between education and industry expectations into regular instruction (Gauthier, 2022). On the other hand, some of the older generations in the workforce have relied on their years of experience to assist them in finding employment when displaced, as the newest generation entering the workforce is forced to rely on technical training to alternatively accommodate the experience expectations of employers.

In addition to the expectations of employers, students' and recent graduates' expectations should be considered to determine the gap between available jobs and unemployment rates. Understandably, organizations must better prepare themselves to allure the newest generation of workers by investigating their Job Pursuit Intentions (JPI) while recognizing and accommodating the interests and expectancies of what this cohort perceives as a fundamental attraction (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Chillakuri, 2020). Generation Z is the newest cohort entering the workforce,

whereby Nguyen Ngoc et al. (2022) suggested they are more attracted to organizations that practice cultural and social awareness or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Before the job seeker can get themselves to this point, there are a series of necessary steps for active job seeking, including obtaining a high school diploma, identifying skills, determining interest, and receiving the training to complement these skills and interests (Workforce West Virginia, n.d.). Just as employers hold a position of power, the employee or job seeker will hold an equal amount of leverage as it relates to job satisfaction through overall Organization Attractiveness (OA). Granted, some recent graduates overestimate their salary expectations, experience level, and skills compared to the employer's assessment due to a lack of practical skills directly linked to the positions applied (Lisá et al., 2019). However, if an employee or job seeker finds their expectations of employment are not met, they will likely depart from the organization early or not apply at all.

The Attrition of Workforce Candidates

Technical colleges are designed to provide students with an affordable alternative education to the typical four-year baccalaureate experience and credentials and may arguably be a more suited preparatory modality of instruction for immediate employment upon graduation. However, some employers do not perceive recent graduates of two-year technical programs to be fully prepared for the workforce, nor do they view graduates as capable of performing sophisticated tasks associated with mid-skill positions (Fuller & Raman, 2022). Community colleges offer critical fundamentals for the expansible degree of the future, which is why it is unfortunate that community colleges are often antagonistically perceived as inferior instruments of higher education compared to four-year institutions (Gauthier, 2020a). In contention, 25% of American households earning $100,000 or more are currently enrolled in community colleges, an

increase of 12% from five years ago (Helvey et al., 2021). As the attrition of workforce candidates is expanding, collegiate or institutional alignment with industry requirements addresses employer concerns by implementing program enhancements, internships, and other employment opportunities to address these concerns (Fuller & Raman, 2022). For this, students who enter a two-year technical program should expect to receive the necessary training as required from industry leaders, with the potential for additional industry-specific certifications while still enrolled.

A disconnect is evident in the mindful inquiry and enthusiasm to pursue a career in specific skilled trades and the completion of the programs designed to place students on a pathway toward employment and success. Although attention to Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs is gaining popularity among students, their parents, and communities (Michaels & Barone, 2020), this popularity has not always been the focus of federal legislation (Kim et al., 2021). By the same token, a significant number of undergraduate students are leaving their institutions short of obtaining any credentials or degree due to the perception that the degree does not yield an advantage in the labor markets and is not necessary for immediate and sustainable employment (Giani et al., 2020). Concurrently, the national unemployment rate reported at the end of February 2022 for individuals with some college credit or an associate degree was 3.8% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.-a). Henceforth, Hanson and Checked (2022) reported that residents of West Virginia are 5.9% less likely to drop out of college as compared to the average residents of the country. Hanson and Checked (2022) also indicated that residents of West Virginia are 21.1% less likely to attend college than the average national population. For the residents of rural West Virginia, indirect barriers to employment can be explored through the

accessibility to, and the affordability of, attending a technical college to receive the necessary skills required for most sustainable occupations.

Accessibility

The current landscape of educational technology in West Virginia has been shaped by the recent shift to online learning evoked by the global coronavirus pandemic. For this, underprepared educational institutions within the state embraced the need for remote learning and academic interaction through advancements designed to engage students at a higher level than previously used through traditional formats (Brock & Diwa, 2021; Ferris & Vesely, 2021). Although technological advancements in education were on the rise despite mandatory isolation protocols preceding the coronavirus pandemic, the need and reliance on technology in education have never been more dependent (Mayzlina, 2020). For primary and secondary education, the availability of technology during the transition from in-person to remote instruction presented many challenges (Wyse et al., 2020). Challenges both financially and physically impacted teachers and students alike (Durr et al., 2021). Online learning seemed to be the only alternative direction to maintain substantiative student learning and institutional engagement. Post-secondary and CTE colleges also had to prepare for interactive learning between students and faculty to ensure meeting active engagement standards.

Technical education requires a profound element of physical interaction with tangible training aids as part of regular curricular instruction; however, the sudden imposition of online learning demanded institutions to implement recent educational innovations as a surrogate to a once physical presence. Some of the more common and recent innovations, according to Heick (2020), include competency-based education, video streaming/flipped, classroom/eLearning trends, open curriculum, changing the nature of faculty, changing revenue sources for institution

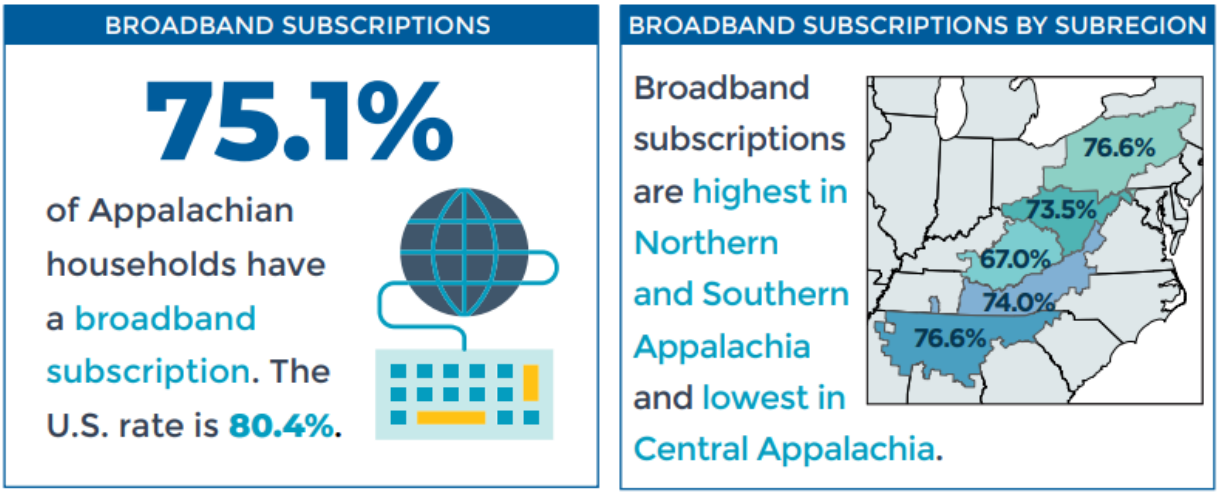
funding, online laboratory platforms, and digital textbooks. Among the various inclusions of educational initiatives, the simulated workplace aligns with West Virginia workforce requirements, including attendance policies, random drug testing, and professionalism, while creating an enhanced method of instructional delivery and creating a more engaged career and technical student (West Virginia Department of Education, 2022). With the numerous reasons educators have begun the process of disbanding traditional pen-and-paper methods of instruction, the integration of educational technology as a leading force behind these practical implementations has become more relevant in the wake of the global coronavirus pandemic (Kerr-Sims & Baker, 2021; Oliveira et al., 2021). However, rural West Virginians have struggled to surmount the uncontrollable barriers to gaining access to the Internet.

Some of the current issues surrounding accessibility to educational technology in West Virginia may not be representative of underachievement, lack of innovation, or an absence of personal computers but rather broadband challenges, whereby individuals living in rural areas cannot access institutional online learning platforms. Concerning e-learning platforms and remote access for student engagement, budget limitations or financial hardships for institutions and students will prevent access to remote education (Fletcher & Dumford, 2021). Maryville University (2021) retrieved data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and reported that only 54.8% of households around the globe had access to the Internet in 2019. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission (2020), only 75.1% of Appalachian households have a broadband internet subscription, compared to the 80.4% national rate, as depicted in Figure 3. Financial hardships and budget limitations aside, other contributing factors to inaccessibility to educational technology may include poor network infrastructure, a common challenge for rural areas around the globe (McDaniels, 2022). Moreover, Mayzlina (2020)

claimed that rural Americans could not access the Internet, utilize connectable devices, or exercise digital literacy, which are recurring factors and challenges within educational technology. For this, students who intend to focus on technical education as a pathway toward employment and, ultimately, job satisfaction, the inability to complete online portions of their college experience may postpone or prevent degree completion due to these refractory circumstances.

Figure 3

Data Snapshots on Appalachia: Computer and Broadband Access



Note. This depiction represents Appalachian broadband subscriptions in compared to the U.S. rate and Appalachian subscriptions by subregion, as reported in 2020. Appalachian Regional Commission (2020).

Additional challenges and issues facing the field of educational technology may represent the internal embrace or acceptance of advancements. The conscious judgment for administrators and educators to dismiss the incorporation of technology education within their curriculum creates several challenges to student learning and will bestow a disservice to students with digital learning styles and associated characteristics (Stackhouse et al., 2020; Syed et al., 2021).

Conversely, Catalano et al. (2021) found that only 20% of schools offered training for teachers transitioning to an online format. Therefore, for schools that are assiduous and plan to embrace and incorporate innovative learning tools into daily instruction, the shortage of professional development and training for teachers may delay the process of technology incorporation (Belt & Lowenthal, 2020). Students who expect to receive the intended effects of technology learning tools may find themselves lagging in this area due to the deficiency of teachers' knowledge of how to wield them (Edouard, 2023). Although the ambiguous nature of educational technology integration into higher education's technical programs yields legitimacy behind resistance or refusal to change, the plausible inclusion of such initiatives may also reflect the institution's budgetary constraints or network availability.

Understandably, the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the landscape of education, more specifically at community and technical colleges, as the push for an already growing trend in technological innovations is more imperative than ever (The Hunt Institute, 2021). This transformation is primarily evident in low enrollments due to significant capital requirements and the approach of "hands-on" experiential learning modalities (Schanzenbach & Turner, 2022). Sabates and Karki (2019) suggested that a deeper understanding of non-cognitive skills is necessary to promote socio-emotional development experiences for students, while some of the more pressing issues sequentially stemming from the pandemic include the anticipated categorical trends in social, technological, and economic balances (EDUCAUSE Horizon Report, 2021). Socially speaking, some aspects of these components include a defined future in remote working/learning, the widening digital divide, and issues surrounding mental health. From a technological perspective, the future trends in technical education initiated by the coronavirus pandemic will include the widespread adoption of hybrid learning models, online

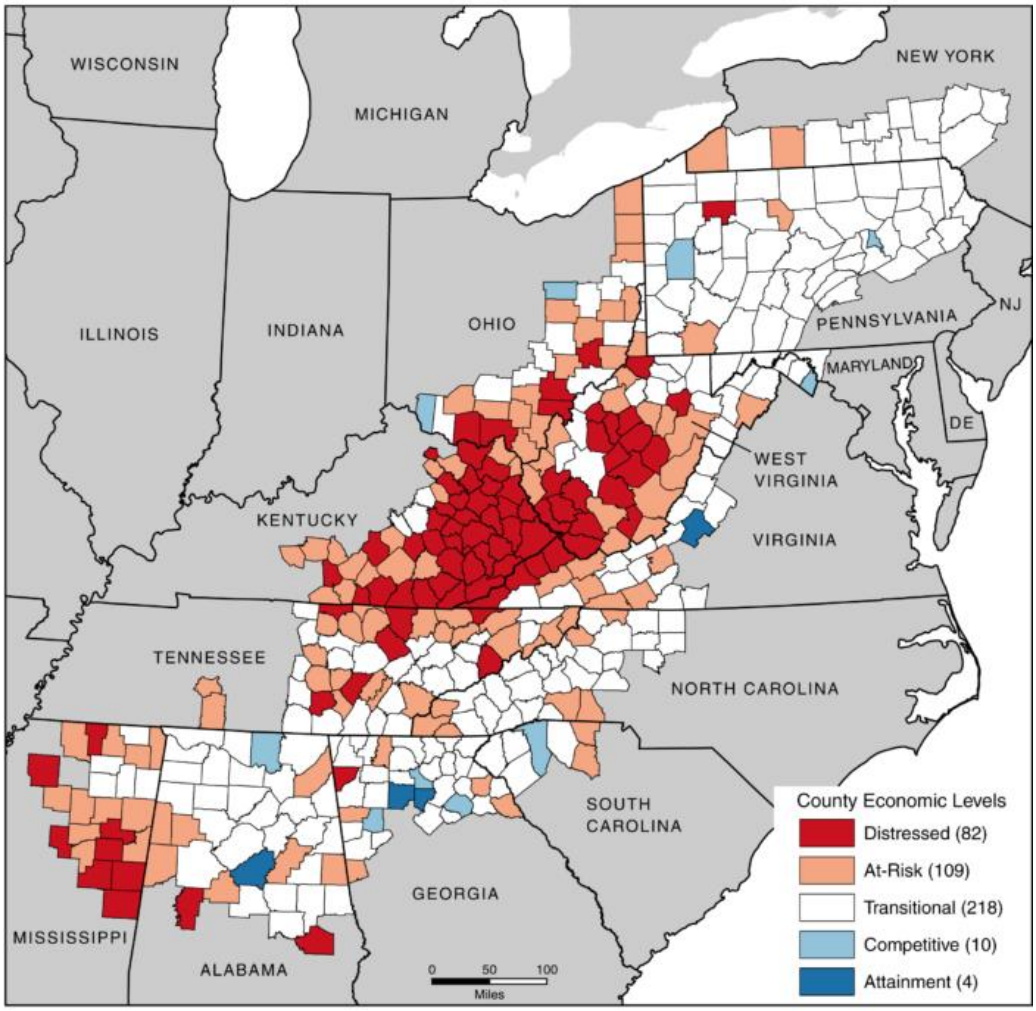
faculty development, and an increase in learning technologies for remote learning (Urban Institute, 2021). However, the more challenging future of economic trends may involve decreased educational funding, demand for new workforce skills, and the uncertainty of economic models.

Affordability

Students in rural areas face burdens and challenges that students from other demographic areas do not, such as a deficiency of resources for college advising, academic preparation, and affordability, making pursuing, enrolling, and attending college difficult on many accounts. Between 2006 and 2010, approximately one in every six Appalachian residents lived in poverty, almost two percentage points higher than the national average (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2020; PRB, n.d.). As of July 2022, West Virginia had a population estimation of 1,775,156, of which 16.8% of this approximation was classified as impoverished (U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts, n.d.-b). In Appalachia, the most severely distressed counties as of FY 2023 fall within eastern Kentucky and throughout mid-state and southern West Virginia, as represented in Figure 4. The term distressed is used to describe these counties as being the worst 10% of all U.S. counties (Klein, 2022), and notably, the distressed counties within West Virginia are also those with the highest job opening rates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). However, West Virginia is acclaimed as one of the lowest cost-of-living states in the U.S., with a rating of 78.1, which scores 20 points below the national average (Bestcolleges.com, 2022), and reported $85,434.2 million in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2021 (FRED, 2022). Financial inequities are common situational dilemmas, as disadvantaged or lower-income families do not have the means necessary to integrate allocations for education tuition and associated fees into monthly or annual budgets.

Figure 4

Economic Distress Levels in Appalachian Counties



Note. This image depicts Appalachian counties and area levels of economic distress in FY2023, determined by median family income and poverty. Appalachian Regional Commission (2022).

Although the coronavirus pandemic has created new obstacles to paying for college, at some point, colleges and universities will need to explore alternative options to sustain retention rather than tuition and other educational resource reductions exclusively. From an educational perspective, and according to communitycollegereview.com (2023), the average cost of tuition for two-year community colleges for West Virginia residents is $3,610, and $8,321 for out-of-

state students. However, The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (2020) disclosed that only 55% of recent high school graduates in West Virginia were enrolled in college as of the fall semester of 2017. Regardless of the decreased tuition rates for a two-year technical program, another reason to explore workforce attrition may include socio-economic status (SES) challenges and the inability to afford these already reduced tuition rates (Michaels & Barone, 2020). Due to the financial crisis associated with the coronavirus pandemic, Burt (2022) reported that 85% of families indicated the upcoming academic year would pose more of a challenge than the last, suggesting 17% will be forced to pay tuition with savings accounts, 45% will take out more student loans, and one-fourth of parents intend to take on student loans in their name for their children.

Significant factors contributing to the decline in workforce participation include economic hardships or other financial burdens preventing entry or completing two-year college programs (Wagner et al., 2021). Moreover, these financial inabilities form barriers to industry-related training obtained only through technical education, which may determine satisfaction or dissatisfaction in job placement, pending the completion or non-completion of a technical degree. Contentiously, these concepts create the theme of workforce candidate attrition, potentially originating from poverty-stricken regions, which would link the individual's ability or inability to obtain gainful employment due to financial hardships and subsequent cognitive behaviors (Gerards & Welters, 2022). Although the concept may spur backlash and criticism among communities, a suggested response to alleviate the drop-out rate among undergraduate students has been for institutions to limit college access for potential students who are most likely to drop out or not complete their intended programs (Giani et al., 2020). Although this approach may manipulate institutional completion rates, the backlash could be detrimental to an

institution's image, as unethical procedures and unfair segregation of income-based populations would continue to keep the underprivileged in a state of non-recovery, regardless of their exceptional work ethics and desires to succeed.

Employability

The anticipated outcome of individuals attending college is to secure employment in a specific discipline upon completion of their program, if not sooner, for this venture is to attain new skills to prepare students to enter the workforce. As the demand for skilled laborers is significantly increasing, so are the employer expectations for candidates who express interest in entering the workforce (Michaels & Barone, 2020). However, some employers express concern that the graduates of two-year technical colleges do not possess the necessary skills required to perform the demands of the jobs upon completion of the programs (Dyki et al., 2021; Okolie et al., 2019). On the other hand, the acumen of recent graduates, especially in higher education displays a sense of overconfidence in their employability skills upon graduation without the knowledge of employer perceptions that claim they do not (Hack-Polay, 2021). From this disconnect, the inability to secure employment and the unemployment rate among recent graduates reinforce the need for college institutions to develop relationships with industry leaders to develop curricular activities that guarantee these soft employability skills are introduced, reinforced, and assessed.

Two-year technical institutions must align their programmatic outcomes with employers' essential criteria and expectations to ensure the student experience is a seamless transition into the workforce. To accomplish these goals, the initiation of partnerships and collaboration with industry leaders in the form of advisory boards will assist educators in curriculum development and will provide these direct pathways toward employment to ensure job placement upon

completion of a technical degree (D'Amico et al., 2022; Okolie et al., 2019). Therefore, the primary focus of a two-year college system is to provide links to the community and to build and sustain relationships with industry leaders to accommodate the employability demands of the regions they serve (Atwell et al., 2022; Soliz et al., 2023). Such initiatives illustrate how job placement satisfaction among individuals in the workforce with a conferred degree may motivate current students to finish their degree from a technical college, ensuring that employment opportunities are attainable.

Institutional Alignment

One of the more promising initiatives to ensure employability is the collaborative inclusion of institutional apprenticeship programs with industry partners or Work-Based Learning (WBL) initiatives, which drive guided career pathways (Anderson & Keily, 2021). Following this process, Dougherty et al. (2021) suggested that students will have the opportunity to work in the field of their chosen profession and gain useful experience while still attaining college credits. Subsequently, this approach leads to a lower chance of contributing to the unemployment rate among college graduates actively seeking employment (Margaryan et al., 2022). The guided pathways initiative will provide valuable assistance for this specific group of students to ensure they are well advised, counseled, and fully prepared to make the most sagacious decisions concerning educational needs, which, in turn, will theoretically diminish institutional withdraws and non-attendance (Jenkins et al., 2022). Moreover, integrating guided pathways at scale requires program and curriculum mapping, aligning with university transfer programs and labor markets (Ambriz, 2019). Thus, students who choose to pursue additional education beyond that of a two-year technical degree benefit from the inclusion of this ministration, although approximately one-third of the national average follow through with these

transfer agreements (Schudde et al., 2021). Similar to guided pathways, career and technical pathways deliver value, options, and opportunities to students with a more hands-on mindset toward earning a degree in higher education (Blaney, 2022; Gyll, 2021). Therefore, when plans are developed early in the educational experience, students are more likely to take the time to categorize which courses will be most beneficial to their overarching goals, persevere through completion, and have overall satisfaction with their educational and financial decisions.

Clotilda (2019) defined institutional effectiveness as a systematic, documented, and explicit performance measurement process against the institutional mission in all respects of the organization. From the categorical institutional alignment of programmatic outcomes to industry expectations, the direct relationship between technical education and job satisfaction is generalized within pre-placement opportunities for students to experience their intended career pathway before fully committing to the field. Associate degree programs offered through two-year community and technical colleges have experienced the most growth as a preferred pathway to middle-skill jobs, per students' perception, and this is primarily due to the incorporation of internships embedded into the curriculum design (Decker, 2019; Grubbs, 2021). Thus, sustaining relationships and partnerships with industry leaders who are participative in these initiatives is key to overall student success and permanent job placement (Jagadesh Kumar, 2022). In turn, students will not only gain the instructional dissemination of course content through the rigors of academia, but also hands-on training while earning credit hours, wages, and real-life working conditions (Adams et al., 2022; Decker, 2019). Therefore, job placement satisfaction ratings would provide viable placement data concerning institutional effectiveness research, as students who finish a two-year technical degree will be linked directly to employment upon program completion.

Job Satisfaction

After two years of pandemic-related learning disruptions, recent graduates are navigating a more challenging job market than pre-2020, including inflation, as disoriented businesses struggle to fill open positions due to resignations, and layoffs. As graduates quickly discover, college locations influence labor market outcomes, and what was once a hope or ambition concerning ideal job placement has now left graduates accepting positions unrelated to their programs of study to make financial ends meet (Lysenko & Wang, 2023). On the other hand, according to economists, minimal wage offerings for skilled labor and the necessity to earn a salary to accommodate recent inflation are misaligned, as increasing the minimum wage requirement would hinder job opportunities for unskilled workers (Henderson, 2021; Neumark & Shirley, 2022). CBS Interactive (2020) reported that approximately 45% of 2020 graduates claim they were still searching for employment and expressed that recent college graduates have a far higher unemployment rate than seasoned workers.

According to a recent survey, one in five students who graduated in Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 are working in positions unrelated to their major and, more specifically, linked to the purpose of this study. This survey reported that 43% of graduates from two-year colleges had accepted positions they could have attained with a high school diploma, revealing that 63% of graduates from two-year technical colleges are unemployed nationally (Haller, 2023). Moreover, 28% of recent graduates are working in positions requiring only a high school diploma, and 6% are working in positions with no specified requirements (Haller, 2023). Circumstantially alluring to these reports, individuals entering the workforce may prudentially exhibit positive perceptions of job satisfaction by attaining employment without the leverage of a two-year degree.

Employee achievement is met under the assumption of the organization that most employees have a sincere desire to perform their jobs well, so the organization's responsibility is to put these employees in a position where their talents can be capitalized and set up for success. To accomplish this, the organization must set clear and attainable goals and standards for these positions while establishing an accord with these employees so that they understand what is expected of them (Bushi, 2021; Syptak et al., 1999). Concerning recognition, all levels of employment have individuals who want to be recognized for their achievements, so an organization may choose to acknowledge all accomplishments short of monumental status to ensure the work performed does not go unnoticed (Conteh & Yuan, 2022). By the same token, employees will express more motivation to perform their duties if charged with taking ownership of their work (Abdelwahed & Doghan, 2023). An organization giving employees the freedom to perform tasks and projects independently with little to no supervision allows employees to express and showcase their abilities without the potential distractions of constant oversight and direction, which is more detrimental to employees than beneficial (Hicks, 2021; Syptak et al., 1999). Other measures an organization may take to give employees a sense of satisfaction, appreciation, and worth is through the assignment of new titles that directly reflect their level of proficiency, as career success and job satisfaction are linked directly to the employees' life satisfaction (Choi & Nae, 2022). Such advancements are typically a forethought of aspirational employees who feel empowered to succeed through performance guidelines set forth by the organization, as promotional offerings could be linked to job satisfaction.

Certain factors in the workplace lead to job satisfaction among individuals who may perceive their employment as a positive or negative experience, leading to either employee retention or attrition. Moreover, personality traits will play a prominent role in overall

satisfaction, and most relevant to job placement satisfaction, graduates may perceive their desired employment working conditions or placement in different ways according to one of the six traits they possess (Prieto-Díez et al., 2022). For example, a graduate placed in an employment position with a social personality trait may quickly become dissatisfied with the job placement outcome if the job description entails little to no human interaction daily. Another example would include a graduate with a realistic personality trait, which includes the joy and satisfaction of working with objects or machinery (as most technically skilled trades do) and quickly realizing their trial period of employment or internship entailed working in a parts room primarily dealing with inventory and other associated office work. Therefore, the vocational choice theory serves as a key factor in the current study, as the perceptions of graduates concerning job satisfaction rely heavily on their personality characteristics.

Although hygiene issues may not directly reflect the sole source of job satisfaction, Herzberg et al., (1959) indicated that these issues must be addressed to create an atmosphere whereby motivation and employee satisfaction are possible. Increasing dissatisfaction with supervision and company policy may include the deliberate and meticulous selection and appointment of who will supervise, create, and enforce policy, as the organizational administration must realize that not all great employees make great supervisors. If employees with certain personalities and specific working conditions or expectancies are not met, the likelihood of them continuing their career with an employer will significantly decrease as other opportunities for meeting these needs may become more appealing (Rogers & Schinoff, 2022). For this, the working conditions of the environment employees are subject to will have a tremendous effect on their pride in themselves, and the output they produce (Uka & Prendi, 2021). Indicatively, such conditions of employment may be among the contributing factors that

two-year technical graduates consider toward their overall perception of degree value and, ultimately job satisfaction.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the perceived degree value among graduates from a West Virginia two-year technical college and how the value was perceived by regional employers when identifying employable candidates. For this, the two-factor theory was chosen as a basis for the research on job placement satisfaction amongst two-year technical school graduates due to the correlation between employability, hygiene issues, motivators, and the drive to meet industry requirements, presumably achieved through technical degrees. Identifying the dissatisfaction outside of the hygiene issues mentioned in Herzberg's two-factor theory, the theory of vocational choice was also explored, as this theory involves personal characteristics, preferences, and how they determine the working atmosphere and similar personalities of colleagues an individual will seek to surround themselves with, which would lead to either satisfactory or unsatisfactory job satisfaction. At this stage in the research, job satisfaction was generally defined as the perceived value of the associate degree awarded.

Historically, employment within a specific trade or discipline required at least a year or two of experience in the field, as employers are searching for potential employees with more than core knowledge of a trade or discipline. One of the more promising initiatives to ensure employability is including institutional apprenticeship programs through guided and career pathways. Two-year technical institutions must ensure their programs align with these criteria and expectations, and to accomplish these goals, the initiative of partnerships with industry leaders in the form of advisory boards to assist in the curriculum development will provide direct pathways of employment to ensure job placement upon completion of a technical degree. Having

a sustaining relationship and partnership with industry leaders who are participative in these initiatives is vital to overall student success and permanent job placement, as the students will gain instruction through lectures and hands-on training while earning credit hours, wages, and real-life working conditions. Workforce West Virginia is an organized resource center catering to workforce development and is designed to serve those actively searching for employment and assist local businesses and industry partners in searching for and hiring skilled workers for their industry.

The current landscape of educational technology in West Virginia embraces the need for remote learning and academic interaction through advancements designed to engage students at a higher level than previously used through traditional formats. Students in rural areas face burdens and challenges that students from other demographic areas do not, such as a lack of resources for college advising, academic preparation, and affordability, which makes the process of pursuing, enrolling, and attending college complex on many accounts. Residents of West Virginia who do not relocate out of state for employment opportunities may have a much different perspective on job satisfaction compared to those who consciously decide to follow the jobs as they slowly leave the state. Regardless of the geographic region, students must gain the required knowledge to prepare them for employment, and employers must be ready to accept the new wave of workforce inductees.

A gap in the literature exists between students who complete a two-year technical degree and job placement satisfaction among these graduates as they identify whether the earned degree offered leverage for employment in their specific field of study. As graduates are quickly finding out, the job market has shifted and what was once a hope or ambition concerning ideal job placement has now left these graduates accepting positions unrelated to their programs of study

to make financial ends meet. Therefore, a significant source of frustration and disgruntlement can lie within administrative policies, especially if the policies are unclear or if only select employees are required to follow them. By examining this job placement satisfaction, administrators may begin to work with industry leaders to develop more efficient and effective means of instruction to accommodate the needs and demands of the workforce industry. For this, subsequent action may need to include the continuous development of more effective technical education programs for two-year students to secure a financially sustainable future.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to gain an in-depth understanding of how graduates of Zion Mountain Institute of Technology perceive the value of their two-year technical degrees, as it relates to job satisfaction. At this stage in the research, the perceived value of the associate degree awarded will be generally defined as job satisfaction. That is, to determine if the time and efforts spent toward earning a degree provided leverage toward employability and job satisfaction. This chapter begins with identifying the research design and questions, followed by the intended site and participants of the study. Researcher positionality and interpretive framework are discussed, along with philosophical assumptions, the researcher's role, procedures, and permissions, the data collection plan, and a final section on trustworthiness.

Research Design

Job satisfaction could conceivably be determined through quantitative data collected; however, to capture emotional elucidations of how and why individuals appraise job satisfaction through their interpretations of degree value in relation to job placement, a qualitative methodological approach is the appropriate exertion for this study. Phenomenology attempts to understand authentic experiences as they happen through description and analysis (Simmons & Benson, 2013). Phenomenology recounts an ordinary meaning for several individuals who experienced a concept, to minimize the experiences of individuals with a phenomenon to describe universal essences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As I intended to understand the perceived degree value, a phenomenological methodology best served the interests of the study due to the presumably varied interpretations of the value of the degree earned at Zion Mountain Institute of

Technology regarding job satisfaction. More specifically, this qualitative research was centered on hermeneutic phenomenology, whereby research is described as oriented toward lived experiences and interpreting the texts of life as hermeneutics and is used for researchers with exact or similar life experiences (Van Manen, 2014). Having graduated from a technical college, my ontological position emulated a perspective of multiple realities to understand the potential for various subject dispositions. In the case of determining job satisfaction, individual cognition determines how a participant expresses their interpretation of reality differently than other subjects with similar life experiences.

Research Questions

The following research questions have been developed following an extensive review of the associated literature, revealing an informational gap therein for the demographic location where the study was administered. Each question is directly linked to both the problem and purpose statements to understand student, employer, and institutional involvement with the phenomenon of graduate unemployment, underemployment, and a horizontal skills mismatch.

Central Research Question

How do students who graduate with a two-year degree from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology perceive its value when searching for and attaining employment?

Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of two-year technical school graduates with job placement upon successful completion of their program?

Sub-Question Two

What are the experiences of students' job placement opportunities while enrolled in their career-driven program?

Sub-Question Three

How do employers perceive students who have completed a two-year technical degree in terms of their candidacy for employment or promotions within their chosen industry?

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study was Zion Mountain Institute of Technology, located in a southeastern state in the United States. The population sample of participants consisted of two-year technical school graduates, whether employed in their field of study or not, to gain perspective on the usefulness and practicality of the degree they earned in relation to job placement and satisfaction. Additionally, a focus group consisting of the same participants contributed to the investigation into employer perspectives concerning the interest, usefulness, and practicality of the degree earned related to employment candidacy. Therefore, the justification for this site and the specified participants was to understand how graduates of this technical college in a southeastern state in the United States view employment opportunities after completing a two-year degree.

Setting

Community and technical college systems are designed to prepare students for employment in their desired field of study (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The setting for this qualitative study was chosen due to the challenges with graduates attaining employment relevant to their chosen field and will be focused on a two-year technical college located in rural West Virginia. The population estimate for this region is 72,882 comprising 88.6% White, 8.1% Black, and 3.3% Other; of which, 21.2% persons are under 18 years, 21.5% persons 65 years and older, 49.5% female, a median household income of $43,150, and 22.0% of persons in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts, n.d.-a). Although this demographic location may be

experiencing economic imbalances, the focus is drawn to the links connecting institutions of higher education and the buy-in of local employers with students having clear employment pathways established therein. The chosen institution has a typical educational hierarchy as a base for its organizational structure managed by a board of governors. Whereby faculty are led by college administrators such as deans, who report to a vice president, and who report to the college president.

Participants

The sample size was adequate for the phenomenon studied to capture the depth, diversity, and nuances of the issues studied to demonstrate content validity that meets qualitative research's ontological and epistemological foundations (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Therefore, participants in this study consist of 10 graduates from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology who were or were not employed in their field of study to collect data on perceived degree value. The current student population of the college is approximately 1,042, comprising 32% male and 68% female students, with a college graduation rate of 18%. Of the 1,042 total enrollments, 84% are White, 5% are Black, and 11% are classified as other (Profiles of USA Community Colleges, n.d.). Since community and technical colleges typically see a diversification of students, the age range of the student population was between 20 and 60 years old. This wide range of demographic possibilities created a more rounded approach that provided input from individuals with varying backgrounds and characteristics and to not focus primarily on one specific group, such as race, sex, or ethnicity.

Recruitment Plan

As this study sought to understand a perceived degree value, the sample pool of this study consisted of graduates from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology who attained a two-year

associate degree, whether they were working in their chosen field of study or not. The intended sample size consisted of 10 participants for each of the data collection methodologies, although the focus group data collection process was broken into two groups with five participants for each group. The sampling types used in this research study combined criterion strategies and maximum variation. First, the criterion strategy is useful for quality assurance and seeks cases that meet a criterion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This strategy was used to ensure all participants selected were Zion Mountain Institute of Technology graduates. To identify these prospective participants, the institution's student contact data was reviewed to eliminate all non-graduates and focus on those who attained the academic credentials necessary to satisfy the graduate requirements for this study within the past five years. Next, the maximum variation strategy documents diverse variations of individuals or sites based on specific characteristics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, the participants were randomly selected by choosing willing graduate participants from each of the most popular technical programs offered by the college until the intended sample size was satisfied. This method allowed me to collect data from a wide perspective range to investigate and understand degree value variation in employment opportunities among several programmatic disciplines.

Researcher's Positionality

One of the more influential and motivational aspects of this research was the practicality and the heightened level of involvement and response I anticipated receiving since I currently work in the field I studied. As a graduate of a two-year technical school, I found an interest in determining the job placement satisfaction of students who leave a two-year technical school designed to provide a career pathway and, if later, become employed in the field of their primary studies. Once I completed all the requirements to graduate from a technical program, the

credential I received was only a diploma and not an associate degree. However, after completing this training, I moved to a big city and was immediately employed. In fact, I had several offers to select from, but this was a large city where the demand for skilled workers was high before the recession of 2007. It was not until a few years later that I decided to return to the institution to complete the general education requirements to receive the two-year degree online. Moreover, the degree awarded opened other doors of opportunity for me, such as becoming eligible for employment as an instructor for an industry-specific trade at a local community and technical college.

Interpretive Framework

When reviewing the interpretive frameworks necessary for this subject, I found that the framework most closely aligned with my subject of study is social constructivism. Creswell and Poth (2018) define the social constructivism framework as the development of subjective meanings of individual experiences in which individuals seek an understanding of the world in which they live and work. Social constructivism profoundly challenges conventional approaches, although the meanings are varied among individuals, making it difficult to be universally precise (Hay, 2016). Open-ended interview questions were effectuated by employing this framework, and as a constructive researcher, I focused on these specific contexts to understand the cultural and historical circumstances leading to the participants' perceptions of reality. Furthermore, I interpreted my findings, shaped by the strong relationship between my background and the pool of subjects I investigated.

Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions are the theoretical framework a researcher uses to collect, analyze, and interpret data that establishes the foundation for concluding a study. Creswell and

Poth (2018) indicated that whether the researcher is aware or not, certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions are integrated into the research, and instilled throughout various educational experiences. Furthermore, some difficulty may arise with the awareness of these assumptions and determining whether they will become actively incorporated into qualitative research studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Nonetheless, the philosophical assumptions integrated into research studies will inform the researcher of a theory selection that will, in turn, guide the research. The following assumptions account for my position on the nature of being, the justification of knowledge, and the extent of my values brought into this study.

Ontological Assumption

Ontological assumptions indicate the locale of researcher positionality concerning the nature of reality, such as a single reality or definite understanding of the world or multiple realities or truths that exist among individuals with broader philosophical comprehensions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, Heidegger (1962) described reality as an ontological term in which one has related to entities within the world, as reality, existence, or being in the world can be defined by rationalistic factors of gnostic or esoteric knowledge (Van Manen, 2014). I have included social constructivism as the interpretive framework for my research, as opposed to other frameworks that may result in the confirmation of a single or fixed measurable reality. I intended to examine this object of inquiry because I understand multiple realities exist, which are constructed and perceived through the lived experiences and interactions of others in the physical, not spiritual, world.

Conflict exists when deviating from Christian beliefs, as Jesus stated in the book of John, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (New International Bible, 1973/2011, John 14:6). This belief system is centered on a fixed reality with

no credible acceptance of multiple alternatives. However, outside of the Christian faith, a universal truth is in contention. For example, what is known as truth within one religion or country may be considered false in another, what is true today may become untrue in another generation, and the truth of today may be reversed by tomorrow's judgment (Pike, 2006). For this, I did not dismiss the idea and existence of multiple realities or perceptions of others due to economic circumstances and social acceptance surrounding the participant's experiences of this study or those participating in similar future studies concerning job satisfaction and degree value. For example, individuals who are mistreated or are denied employment because of the color of their skin or sexual orientation will experience a contrasted reality than those who are more communally accepted through social constructions.

Embracing social constructivism, one of my goals was to understand the world in which the subjects of this study live and work, which have likely been influenced by historical, cultural, and religious backgrounds as the key components that shaped their interpretations of reality. Additionally, individual cognition of job satisfaction or the value of a two-year degree may determine how participants interpret reality differently than other subjects with similar life experiences. With this framework, I expected to potentially display a parallelism to participants' interpretations and constructions of meaning through their lived accounts. Therefore, my ontological position emulated a perspective of multiple realities relating to individual perceptions to understand the potential for various subject dispositions, as they were anticipated to have developed from a socially constructed origination.

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemological beliefs, or how reality is known, are the basis for qualitative research (Van Manen, 2014) and will vary depending on the interpretive framework selected. These

beliefs may include the assumption that reality is an approximation constructed through research and statistics, while other beliefs include holding to multiple pathways for knowledge and understanding reflecting of deductive and inductive evidence (Costa, 2014). Comparing social constructivism to the associated philosophical beliefs, Creswell and Poth (2018) specifying the epistemological belief alignment will suggest that reality is constructed between the researcher and participants, shaped by individual experiences. Per these individual experiences, a researcher must determine an objective or subjective stance. An example of objectivism, as it pertains to my research, would include an individual(s) who creates a plan or action to sustain happiness for the rest of their life through accepting an occupation in their field of study. However, my intended epistemological position would more closely align with subjectivism, which is the acknowledgment that the participant's mental activity is the sole source and unquestionable fact of their experience and satisfaction rather than a communal or universal and objective truth.

Axiological Assumption

Creswell and Poth (2018) conveyed that axiological beliefs involve the role of values the researcher and participants view as having through their lived experiences and truths. Through the variance of interpretive frameworks, these beliefs and the intended outcomes of the study will differ. Some of the differences in axiological beliefs include removing or controlling researcher biases, which are not included in a study; values may be problematized and interrogated, and values may be discussed to reflect researcher and participant views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this, my axiological assumption aligns with social constructivism, as my experiences as a two-year technical school graduate determined my perceived degree value through experiences within a social construct. What one participant may view as holding value may not produce the same level of understanding and acceptance to another, which reconfirms

the subjective nature of my research through negotiations among participants.

Researcher's Role

Although the participant list for this study was assigned pseudonyms, the intention was to obtain a selection of participants with whom the researcher has no prior engagements and who served as the human instrument for data collection. Additionally, I collaborated with other administrators from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology in determining the best approach for random selection from the various programs within the institution. The removal of biases and assumptions I may have as the researcher for this study was critical; however, I have experienced the same phenomenon, which may lead the readers to assume some may exist. On the contrary, my experience was 16 years ago, so the dynamics of this phenomenon in its current state and the implications of this experience would seem irrelevant due to changes and fluctuations in employment and economic development.

Procedures

The necessary steps to increase the validity and credibility of the research findings of this study through triangulation were achieved through individual interviews, focus groups, and a letter-writing assignment. Triangulation was achieved from personal interviews through an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perspectives, and insights. By conducting interviews with a diverse range of participants, triangulation was also achieved by clarifying ambiguous or complex responses obtained from other data sources. Triangulation was achieved from focus groups by revealing shared experiences, conflicting opinions, and consensus-building processes among participants, which affiliated individuals with varying backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints. This diversity of perspectives led to a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic by generating new ideas or insights that may not have

emerged through individual interviews or the letter-writing assignment by creating a setting that stimulated collective brainstorming and creativity. Triangulation can be achieved through letter-writing exercises by extracting information about patterns, trends, and relationships. Letter-writing exercises offer the advantage of engaging participants in a unique and personalized manner, fostering a deeper connection and understanding of individual perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allows for a more intimate exploration of thoughts, experiences, and opinions, potentially uncovering nuanced insights. Results obtained from letter-writing exercises can serve as a valuable complement to qualitative findings garnered from personal interviews and focus groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By intertwining these methods, I strengthened the credibility and depth of the research findings, creating a comprehensive and multi-dimensional understanding of the subject matter.

These steps included site permissions by contacting the intended institution for this study and a recruitment plan, which involved the review of institutional student contact data. The methods for data collection and data analysis planning are discussed, as justification for such methods to align with the research questions and the problem statement. Additionally, securing the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was completed before the data collection commenced. This ethical clearance ensured that the study met the required ethical standards and safeguarded the rights and well-being of the participants throughout the research process.

Data Collection Plan

The types of data collection appropriate for the hermeneutic phenomenological design of this study included the implementation of personal communications and conversational interviews. A series of in-person semi-structured interviews was the primary method for data retrieval in this study, although other methods were used for alternative types of data collection.

These additional means of the collection entailed the inclusion of a focus group with these same graduates, broken into two groups and separate sessions, and a letter-writing exercise for graduates that accommodated participants' situations, availability, and flexibility. With at least three data collection methods, I received variances of individual experiences expressed through a qualitative process to understand perspective meaning through well-developed themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Individual Interviews

Creswell and Poth (2018) identified interviews as a central role in data collection, so as a primary source of data collection, individual interviews were conducted to retrieve experiences on the phenomenon of this study (see Table 1). In-depth and in-person interviews provided the opportunity to record verbal accounts and to obtain a more intimate experience through body language and mannerisms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, due to individual availability, the subjects were given the option to participate in these interviews remotely through communication platforms, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams Meetings. All participants were either contacted by phone or email to schedule an interview at their most convenient time and in anticipation, it was communicated that they would last approximately one hour per interview. Additionally, transcriptions of the recorded interview through software such as Descript, Fathom, or Vowel will allow for ease of written interpretation, as the themes developed from all interviews will most likely derive from these verbal data points. Individual interviews also served as a reporting tool for how the phenomenon was experienced through the significant statements of the participants examined from the discussion and the creation and development of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 1

Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Hello, and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Today we will discuss the value of a two-year technical degree, job placement satisfaction, and your experiences obtaining gainful employment in your chosen field of study. Please describe your educational background and current career position. CRQ
2. Describe your challenges when seeking employment while enrolled in your two-year technical degree. SQ2
3. Describe successful career pathway practices you use when applying for employment in your chosen field of study. SQ2
4. What professional development experiences have you had that prepared you to work within this industry outside of your educational foundation? SQ2
5. What other additions would you like to include in our discussion of your experiences with job placement opportunities that we have not discussed? CRQ
6. Describe your challenges when seeking employment upon completion of your two-year technical degree. SQ1
7. Describe successful practices you use when seeking employment in your chosen field of study upon completing your two-year technical degree. SQ1
8. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with obtaining employment upon completion of your two-year degree? CRQ
9. Describe your challenges when working in your current position of employment. SQ3
10. Describe successful practices you use when working in your current position to adapt to the atmosphere of your current employer. SQ3

11. What professional development experiences have you been offered at your current place of employment that prepared you to continue working in this field or one you aspire to follow? SQ3
12. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with overall job satisfaction? CRQ

Herzberg et al. (1959) developed the two-factor theory based on two interview questions, which led to the interpretation that there are two dimensions to job satisfaction, which include hygiene issues (dissatisfiers) and motivators (satisfiers). The theory of vocational choice predicts the more parallel the levels between the individual and the characteristics of the occupational standards, the more likely the individual will perceive their career-related outcomes as positive and motivating events, such as satisfaction and achievement (Holland, 1959). The theory of vocational choice is parallel to the two-factor theory in that individuals will channel their personality characteristics into determining job satisfaction, which may or may not align with their current position of employment. To tie these two theories to the topic of the study and consideration of the positionality of the researcher's lived experience, each interview question was directly linked to either the central research question or any of the sub-questions listed within this chapter.

Although Barnow et al. (2021) described technical education as a more viable option for individuals who are not destined for a four-year university, Hack-Polay (2021) claimed the efficacy of knowledge retained from technical education is disproportionately inadequate compared to industry expectations. The data collected from interview questions one, eight, and twelve addressed the central research question of this study, which directly reflects the perceptions of degree value and the experiences graduates face concerning employment

opportunities in their search to use their academic credentials. Even though the examined literature provides legitimacy in the employer's perspective that technical education is subpar to industry standards, this evidence is a median report and therefore does not examine the specific geographic area and economic circumstances where this study will be conducted, exposing a literary gap.

The data collected from interview questions six and seven addressed sub-research question one, which examines the experiences of graduate employment upon completion of a two-year technical program. Due to recent economic transitions, Appalachia is now experiencing an abundance of displaced workers, poverty, opioid addiction, and social unrest, as businesses may be pushed or persuaded away from the region to pursue opportunities in other states where the economic outlook is a more viable option (Badger, 2021; Marberry & Werner, 2022; Watson et al., 2023). In contrast, de Boer and Bordoli (2022) and Leslie et al. (2021) suggested that some labor shortages may respond to the lack of work ethics in the newest generation to enter the workforce. Although the examination of related literature provides generalized variances of opinions on the current labor shortage, a literary gap still exists, as this study's specific site and region are unexplored.

Sub-research question two was addressed through the data collected from interview questions two, three, and four, reflecting graduate experiences with job placement opportunities while still a student. To satisfy student expectations of direct pathways toward employment, Ertelt et al. (2021) claimed that internships or apprenticeship initiatives embedded into technical programs serve as motivators, likely increasing interest and participation. Additionally, D'Amico et al. (2022) and Okolie et al. (2019) indicated that such initiatives must be included through collaborations between educational institutions and industry leaders to provide a more

customized curricular experience. While the review of related literature provides merit in such initiatives and collaborations, a literary gap exists due to the absence of such participation and collaboration for the site and region of this study.

The data collected from interview questions nine, ten, and eleven addressed sub-research question three, which examines how employers recognize graduates for holding a specialized degree in their chosen profession. Milovanska-Farrington (2023) indicated that individuals proceed with employment in a profession that highlights their key attributes, characteristics, and skills. Edenfield and McBrayer (2021) and Holzer and Xu (2021) claimed that pursuing technical education for individuals not destined for a four-year university would eliminate the uncertainty of employment status upon degree completion. However, if employers do not perceive a value, or offer recognition in the two-year degree, students are less likely to complete these programs, further adding to the statistical attrition of skilled labor shortages.

Focus Groups

In tandem with the individual interview data collection approach, focus group sessions offer a dynamic and complementary method for gathering information within an open and casual setting. While individual interviews can sometimes place participants in the position of immediate response, with limited time for reflection, the focus group sessions provided a unique opportunity for triangulation. Through group discussions centered around similar questions (see Table 2), participants openly shared their perspectives and experiences. Triangulation, facilitated by multiple viewpoints within the group, can enhance the validity and reliability of the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, focus group settings are conducive to member-checking, a valuable process for data validation, as participants will have the opportunity to discuss and confirm their interpretations and insights collectively. This

iterative approach allowed for validating emerging themes and ensured that the analysis accurately represented the participants' views.

The inclusive nature of focus groups accommodated various communication styles and encouraged participants to thoroughly ponder the questions before sharing their responses with the group. Recognizing the diverse needs and availability of participants, in-person and virtual attendance options for focus group sessions were offered. This flexibility ensured that participants could engage comfortably, maintaining their focus and concentration throughout the discussion. By leveraging the benefits of triangulation and member-checking, I aimed to enrich the depth and authenticity of the data collected, contributing to a robust and comprehensive study.

Table 2

Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

1. Hello everyone and thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. Today, we will discuss your perceptions of the value of a two-year technical degree, employee job satisfaction, and your experiences with attaining and retaining employment in your respective fields. Please describe how you see the current state of demand concerning the talent required to sustain businesses in your geographic location. SQ1
2. What professional development opportunities does your company offer that either entices prospective employees to apply for employment or advances the skills that prepare them to continue working in this field? SQ3
3. How do you anticipate employer interpretations of the value of a two-year technical degree when identifying prospective candidates for employment? SQ3
4. What are your experiences with basic employability imperatives, such as existing

knowledge or experience or other industry-specific exigencies necessary before applicants are considered for employment? SQ1

5. Describe your interpretations of the importance of collaborations between regional employers and two-year technical institutions to ensure their curriculum directly reflects basic industry standards required for employment consideration. SQ2
6. Describe your experiences with being provided employment opportunities or a career pathway as a student who was enrolled in a two-year technical degree program. SQ2
7. Describe specific barriers or challenges in seeking employment while enrolled in a two-year technical degree program. SQ2
8. Describe specific barriers or challenges in securing employment upon completing a two-year technical degree. SQ1
9. How would you describe students who graduate with a two-year technical degree being recognized, concerning employment or promotion-eligible by their companies for holding a degree in their chosen profession? SQ3
10. How would you describe your experiences as graduate employees concerning overall job satisfaction with your company? CRQ

These questions were included to investigate further personal motives and influences culminating in the actions taken toward attaining a desired position or status. The motivational inquiry of these questions has a strong relationship with the study's theoretical framework that addresses both the two-factor theory (Herzberg et al., 1959), and the theory of vocational choice (Holland, 1959). Additionally, these questions were used for participants to describe their experiences and circumstances with securing employment, both as a student and after graduation, which has a strong relationship with the problem statement of this study. Ultimately, job

satisfaction, or the degree's perceived value, is addressed in question ten which is directly linked to the central research question.

Letter-Writing

Upon conclusion of this study, participants were requested to compose and submit a concise 400-word letter that concentrates on advising their younger selves on how to secure employment in their chosen field of study. This guidance encouraged reflection on their own experiences, lessons learned, and valuable insights gained throughout their academic and professional journey. Participants were encouraged to share practical advice, tips, and strategies that they believed would have been beneficial for them to know earlier in their careers. Participants were prompted to consider addressing specific challenges they faced and the skills and qualities that proved essential in the job search process. This letter was recommended to be substantive and offer meaningful insights to help guide and inspire others on their path to securing employment in their field of study. Participants were prompted to take the time to craft a thoughtful and comprehensive message with sincerity and generosity that serves as a valuable resource for those embarking on their journey in this field, as their personal experiences and insights have the potential to make a significant impact on others' career pursuits.

Data Analysis

While a researcher's understanding of the data collected becomes augmented through several readings and related literature, the analytical approach for hermeneutic phenomenology will involve a circular process, by which material is synthesized and themes are developed. In synthesizing the gathered data, the study drew upon the principles outlined in van Manen (2014). Van Manen's (2014) approach emphasizes the significance of uncovering the lived experiences of individuals and delving into the deeper layers of meaning within those experiences. The data

synthesis process followed van Manen's guidance in utilizing meaning-giving methods to explore the perceptions and experiences of two-year technical school graduates from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology. This approach aimed to unravel the nuanced ways these graduates perceive the value of their degrees and how they are recognized by regional employers when assessing potential candidates.

Van Manen's (2014) framework encourages a profound exploration of the collected data, ensuring that the essence of participants' experiences is authentically captured. Through a phenomenological lens, this study transcended surface-level descriptions and tapped into the underlying structures of meaning that shape these graduates' views on employability and job satisfaction. Moreover, van Manen's (2014) perspective underscores the importance of engaging in reflective writing throughout the research process, as this reflective aspect enhances the researcher's understanding of the data and facilitates the development of a comprehensive narrative that conveys the richness of participants' experiences. Therefore, this data synthesis adhered to the principles of phenomenological research while aiming to provide a holistic and insightful exploration of the perceived degree value among two-year technical school graduates and its significance in the context of regional employment dynamics.

Given the amalgamated nature of participants and the researcher within hermeneutical phenomenology, it was essential to concurrently analyze, synthesize, and archive the collected data alongside the researcher's personal accounts, opinions, interpretations, and perceptions of the phenomenon (Oerther, 2020). A multifaceted approach was employed to initiate the synthesis of the collected data. First, each data collection method underwent an independent analysis, and subsequently, these findings were collectively configured and organized within NVivo. This methodological approach enables nuanced comparisons, including the identification of

overarching themes, exploration of participant backgrounds, and the creation of coded excerpts that encompass relevant data points pertaining to the central focus of the study. This concurrent synthesis process facilitated the cohesive generation of the data into a unified presentation, highlighting a cohesive set of themes that emerged from the multifaceted data sources.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis for individual interviews was conducted with meticulous precision. Transcription software, MSTeams, was instrumental in capturing and preserving personal communication sessions. Additionally, video recordings were made to facilitate a comprehensive review of body language cues. A thorough familiarization process preceded the analysis, laying the foundation for subsequent coding. Code words were strategically employed to encapsulate the essence of each sentence or relevant portions, serving as building blocks for theme development (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This synthesis of interview notes complemented this process. Intermediate codes were meticulously crafted from the transcribed data, subsequently coalescing into well-defined themes. Following ethical guidelines, confidentiality and data security were upheld with the utmost care, aligning with appropriate measures, as all data collection materials will be securely stored and subsequently destroyed after a three-year retention period (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis plan for the focus group sessions mirrored the rigor employed in individual interviews. It is essential to underscore that, unlike personal interviews and letter-writing focused on the insights of recent graduates, the focus group sessions were comprised of a consistent group of 10 participants, which was broken into two groups of five participants each. This deliberate composition aimed to comprehensively understand the value associated with a

two-year degree from a collective perspective. The group dynamics were expected to foster shared responses, unveiling valuable insights uniquely attainable within this context. To effectively analyze the focus group data, audio and video equipment was employed. The analysis process aligned with the structure delineated in the individual interview analysis plan. This methodical approach facilitated the elucidation of participants' perspectives through the development of intermediate codes and group intermediate codes.

Trustworthiness

Gunawan (2015) suggested that many qualitative researchers neglect to provide adequate descriptions in their research concerning assumptions, methods, and more specifically, data analysis. Creswell and Poth (2018) view validation as an evolving construct whereby a broad understanding of traditional and contemporary perspectives is essential for informing researchers and readers of qualitative research. Unfortunately, biased researchers or inadequate reference material will provide subjective results and more of an opinion or assumption on the topic or phenomenon rather than an objective perspective. Therefore, researchers must consider techniques such as member-checking, triangulation, systematic planning and coding, and detailed transcriptions to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the qualitative research study (Gunawan, 2015).

Credibility

The measurement of confidence in the truth value of a qualitative study and whether the findings are accurately depicted is classified as the credibility of the research and is analogous to its internal validity (Connelly, 2016). The acceptability of these findings to others will rely heavily on solid truths, whereby the researcher has based information from, as well as the credibility of the researcher that they may hold no biases toward the content of the research,

which would otherwise compromise the integrity thereof (Kline, 2008). To establish credibility, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested techniques used will include: (a) triangulation; (b) prolonged engagement with data; (c) persistent observation; (d) negative case analysis; (e) peer debriefing; (f) member-checking; and referential adequacy. Therefore, the researcher intended to achieve credibility through the triangulation of data collection methods, peer debriefing, and member-checking.

Transferability

Generalizing the results or findings of the study will determine its transferability. Therefore, these results may be presented to have alternative applicability within other contexts, settings, and circumstances (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To demonstrate the transferability of qualitative research, the researcher provided rich descriptions and specific examples of the study participants, adequate details of the site, and the methods and procedures used to collect the data throughout the research study process and evaluation (Connelly, 2016).

Dependability

The consistency and reliability of the research results will be measured and demonstrated through dependability with the understanding that the stability of conditions depends on the nature of the study (Connelly, 2016). To initiate dependability, the researcher tracked the precise methods used for data collection as well as the analysis and interpretation, whereby the findings are consistent and can be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, the researcher provided substantial evidence of contextual information on each element for theoretical replication of the study by other researchers who chose to pursue research on the subject or the phenomenon.

Confirmability

One of the foremost actions of a researcher is to ensure that qualitative research is unbiased, neutral, and uninfluenced by the internal assumptions of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve confirmability, the researcher produced objectivity in the reflected information collected from the participants rather than relying on assumptions and opinions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To demonstrate confirmability, the researcher applied techniques, such as detailed steps of data analysis through an audit trail to confirm that the study findings and results were not influenced by the conscious or unconscious biases of the researcher and accurately portrayed the responses of every participant (Connelly, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

Appropriate planning by a researcher during the process of developing a qualitative study pertaining to ethical considerations must be addressed and prepared before these issues surface throughout the conduction of the full study. Likewise, Creswell and Poth (2018) indicated that ethical considerations and issues arise throughout several phases of the qualitative study process, and researchers must be fully prepared to address these concerns as they surface. One of the first considerations involved site approval, whereby the researcher selected a site without a vested interest in the study outcome, and the appropriate local approvals, with the cooperation of a gatekeeper, who assisted in obtaining permissions. Another consideration involves the consent of subjects and their willingness to participate. For this, the researcher refrained from the pressure on participants to sign participant and site consent forms by assuring the subjects they were issued a pseudonym, their participation was completely voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at their discretion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, all data collection materials will be stored using appropriate security measures, where they will remain for a maximum of three years (American Psychological Association, 2020). Benefits to the

participants may include either a tangible or emotional reward for participation, while some risks to participation may include the exploitation of personal information that will harm participants in the present or future. To alleviate these risk concerns, the researcher will continue to keep all participant information confidential, pseudonyms were used, and all data collected will remain secure.

Permissions

This research study, in its current state, was granted permission for site access. The researcher followed the necessary steps toward gaining access and permissions through the gatekeepers of the selected research site before the IRB application wass submitted. Since there was only one technical college to select site permissions from, the process of permission inquiry and security was relatively expeditious.

Other Participant Protections

Ethical considerations were explained, and participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw from the study at any time through email correspondence. The confidentiality of the site and participants were also assured, using site and participant pseudonyms. Furthermore, the security measures for physical and electronic data were discussed, including data storage methods such as locked filing cabinets and password protection for electronic files. It will be noted that, in accordance with LU IRB guidelines, if there are no plans to add to the data collected for the dissertation, the data will be destroyed after three years. However, if there is a potential for the study to be extended in the future, the data will not be destroyed. I also addressed risks and benefits to the participants, including an evaluation of possible risks and mitigation factors. Additionally, any other potential issues that are unique to the study and may have arisen were discussed, along with the proposed methods

for addressing them.

Summary

This chapter focused on the research methodology utilized to understand the perceived degree value amongst two-year technical school graduates of Zion Mountain Institute of Technology located in a southeastern state in the United States. This chapter began identifying this hermeneutic phenomenology research design and presenting its central and sub-research questions. Sequentially, the justification of the intended setting and participants of the study were introduced, as well as researcher positionality and the interpretive framework, along with philosophical assumptions, the researcher's role, procedures and permissions, the data collection plan, and a final section on trustworthiness. The inclusion of three data collection methods: personal interviews, surveys, and a focus group were structured to solidify the researcher's understanding of how Zion Mountain Institute of Technology graduates view employment opportunities in this region after completing a two-year degree.

Transcription software, MSTeams, was used for the personal communication sessions in addition to video recordings of the interviews to later review body language as well. The data analysis strategy consisted of the letter-writing assignment being delivered via email to the participants with a completion deadline. Concerning the letter-writing assignment, one of the features used to simplify the synthesizing of data was the implementation of a Word Cloud. Since participants shared responses during the focus group, the presentation of valuable and relative data necessitated the incorporation of transcription software; therefore, the focus group session was evaluated and analyzed using audio and video equipment. All data collection approaches were analyzed independently, and then collectively configured and arranged through NVivo. This process was to enable contrasts and comparisons, emergent themes, procuring

participant backgrounds, and developing coded excerpts with relevant data points pertaining to the focus of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to gain an in-depth understanding of how graduates of Zion Mountain Institute of Technology perceive the value of their two-year technical degrees, as it relates to job satisfaction. This chapter explores the multifaceted influence of two-year technical degrees on employment, career advancement, and personal growth. Also, this chapter synthesizes data from interviews, focus groups, and letter-writing exercises, offering insights into how graduates from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology perceive and utilize their education in the workforce. A dissection of the functionality of these degrees is presented, not just as educational achievements but as vital stepping stones in the landscape of modern employment and career development.

Participants

In the pursuit of assembling a cohort reflective of the targeted population, the recruitment strategy outlined in Chapter Three was meticulously executed. As the study aimed to investigate the perceived value of a two-year associate degree among graduates of Zion Mountain Institute of Technology, a methodical approach was employed to ensure the selection of participants aligned with the research objectives. The intended sample size, ranging between 10 to 15 participants per data collection methodology, was guided by the necessity to garner comprehensive insights while ensuring manageable group dynamics, particularly in the context of focus group discussions. Utilizing a combination of criterion and maximum variation sampling strategies, the selection process aimed to maintain the integrity and diversity of the 10-member participant pool, as described in Table 4.

Table 4

Graduate Participant Demographic Information

Graduate Participant	Year of Graduation	Degree Earned	Content Area	Currently Employed	Employed in the Field of Study	Sex	Ethnicity
Brooke	2021	AAS	Massage Therapy	Yes	Yes	F	White
Cameron	2022	AAS	Diesel	Yes	Yes	M	White
Carter	2022	AAS	Diesel	Yes	No	M	White
Cassidy	2019	AAS	Cosmetology	Yes	Yes	F	White
Jason	2023	AAS	Welding	Yes	No	M	White
Jasper	2021	AAS	Automotive	Yes	No	M	Black
Julian	2023	AAS	Diesel	Yes	Yes	M	White
Marcus	2019	AAS	Automotive	Yes	No	M	White
Mason	2020	AAS	Emergency Medical Services	Yes	Yes	M	White
Simon	2019	AAS	Welding	Yes	Yes	M	Black

Initially, access to the target population was facilitated through collaboration with the institution's data analyst, who provided contact information for graduates meeting the specified criteria within the preceding five years. Despite initial challenges in receiving responses through email correspondence, subsequent adjustments to compensation offerings and proactive outreach

via telephone communication yielded a more favorable response rate. While the final participant count met the minimum threshold of 10 individuals, an outcome necessitated by the attrition of three initially engaged participants, efforts were made to ensure equitable distribution across two focus groups, each comprising five participants. This strategic allocation aimed to foster robust discussions and facilitate nuanced exploration of the perceived value of an associate degree within varying programmatic contexts. Sequentially, themes and sub-themes were developed and recorded as presented in Table 5.

Brooke

Brooke, a 24-year-old White female from Solstice County (pseudonym), has experienced firsthand the transformative power of vocational education through her studies in massage therapy and aesthetics at Zion Mountain Institute of Technology, where she graduated in 2021. Currently thriving in her career, Brooke's work in the wellness industry encapsulates the applicability and versatility of vocational training. “Choosing a vocational path was a pivotal decision in my life. It not only equipped me with practical skills but also opened doors to diverse opportunities in the wellness industry,” Brooke shares, reflecting on the impact of her educational choices. Her successful employment within both fields of study—massage therapy and aesthetics—highlights how targeted vocational education can directly lead to job satisfaction and career stability.

Brooke’s journey exemplifies the potential of vocational training to provide fulfilling career paths that align well with personal passions and market demands. Her integration into the holistic wellness and personal care sectors serves as an inspiring example for those contemplating similar paths, demonstrating the tangible benefits of aligning one’s career with intrinsic interests and societal needs. Through her story, Brooke underscores a significant trend

in vocational education, showcasing its role in shaping skilled professionals ready to meet the needs of today's diverse job market.

Cameron

Cameron, a 21-year-old White male from Tasborough County (pseudonym), exemplifies the direct benefits of vocational education through his experiences in the diesel technology program at Zion Mountain Institute of Technology, from which he graduated in 2022. Currently employed in his field of study, Cameron's career reflects a strong alignment between his academic training and his professional role, showcasing the efficacy of specialized vocational programs. "Entering the diesel technology field felt like a natural fit for me, leveraging both my interest in mechanics and my desire for a stable career," Cameron explains, highlighting how his education directly supported his career aspirations and professional placement.

Cameron's seamless transition from education to employment underscores the practical advantages of focused educational tracks that prepare students for specific roles within the industry. This alignment not only demonstrates the relevance of his academic training to job market demands but also emphasizes the personal satisfaction he derives from working in a field he is passionate about. Cameron's experience illustrates the value of vocational education in fulfilling both personal aspirations and economic needs, proving that such training is crucial for preparing students for immediate and relevant employment opportunities in their chosen fields.

Carter

Carter, a 23-year-old White male from Nicholson County (pseudonym), reflects a different facet of vocational education outcomes. Despite graduating in 2022 from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology with a degree in diesel technology, Carter finds himself working outside his specialized field. "While I am grateful for my employment, it's not exactly in

diesel technology, which I trained for," he shares, highlighting the disconnection between his education and his current job. This situation illustrates a common challenge among vocational graduates: the volatile dynamics of the job market can sometimes lead to employment in areas outside their areas of specialization.

Carter's experience underscores the broader issue of job market volatility and its impact on career paths post-graduation. Despite the misalignment, Carter remains optimistic, viewing his current role as a stepping stone toward a career that aligns more closely with his training in diesel technology. His story exemplifies the adaptability required by many graduates to navigate the realities of the modern workforce, showing both the strengths and limitations of vocational education in meeting specific economic and personal goals.

Cassidy

Cassidy, a 52-year-old White female from Greywood County (pseudonym), embodies the adaptability and potential of vocational education through her varied academic pursuits. Initially engaged in general studies, she later transitioned to cosmetology, both at Zion Mountain Institute of Technology, where she graduated in 2019. Currently employed in the cosmetology field, Cassidy's professional journey reflects her ability to transition smoothly between diverse educational disciplines while maintaining career relevance.

"Transitioning from general studies to cosmetology allowed me to merge my broad educational foundation with a more focused career path," Cassidy reflects. This shift not only highlights her personal growth but also underscores the versatility and resilience often required in today's job market. Her successful employment in cosmetology serves as a testament to the fact that it is never too late to redefine one's professional direction and find fulfillment in a new domain. Cassidy's story is particularly inspiring, demonstrating the significant value of a diverse

educational background in enhancing long-term career prospects and adapting to evolving market demands.

Jason

Jason, a 22-year-old White male from Greywood County (pseudonym), represents a dynamic approach to vocational education with his studies in welding technology at Zion Mountain Institute of Technology, from which he graduated in 2023. Currently self-employed, Jason uses his training directly in the market, illustrating the close link between vocational education and professional practice. “Welding is not just a skill; it's an art that has allowed me to create my own path,” he says, reflecting his entrepreneurial spirit. Although he occasionally undertakes projects outside traditional welding to sustain his business, his core work remains deeply rooted in his field of study.

Jason's choice to embrace self-employment post-graduation demonstrates the adaptability and independence that vocational training can instill. His experience highlights how such education equips graduates with the skills necessary to navigate and thrive within dynamic and sometimes unpredictable economic landscapes. Jason’s journey underscores the notion that vocational training is not merely about learning a trade but also about acquiring the flexibility required to succeed in today’s economy, showing how it prepares individuals to forge their own careers.

Jasper

Jasper, a 22-year-old Black male from Solstice County (pseudonym), offers a unique perspective on the value of vocational education through his experiences since graduating from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology in 2021, where he studied automotive technology. Currently employed in a role that does not directly correlate with his field of study, Jasper's

situation is reflective of a common scenario many vocational graduates encounter—securing jobs in adjacent fields or industries. “Though I am not directly working in automotive technology, the skills I learned are incredibly versatile and help me in various aspects of my job,” Jasper comments.

Jasper’s insight into the versatility of the skills gained through vocational training underscores the adaptability required in today's job market. Jasper's journey highlights the resilience of vocational training graduates and demonstrates how specialized skills can be transferable and advantageous across various job roles. This adaptability is crucial, particularly in a job market where direct paths from education to related employment are not always available. Jasper's experience exemplifies the broader applicability and value of technical skills in enhancing career flexibility and opportunities, even when the employment does not align perfectly with one's initial field of study.

Julian

Julian, a 23-year-old White male from Rayfield County (pseudonym), exemplifies the successful alignment of vocational education with immediate career opportunities. He graduated in 2023 from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology, where he studied diesel technology, and quickly found employment within his field. “Working within the diesel technology field right after graduation has really solidified my choice of career,” Julian reflects, expressing his satisfaction with how seamlessly his education transitioned into a professional setting.

Julian’s experience underscores the effectiveness of targeted vocational programs that are designed to meet current industry demands for skilled technicians. Julian's smooth transition into the workforce and immediate employment in his field of study highlight the ideal outcome for vocational education: training that aligns closely with job market needs, providing both

relevance and stability in chosen careers. Julian's success story serves as a strong testament to the value of specialized educational tracks that prepare students explicitly for specific sectors, showcasing the direct benefits of such an approach in vocational training.

Marcus

Marcus, a 39-year-old White male from Fairvale County (pseudonym), demonstrates the versatile application of vocational education through his journey in automotive technology. Having graduated from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology in 2019, Marcus is currently self-employed, creatively applying his skills within and beyond his initial field of study. “Being self-employed gives me the flexibility to apply my automotive technology skills in various ways,” he remarks, highlighting the broad applicability of his education.

Since his graduation, Marcus has successfully navigated the complexities of self-employment, adapting his automotive technology expertise to a variety of contexts. This adaptability not only shows how vocational training can equip individuals with a diverse set of applicable skills but also underscores the entrepreneurial potential inherent in such education. Marcus's career trajectory illustrates the importance of flexibility and innovation in building a sustainable business model within today's dynamic job market. His experience serves as a compelling example of how vocational education can foster not just job readiness but also the entrepreneurial spirit needed to thrive in diverse and evolving industries.

Mason

Mason, a 40-year-old White male from Rayfield County (pseudonym), embodies the successful alignment of vocational education with professional practice, particularly in the critical field of emergency medical services (EMS) paramedicine. Having graduated in 2020 from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology with a specialization in EMS paramedicine,

Mason's quick employment within his field reflects the strong demand for well-trained emergency medical personnel. “Every day in this job confirms the value of my education,” he states, emphasizing how directly his training impacts his daily responsibilities.

Mason's career highlights the practicality and essential nature of vocational education in preparing professionals to effectively handle real-life crises. His work in EMS not only showcases the successful application of his education but also illuminates the vital role that vocational training plays in equipping professionals to respond to emergencies efficiently. Through his dedication and the lifesaving outcomes of his work, Mason's experience underscores the profound societal benefits of aligning educational programs with both community needs and job market demands. His story serves as a strong testament to the importance and impact of specialized vocational training in sectors where expertise is crucial for both individual and public well-being.

Simon

Simon, a 61-year-old Black male from Montrose County (pseudonym), vividly demonstrates the enduring relevance of vocational education through his career in welding. Graduating from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology in 2019, Simon's swift transition into employment within his field showcases the persistent demand for skilled tradespeople. “Welding has been more than a job; it's been a stable career that continues to evolve as I do,” he reflects, highlighting the adaptability and longevity of careers in specialized trades.

Simon's professional journey underscores the long-term value of vocational training, particularly in fields like welding that demand technical proficiency coupled with practical experience. His experience is a testament to the sustainability of careers fostered by vocational education, offering not just initial employment but ongoing stability and growth opportunities.

This sustainability is crucial in sectors that are fundamental to various aspects of the economy, emphasizing the importance of educational programs that are closely aligned with industry needs. Simon's story illustrates the practical benefits and the significant role vocational training plays in securing a stable and evolving career path within specialized trades.

Results

The results from this study intricately weaved together the voices of graduates, revealing a tapestry of experiences that ranged from highly positive job outcomes to challenges faced in specific industries. It became evident that while a two-year technical degree often serves as a robust foundation for entering the workforce, its value and effectiveness can be influenced by various factors such as industry demands, regional economic conditions, and the rapidly evolving nature of technical professions. Furthermore, the data illuminated the personal growth and confidence that accompany the acquisition of practical skills, showcasing how these degrees shape not only professional paths but also personal development (see Table 5). Through this comprehensive exploration, a clear picture emerged of the role of technical education in shaping the future of work and its participants.

Table 5

Themes, Subthemes & Codes

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Degree Value	Practical Skills, Employability	Direct Application, Applicability, Adaptability, Networking, Collaboration, Immediate Advantages, Educational Impact
Industry Demand and Job Placement	Field-Specific Demand, Adaptability and Versatility	Resource Management, Employer Support, Versatility, Adaptation, Variability, Career Trajectories, Placement Implications, Market Needs,

		Career Paths
Job Satisfaction and Career Growth	Personal Fulfillment, Career Advancement	Work/Life Balance, Continuing Education, Employer Support, Essential Soft Skills, Industry Skills, Upgradation, Adaptation, Professional Growth
Challenges and Barriers	Employment Seeking Challenges, Educational Limitations	Resume Building, Interview Skills, Educational Relevance, Employability, Regional Availability, Practical Experience
Professional Development and Lifelong Learning	Continuing Education, Adaptation to Industry Changes	Industry Requirements, Evolving Industries, Sustaining Success, Future Opportunities, Employer Participation

Degree Value

This theme captures the core benefits perceived by participants regarding their technical education. It encompasses the tangible and immediate advantages they experienced, directly linked to their degree. This theme is crucial because it underlines the practical relevance of two-year technical degrees in the job market. Degree Value reflects a broad consensus among participants about the positive impact their education had on their career prospects and professional abilities. Marcus said, “I have a better understanding of how to perform my job duties, so I am very satisfied with getting my degree and the personal and professional value that it holds.” Cassidy added, “In cosmetology, you have to complete a certain number of hours before you are eligible to sit for your state board exams, so to go through all of that and to pass your exams, which leads to licensure, the personal satisfaction was linked to how I value my degree.” On the other hand, Jason admitted that “Since I am self-employed, I really didn’t need the degree to work for myself, but the information I gained from the degree was advantageous to my success.”

Practical Skills

This subtheme emerged consistently across all data collection methods. Participants often highlighted how their technical degree provided them with practical, hands-on skills that were directly applicable to their job roles. These skills were a recurring point of emphasis, reflecting the immediate utility and relevance of their education in the workforce. Jasper said, “I was satisfied with the job I got concerning my field of study, but I decided to try a different job and the soft skills I received from school helped me communicate better as I applied and participated in interviews.” Julian expressed, “The skills I learned in school were immediately applicable in my position, so I was familiar with what was expected of me.” Cameron talked about how his skills in typing from high school already existed; he also explained that “Having several typing and writing assignments in school boosted my skills in typing that are directly applied to my current position since I have to write service orders and other service-related documents for customers and my employer.”

Employability

Another common point was the increased job opportunities and employability that participants attributed to their two-year technical degrees. This subtheme was particularly evident in discussions about how their qualifications opened doors to new job markets and provided a competitive edge in the job-seeking process. Mason said, “When I started getting close to the end of my program, I started getting several job offers from local companies”. Simon shared a similar experience when he said, “While I was in school, there were several companies that would communicate with us students and the employment opportunities came sooner than I thought.”

Industry Demand and Job Placement

This theme focuses on the demand for technical skills in various industries and the implications for job placement. It highlights how different fields have varying demand levels and opportunities based on several factors, including geographic location. Understanding industry demand is vital for both educators and students in technical fields. It guides them in aligning educational programs with market needs and helps students make informed decisions about their career paths. Cameron said, “While I was in school, I was working in my field of study, so upon graduation, not only did I have the degree, but I also had two years of experience to add to my resume when I started looking for another position.” Carter said, “While there was the perception of demand for several positions related to my field of study, none of my applications were addressed.” Brooke related to Carter by mentioning that “My field of study prepared me to work in an industry that had little regional demand, so I continued with my education by taking an additional focus to increase my employment opportunities, which worked.”

Field-Specific Demand

Participants from various fields, such as EMS, cosmetology, welding, and diesel mechanics, noted significant differences in demand based on their specific areas of expertise. This variation was often linked to geographic location, highlighting how local economic landscapes influence job opportunities in different technical fields. Carter said, “Upon graduation, I had applied to approximately 12 jobs in my area and only received a call from two, neither of which resulted in employment.” However, Mason mentioned that “The healthcare industry is currently in high demand and has been for several years, so finding employment after school was never an issue for me.” Cassidy added, “The beauty industry is a great opportunity for people wanting to start their own business or own and operate a salon, although there are

seasoned individuals already secure that need people to fill their salon stations that finding a job within this industry is not a challenge."

Adaptability and Versatility

Many participants described how their technical degree enhanced their adaptability in the workforce. This included transitioning between roles within their field, adapting to new technologies, or even shifting to different industries. This subtheme underscores the versatility provided by the skills acquired through their technical education. Julian said, "Coming in as an apprentice, I was exposed to several professional development opportunities that include specific training on equipment that would allow me to perform various job duties outside of my typical scope of work." Jasper mentioned, "Although I was hired to perform a certain set of duties, I was exposed to other opportunities that interested me and that I chose to follow."

Job Satisfaction and Career Growth

This theme reflects the participants' feelings about their job satisfaction and the prospects for career advancement provided by their degrees. This theme is important as it goes beyond the initial job placement to explore long-term career trajectories and personal fulfillment. It underscores the role of technical education not just in securing a job, but in fostering rewarding, long-term careers. Simon said, "Standards are going to change, and we as employees need to keep up with them through updated certifications so that employers will feel comfortable hiring or retaining employees." Brooke mentioned, "There are always opportunities that are available in my industry that will allow us to grow professionally, whether it be through specialized training that leads to additional certifications, to conference style training opportunities."

Personal Fulfillment

A high level of job satisfaction and personal fulfillment was a common thread among participants. Many expressed contentment and pride in their work, highlighting their chosen careers' emotional and personal rewards. Cameron said, “Any time I fix a truck or just fix an issue, it gives me a sense of satisfaction that not everybody can do this, and I take a lot of pride in having the skills to get drivers back on the road.” Julian was extremely vocal about his perception of job satisfaction, as he expressed “I am very satisfied with my current job and there isn’t a day that I leave work that I do not feel comfortable and personally fulfilled knowing that the skills I learned in school have allowed me to make a difference in this industry.”

Career Advancement

The degree often facilitated career advancement, opening doors to promotions, leadership roles, and opportunities for further specialization. This subtheme points to the long-term career benefits and upward mobility enabled by technical education. Jasper said, “In my current position, we have the opportunity to take professional development courses focused on leadership, which is internal pathways toward managerial positions from within.” Simon said, “My company now will assign employees as trainers and will hire students while enrolled to teach on the job with position basics aligned with institutional curriculum, and will progress with training as they show improvements.”

Challenges and Barriers

Here, the focus is on the obstacles and difficulties participants faced in leveraging their degrees for employment, as well as the limitations inherent in a two-year technical education. Recognizing challenges and barriers is essential for continuous improvement in technical education programs. This recognition helps address gaps between education and industry requirements and prepares students more effectively for real-world scenarios. Jasper noted in his

interview, that “although I had two years of educational experience, I was very confused in my first role because I was unfamiliar with processes of my employer”. Cassidy mentioned, “In the field of cosmetology, you are not allowed to work in a salon until you have passed a state board exam, which cannot be administered until you have completed a cosmetology program.”

Employment-Seeking Challenges

Despite the overall positive reception of technical degrees, some participants shared initial struggles with job placements, especially in fields with lower local demand or industries with specific entry requirements. Brooke said, “The difficulties I faced were available job openings in my field within my area. Most of the opportunities I noticed were too far from my residence to accept, or the ones local were already at max capacity.” Jasper’s response was similar, where he mentioned that “the biggest employment-seeking challenge for me was the lack of employment opportunities in the area I was searching.” Similarly, Carter shared “My biggest challenge was securing employment. I applied for several jobs that appeared to be hiring, and I never received a callback.”

Educational Limitations

A few individuals noted the limitations of a two-year degree compared to more advanced education levels, particularly concerning opportunities for advanced roles or specialized positions. This subtheme reflects an awareness of the educational ceiling that some may encounter. Carter said, “I believe employers value a two-year degree, although being placed in employment consideration with someone with a four-year degree, it seems like the individual with the four-year degree will get selected due to the extra years of educational experience, which isn’t fair.” Cameron said, “I don’t believe a two-year program is undervalued or

overvalued. Employers may have an expectation of people graduating a technical college but you will only get out of the program what you put into it."

Professional Development and Lifelong Learning

This theme highlights the ongoing nature of learning and skill development in technical careers. It emphasizes the need for continual education and adaptation to stay relevant and effective in rapidly evolving industries. The emphasis on lifelong learning is critical in today's fast-paced and constantly changing job market. It signals to students and professionals alike that education doesn't end with a degree but is an ongoing process critical for sustained success in technical fields. Cassidy said, "In cosmetology, there are annual hair shows that we have the opportunity to attend to be exposed to new trends and styles." Mason added that "The medical profession is constantly changing, so there will always be opportunities to continue learning within this industry."

Continuing Education

The importance of ongoing learning and professional development was a recurring theme. Many participants highlighted how continued education and upskilling were encouraged and often supported by employers, reflecting a commitment to staying current in their fields. Simon said, "As a welder, my employer has offered for me to be trained as a certified OSHA trainer for employees, which also opened the door for me to use this certification to teach other businesses in need of this specialized training as well." Brooke added that "My employer will pay for all employees to specialized training sessions, conferences, and spa shows that will build our skills. Although the intent is to use this knowledge to put into application for the company, we will always have these skills to list on our resumes if we decide to work somewhere else." Mason said, "If you are in emergency medical services or any area of medicine, you are going to

be a lifelong learner. Several companies in this industry are offering continuing education classes regularly, some of which are monthly offerings."

Adaptation to Industry Changes

Participants discussed the need to continuously adapt to evolving industry standards and technologies. This subtheme emphasizes the dynamic nature of technical fields and the necessity for professionals to stay informed and adaptable. Julian said, "In addition to updates on procedures and policies within my field, the biggest help for me with adapting to industry changes has been opening myself to be receptive to knowledge or information from senior coworkers." Mason added, "With new data coming out with medicine, there is always a new study going on, so having relationships with businesses from an institutional perspective is invaluable."

Research Question Responses

In exploring the perceptions and experiences of graduates from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology concerning their two-year degrees and subsequent employment, a central and three sub-research questions were addressed. Analysis of the data revealed a generally positive perception among graduates, who emphasize the practical skills gained during their programs as directly applicable to their job roles, leading to increased job opportunities and employability. This sentiment is echoed across various fields of study, suggesting a broad recognition of the utility of their degrees in meeting industry needs. As exemplified by participants, whose confidence and clientele have benefited from their two-year degree, these findings underscore the significance of exploring graduates' perceptions in understanding the impact of technical education on employment outcomes.

Central Research Question

How do students who graduate with a two-year degree from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology perceive its value when searching for and attaining employment? From the data analysis, graduates generally perceive their two-year degrees as valuable. This value is seen in the practical skills they acquired, directly applicable to their job roles. Many mentioned increased job opportunities and employability as direct outcomes of their education. The degrees' practicality was emphasized across various fields, suggesting a broad perception of their utility in enhancing employability and meeting industry needs. Jason said, “Having this two-year degree as someone self-employed has not only given me confidence but has also instilled confidence in my clientele when approached for services. This confidence also carries over to potential clients as word-of-mouth spreads.” Simon mentioned “Ever since I was a student, I was receiving offers for employment that I had applied for. Although I am currently employed, I still get follow-up calls from businesses looking for welders.” Mason said, “Although I did not need the two-year degree to work on an ambulance, the associate’s degree enabled me to get into leadership and into a supervisory role. Eventually, my degree allowed me the opportunity to get into an instructor role teaching paramedics.”

Sub-Question One

What are the experiences of two-year technical school graduates with job placement upon successful completion of their program? Graduates faced varying experiences in job placement. Some encountered challenges initially, particularly in fields with lower local demand or requiring specific qualifications. However, many experienced successful job placements, attributing it to the skills and knowledge gained during their course. The degree was often seen as opening doors for immediate employment, with some fields like EMS, welding, and diesel mechanics noted for their high demand. Julian said, “Since I have become employed in my field

of study, as an apprentice, I have been exposed to several specialized pathways for continuing education that will allow me to broaden my knowledge." However, Carter said, "I had applied to several positions in my area and never began my career in the field I went to school for. I eventually took a position in a very similar position because that is all I could find in my immediate area."

Sub-Question Two

What are the experiences of students' job placement opportunities while enrolled in their career-driven program? Students enrolled in their programs often had access to job opportunities, though experiences varied by field. Some fields, like massage therapy, reported numerous job offers and active recruitment, while others like aesthetics experienced more challenges. Brooke said, "The reason I went back to school for massage therapy was because the field of aesthetics in my area was not an in-demand position." Networking, word of mouth, and proactive job searching were common strategies employed by students. Employers' willingness to work with students' schedules was a recurring theme in the facilitation of job placement during study. Cameron mentioned, "What helped me the most with my experience was my employer's accommodations to my school schedule. I was able to work and go to school without any disruptions to either."

Sub-Question Three

How do employers perceive students who have completed a two-year technical degree in terms of their candidacy for employment or promotions within their chosen industry? Employers generally perceive graduates of two-year technical degrees positively, recognizing the practical skills and foundational knowledge they bring. Employers value the commitment shown in completing the degree and often consider these graduates as strong candidates for employment.

Graduates with these degrees were also seen as potential candidates for promotions, especially when they continuously upskill and adapt to industry changes. Mason said, “In the past couple of years, the salary has increased for individuals in my field who have attained the corresponding two-year degree.” However, there were instances where experience was valued over education, indicating that while degrees are beneficial, practical experience remains a key factor in some industries. Carter added, “A two-year degree is not mandatory in my field, so it is difficult to compete with individuals who have more years of experience rather than the two years of education alone.”

Summary

This chapter concludes that two-year technical degrees from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology are generally perceived as valuable for enhancing employability, providing practical skills, and facilitating career satisfaction. However, the experiences of graduates also highlight the significance of industry-specific demands, regional variations, and the need for ongoing professional development. The analysis offers a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted impact of technical education on individual career trajectories. Graduates appreciate the practical skills and enhanced employability these degrees offer, and they also experience varying levels of industry demand and job placement success, with some facing challenges in certain fields or locations. Despite these challenges, many find satisfaction and opportunities for career growth, emphasizing the importance of continuous learning and adaptation to industry changes. This comprehensive view underscores the role of two-year technical degrees in not only securing initial employment but also in fostering long-term career satisfaction and growth.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how graduates of Zion Mountain Institute of Technology perceive the value of their two-year technical degrees, as it relates to job satisfaction. This chapter presents a detailed interpretation of the study's findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research implications. Included in this chapter are five discussion subsections: interpretation of findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research. Each section integrates the researcher's interpretations and insights, refining the study's findings and offering actionable conclusions. This chapter aims to connect the study's results with broader theoretical frameworks and practical applications, enhancing the overall understanding of the subject.

Discussion

The findings of this study, in light of the developed themes, provide a comprehensive analysis of the value and impact of two-year technical degrees on employability, career satisfaction, and professional development. Revealed from this study, practical skills and increased employability were significant benefits of these programs, with graduates frequently securing job opportunities and advancing in their careers. The interpretation of findings underscores the importance of hands-on training and industry-relevant knowledge, aligning with empirical and theoretical sources that emphasize the role of technical education in workforce readiness. Implications for policy and practice suggest enhancing support systems for graduates and fostering stronger partnerships between educational institutions and industry stakeholders. Theoretical and empirical implications highlight the need for ongoing research to explore the

long-term effects of technical education on career trajectories. Limitations of the study include the small, homogenous sample size and reliance on self-reported data, while delimitations focus on the chosen methodology and participant criteria. Recommendations for future research involve expanding the sample size and exploring diverse geographic regions to gain a broader understanding of the impact of two-year technical degrees.

Summary of Thematic Findings

This study investigated the value of two-year technical degrees, focusing on graduate perspectives, employer insights, and educational institution roles. Through interviews, letter writing, and focus groups, key themes emerged that highlight the practical benefits and challenges of these degrees. Graduates emphasized the practicality and employability provided by two-year technical programs, noting that hands-on training directly applicable to job roles increased their job opportunities. Specific fields, such as EMS and diesel technology, reported high demand for skilled professionals, while areas like esthetics faced more competitive markets. Job satisfaction was generally high, with many graduates expressing personal fulfillment and career growth facilitated by their degrees.

However, challenges in job placement and educational limitations were noted, particularly in fields with lower demand or specific credential requirements. Professional development and lifelong learning were crucial for graduates to stay current in their fields, with continuous education and adaptation to industry changes highlighted as essential. The study also revealed regional variations in job opportunities and industry demand, affecting career mobility. Overall, the findings underscore the significant impact of two-year technical degrees on employability, career satisfaction, and personal growth, while also highlighting areas for improvement in support and resources for graduates.

Interpretation of Findings

This study reveals the significant value of two-year technical degrees in enhancing employability, providing practical skills, and fostering career satisfaction. Graduates emphasized the hands-on training and industry-relevant knowledge gained, which translated into increased job opportunities and career advancements. Demand for technical skills varied, with high demand in fields like EMS and diesel technology compared to the more competitive esthetics field. The degrees' focus on technical proficiency and adaptability allowed graduates to navigate various roles effectively. Many participants expressed job satisfaction and career growth, including promotions and leadership roles. However, challenges such as initial job placement difficulties and the limitations of a two-year degree for advanced opportunities were noted. Continuous professional development and adaptation to industry changes were emphasized.

This section critically interprets these findings through hermeneutical phenomenology, connecting participants' experiences with existing literature, the research setting, and the theoretical framework to generate new insights. By interpreting these findings, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the experiences of technical degree graduates, highlighting the practical benefits of such education, the impact of industry demand, the importance of lifelong learning, and the challenges faced in the job market. These interpretations provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and industry stakeholders aiming to enhance the effectiveness and impact of technical education programs.

Degree Practicality

One of the key interpretations from this study is the emphasis on the practicality and immediate applicability of the skills gained from two-year technical degrees. Participants across various fields, including diesel technology, welding, cosmetology, and EMS, consistently

highlighted how their education provided them with hands-on skills directly transferable to their job roles. Jason said, “Before I went to college, I did not have the skills to work in my field. After completion of my degree, I found the confidence to perform at a competitive level.” This finding suggests that two-year technical degrees are highly effective in preparing individuals for the workforce by equipping them with relevant and practical skills that meet industry needs.

The literature supports this interpretation, indicating that technical education is often valued for its focus on practical skills and job readiness (Fletcher & Dumford, 2021). This aligns with the theoretical framework of experiential learning, which posits that learning through direct experience is crucial for skill acquisition and application (Kolb, 1984). The participants’ experiences reaffirm the importance of this educational approach, demonstrating that technical degrees effectively bridge the gap between education and employment. Moreover, students will not only gain the instructional dissemination of course content through the rigors of academia, but also hands-on training while earning credit hours, wages, and real-life working conditions (Adams et al., 2022; Decker, 2019). On the other hand, personality traits will play a prominent role in overall satisfaction, and most relevant to job placement satisfaction, graduates may perceive their desired employment working conditions or placement in different ways according to one of the six traits they possess (Prieto-Díez et al., 2022).

Employment Variations

This study also revealed significant variations in employment opportunities based on industry-specific demand. Fields like EMS and diesel technician showed a high demand for skilled workers, leading to better job placement and career advancement opportunities for graduates, like Mason and Cameron. In contrast, fields like esthetics faced lower demand and more challenges in job placement, according to Brooke and Carter. This interpretation is

consistent with existing research that highlights the role of industry demand in shaping employment outcomes for technical graduates (Ertelt et al., 2021). The geographical location also played a crucial role, with participants from regions with higher industry demand experiencing more favorable employment outcomes. This finding underscores the need for policymakers and educational institutions to consider local labor market demands when developing technical education programs.

Career Advancement

Another significant interpretation is the critical role of professional development and lifelong learning in the careers of technical degree graduates. Many participants emphasized the importance of continuing education, certifications, and on-the-job training in maintaining and advancing their careers. Julian said, “As an apprentice, I have been enrolled in continuing education courses, such as hydraulics and engine performance. These courses have enhanced my existing knowledge and I have more confidence in my troubleshooting techniques.” This ongoing learning was often supported by employers, highlighting a collaborative effort to ensure that employees remain competitive and up-to-date with industry standards. This finding aligns with the theory of lifelong learning, which emphasizes the continuous development of skills and knowledge throughout an individual's career (Dyki et al., 2021). The participants’ experiences suggest that technical education does not end with graduation but is an ongoing process that requires regular updates and enhancements to remain relevant in a rapidly changing job market.

Employment Barriers

The study identified several challenges and barriers to employment for technical degree graduates, including limited local job opportunities, self-reporting biases, and external events like the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges often impacted the participants’ ability to secure

employment and advance in their careers. The findings suggest that while technical degrees provide valuable skills, external factors can significantly influence employment outcomes. This interpretation is supported by the literature, which indicates that economic conditions and industry-specific factors can affect job availability and stability (Dhingra & Kundu, 2021). Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including robust career services, stronger industry partnerships, and policies that support job creation in technical fields.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The findings from this study have significant implications for both policy and practice in the realm of two-year technical degrees. The implications are designed to provide actionable recommendations for various stakeholders, including policymakers, educational administrators, and employers, to enhance the value and effectiveness of technical education (D'Amico et al., 2022). By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can enhance the effectiveness of two-year technical degrees, improve graduate employability, and ensure that the education system remains responsive to the needs of the workforce and industry.

Implications for Policy

The study highlights the need for specific policies, laws, and regulations to support and enhance the role of two-year technical degrees in meeting industry demands and improving employability. Policies should mandate and fund robust career services and job placement programs in technical colleges. This includes resources for resume building, interview preparation, job search assistance, and employer networking. Effective career services are crucial for bridging the gap between education and employment. The following recommendations are proposed for policymakers at the district, state, and federal levels.

Federal and state governments should create incentives for industries to partner with

technical colleges. These partnerships can facilitate internships, apprenticeships, and direct job placements, aligning educational outcomes with industry needs. Tax incentives, grants, and public recognition can encourage businesses to engage with educational institutions. Policies should ensure ongoing funding for the professional development of technical college instructors. Continuous training and upskilling of educators will help maintain high educational standards and keep curricula aligned with the latest industry trends and technologies. Establishing standardized certifications across states can ensure that technical degree holders have universally recognized qualifications. This would enhance the mobility and employability of graduates, making it easier for them to find jobs across different regions. Policies should promote lifelong learning by providing financial support for continuing education. This includes grants, scholarships, and tax deductions for individuals pursuing further education and training, ensuring that graduates can continuously update their skills.

Implications for Practice

The practical implications of the study are directed toward educational institutions, employers, and other stakeholders involved in the delivery and utilization of technical education. These recommendations aim to improve the implementation and impact of two-year technical degrees within their specific contexts. Employers should actively recognize the value of two-year technical degrees. This involves integrating these qualifications into their hiring practices and acknowledging the practical skills that graduates bring to the workplace. By valuing these degrees, employers can create a more inclusive hiring process that appreciates diverse educational backgrounds. Employers should provide structured on-the-job training programs for graduates. This can include mentorship, apprenticeships, and hands-on training that allow new employees to further develop their skills and adapt to specific job roles. Continuous training

opportunities can improve job performance and employee retention.

Organizations should foster a culture of lifelong learning by encouraging employees to pursue additional training and education. Providing financial assistance for courses, flexible work schedules to accommodate learning, and recognizing achievements in continued education can support this culture. Educational institutions should regularly update their curricula to reflect current industry standards and practices. This can be achieved through regular consultations with industry stakeholders, incorporating practical, hands-on training, and ensuring that course content remains relevant to evolving industry demands. Technical colleges should invest in comprehensive career services that offer robust support to graduates. This includes not only job placement assistance but also career counseling, workshops on professional skills, and networking events with potential employers.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

This section discusses the theoretical and empirical implications of the study, comparing and contrasting the themes found with the theory and literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The empirical and theoretical implications underscore the significant role of two-year technical degrees in enhancing employability, job satisfaction, and career growth. This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of vocational and technical education by reinforcing the importance of practical, hands-on training. Additionally, this study confirms and extends existing theories while highlighting specific challenges and nuances related to local demand and industry-specific requirements. Empirically, it provides evidence of the diverse experiences of graduates from different fields and regions, offering a nuanced understanding of the benefits and challenges associated with two-year technical degrees. By addressing these implications, policymakers, educators, and employers can better support technical education and improve outcomes for

graduates.

Empirical Implications

The primary themes developed from the research highlight several key empirical implications regarding two-year technical degrees. These themes include the value of two-year technical degrees, industry demand and job placement, job satisfaction and career growth, challenges and barriers, educational limitations, field-specific demand and adaptability, and professional development and lifelong learning. Each theme underscores significant findings from the study and aligns with or extends existing literature in the field. The subsequent sections will delve into these themes, providing a comprehensive understanding of the empirical implications of the study.

Value of Two-Year Technical Degrees. The study confirms previous research indicating that two-year technical degrees provide practical skills directly applicable to job roles. Similar to the findings by Okolie et al., (2019), participants emphasized the hands-on experience and technical expertise gained from these programs, which enhanced their employability. Graduates highlighted that the practical training received not only prepared them for immediate entry into the workforce but also gave them a competitive edge over candidates with purely theoretical knowledge. Although hygiene issues may not directly reflect the sole source of job satisfaction or the value of a technical degree, Herzberg et al., (1959) indicated that these issues must be addressed to create an atmosphere whereby motivation and employee satisfaction are possible. This practical emphasis allowed them to quickly adapt to workplace demands and meet employer expectations effectively, thereby reinforcing the perceived value of their technical education.

Industry Demand and Job Placement. The study aligns with research by Dhingra and

Kundu (2021), which highlighted that industry demand varies significantly by field and geographic location. Participants noted high demand for EMS, welding, and diesel technology skills, consistent with national employment trends. However, the study also revealed that graduates in fields such as aesthetics faced more competitive job markets, indicating that local economic conditions and industry needs heavily influence job placement success. Gauthier (2020b) indicated that employers are looking for candidates who can easily be integrated into the workforce and have obtained job-related competencies through two-year technical degree programs. This variability underscores the importance of aligning educational programs with regional labor market demands to optimize job placement outcomes for graduates.

Job Satisfaction and Career Growth. The findings corroborate the work of Nguyen et al. (2022), who found that graduates of technical programs often experience high job satisfaction and opportunities for career advancement. Measures an organization may take to give employees a sense of satisfaction, appreciation, and worth is through the assignment of new titles that directly reflect their level of proficiency, as career success and job satisfaction are linked directly to the employees' life satisfaction (Choi & Nae, 2022). The study participants frequently mentioned personal fulfillment and career growth as outcomes of their technical education. Many graduates reported feeling a deep sense of pride and accomplishment in their work, attributing their career progression to the solid foundation provided by their two-year degrees. This sense of satisfaction and the potential for upward mobility highlights the significant role technical education plays in fostering long-term career development and personal growth.

Challenges and Barriers. While prior research, such as that by Gerazrds and Welters (2022); Henderson (2021), identified general challenges faced by technical graduates, this study highlights specific barriers related to local demand and industry-specific requirements. The

difficulty in finding employment in fields like aesthetics and diesel technology in certain geographic areas diverges from broader national studies. These challenges suggest that graduates must often navigate complex and varying employment landscapes, which can impact their initial job search and long-term career stability (Lackner, 2023). Addressing these barriers requires tailored support systems and robust career services that can help graduates overcome localized employment hurdles.

Educational Limitations. This study adds nuance to the findings of Somers et al., (2019), who discussed the limitations of two-year degrees. Participants noted that while the degrees provided substantial practical skills, they sometimes fell short in offering advanced opportunities compared to higher education degrees. Graduates expressed a desire for more pathways to higher education and advanced certifications, which could further enhance their career prospects and professional development. This highlights the need for educational institutions to create bridges to continuing education and advanced training to fully meet the evolving needs of their students.

Field-Specific Demand and Adaptability. The study introduces the concept of adaptability and versatility as significant benefits of two-year technical degrees. Uka & Prendi (2021) claimed that the working conditions of the environment employees are subject to will have a tremendous effect on their pride in themselves, and the output they produce. This extends previous research of Sublett et al., (2021), by showing that graduates can transition between roles and industries, maintaining employability despite fluctuations in job market demand. Graduates, like Mason and Cameron, often leveraged their versatile skill sets to pivot into related fields or take on new roles within their existing industries, showcasing the broad applicability of their technical training. This adaptability not only helps in securing immediate employment but also

supports long-term career resilience in an ever-changing job market.

Professional Development and Lifelong Learning. Unlike much of the existing literature, this study emphasizes the importance of continuous education and employer-supported professional development. Holland (1959) suggested that people use their personality characteristics to search for the type of atmosphere that will allow them to excel and become successful in their environment, leading to a more satisfactory element in their occupations. Therefore, participants highlighted ongoing learning as critical for adapting to industry changes and staying competitive in their fields. Rocconi et al. (2020) indicated that the same principles apply to the students of Career and Technical Education or Workforce Education and Development, as their characteristics and personality types were linked directly to person-environment fit. Graduates, like Julian, valued opportunities for further training and certifications provided by their employers, which allowed them to keep pace with technological advancements and evolving industry standards. This commitment to lifelong learning underscores the dynamic nature of technical careers and the necessity for continuous skill enhancement to sustain career growth and job satisfaction.

Theoretical Implications

The primary themes developed from the research highlight key theoretical implications concerning two-year technical degrees. These implications encompass Herzberg's theory of motivation (1959) and Holland's theory of vocational choice (1959). Additionally, this study brought to light the relevance of the Human Capital Theory and the Social Cognitive Career Theory in understanding the value of technical education. Each theme underscores significant findings from the study and either aligns with or extends existing theoretical frameworks in the field. The subsequent sections will delve into these themes, providing a comprehensive

understanding of the theoretical implications of the study.

Herzberg's Theory of Motivation. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, which differentiates between hygiene factors (which prevent dissatisfaction) and motivators (which encourage satisfaction), can be directly related to the findings of this study. Graduates from two-year technical programs reported high levels of job satisfaction, which aligns with Herzberg's motivators. These motivators include achievement, recognition, and work itself. Many participants expressed a sense of accomplishment and pride in their technical skills and career progress. The practical training provided by the two-year programs helped them achieve significant milestones in their careers, thus fulfilling the need for achievement. Graduates felt valued and recognized in their workplaces for the specialized skills they brought. The ability to apply their knowledge directly to their job roles contributed to a sense of recognition and respect from peers and employers. The hands-on nature of technical jobs, where graduates can see the tangible results of their efforts, provides intrinsic motivation and satisfaction. Participants highlighted the fulfilling nature of their work, which aligns with Herzberg's motivators related to the content of the work itself.

However, the study also uncovered some challenges tied to hygiene factors, which were job placement difficulties and economic stability. Initial job placement difficulties, especially in regions with lower demand, indicate that external conditions like job availability and support services need improvement to prevent dissatisfaction. While many graduates found satisfaction in their jobs, the external economic factors and regional variations in job demand highlighted the importance of stable and supportive employment conditions, which Herzberg identifies as critical hygiene factors.

Holland's Theory of Vocational Choice. Holland's Theory of Vocational Choice

emphasizes the fit between an individual's personality and their occupational environment. The study's findings support and extend this theory by showing how graduates' satisfaction and career success were influenced by the alignment between personality-job fit, career development, and adaptability and versatility. Graduates often chose technical fields that matched their interests and personalities. For example, those who pursued diesel mechanics or welding enjoyed practical, hands-on work and problem-solving, which are key aspects of Holland's Realistic and Investigative personality types. The alignment between vocational interests and job roles facilitated career growth and job satisfaction. Graduates who found jobs that matched their vocational personalities reported higher levels of job satisfaction and a sense of career fulfillment. The study also highlighted that technical education provided graduates with versatile skills, allowing them to adapt to various roles within their fields. This adaptability aligns with Holland's idea that individuals with congruent vocational personalities and work environments are more likely to be satisfied and successful in their careers.

Integration and Contribution to Theories. This study contributes to both Herzberg's and Holland's theories by reinforcing the importance of motivators, highlighting the role of hygiene factors, supporting personality-job fit, and advocating the applicability and impact of technical education through empirical evidence. The satisfaction derived from achievement, recognition, and the work itself emphasizes the critical role of motivators in career satisfaction, supporting Herzberg's theory. The challenges related to job placement and economic conditions underscore the necessity of addressing hygiene factors to prevent job dissatisfaction. The study confirms Holland's theory by showing how well-aligned personality and job environments lead to higher job satisfaction and career success. By providing empirical evidence of how two-year technical degrees impact employability and job satisfaction, the study extends the applicability of

these theories to the context of technical education and regional employment dynamics. These theoretical implications suggest that enhancing technical education programs and addressing external employment conditions can significantly improve job satisfaction and career outcomes for graduates, aligning with the principles of Herzberg's and Holland's theories.

Human Capital Theory. In addition to the two theories used, this study also strongly supports the Human Capital Theory, which posits that investment in education and training enhances individual productivity and employability (Becker, 1964). The participants' experiences of increased job opportunities and career growth as a result of their technical education corroborate this theory.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). The findings of this study also align with SCCT, which emphasizes the role of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals in career development (Lent et al., 1994). Graduates' personal fulfillment and job satisfaction reports indicate that their educational experiences positively influenced their self-efficacy and career outcomes.

Limitations and Delimitations

This section discusses the potential weaknesses (limitations) of the study that were beyond the researcher's control, as well as the purposeful decisions (delimitations) made to define the scope and focus of the study. The limitations highlight potential weaknesses beyond the researcher's control, such as sample size, self-reporting biases, external events, technology issues, and non-participation. The delimitations reflect the purposeful decisions made to narrow the study's focus, including participant selection, geographic focus, research design, time frame, and industry focus. Understanding these factors is crucial for interpreting the study's findings and recognizing the context within which the research was conducted.

Limitations

Every research study has its inherent limitations, and this one is no exception. While the findings offer valuable insights into the perceived value of two-year technical degrees, several factors may affect the breadth and applicability of these conclusions. The limitations primarily stem from the study's sample size and composition, which were relatively small and geographically concentrated. This limitation, along with potential biases in self-reporting and the influence of external events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, could influence the generalizability and depth of the findings. Additionally, technological issues during data collection and the non-participation of some potential participants further constrained the study. Each of these factors is discussed in more detail below to provide a comprehensive understanding of the study's constraints.

Sample Size and Composition. One of the primary limitations of this study is the relatively small and homogenous sample size. The participants were primarily from specific geographic locations and industries, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. This geographical constraint may not capture the diverse experiences of individuals in different regions or those involved in other technical fields. Consequently, the insights derived may be more reflective of the particular local contexts and industries rather than offering a universally applicable understanding.

Future research could benefit from a broader and more diverse sample that includes participants from various geographic regions and technical disciplines to provide a more comprehensive view. Expanding the sample size would also allow for the exploration of additional variables, such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status, which could provide a more nuanced understanding of how different demographic factors influence the perceived value and

impact of two-year technical degrees. Including participants from a wider array of industries and educational backgrounds would enhance the robustness of the findings and improve the generalizability to other contexts and populations.

Self-Reporting Bias. The data collected from interviews, letter writing, and focus groups relied on self-reporting by participants, which is subject to biases such as exaggeration, selective memory, and social desirability. Participants may have portrayed their experiences more positively or negatively than they actually were. This inherent bias in self-reported data can sometimes skew the findings, making it challenging to assess the objective impact of two-year technical degrees accurately. Additionally, the personal reflections of participants, while valuable, may not always align with empirical measures of success or satisfaction, which could affect the study's overall reliability.

To mitigate these biases in future research, incorporating triangulation methods—such as combining self-reported data with objective measures like employment records, academic performance, and employer feedback—could provide a more balanced and accurate representation of the impact of two-year technical degrees. Additionally, employing techniques such as longitudinal studies could help track changes over time, offering deeper insights into how graduates' perceptions and outcomes evolve, thus minimizing the immediate biases present in self-reported data.

External Events. The study was conducted during a time when external factors, such as economic fluctuations and the COVID-19 pandemic, could have influenced participants' experiences and perceptions of their technical education and job prospects. These events were beyond the control of the researcher and may have impacted the findings. For instance, the pandemic significantly altered employment landscapes and educational delivery methods,

potentially affecting participants' views and opportunities in ways that would not be present under normal circumstances. The economic instability during this period might have also heightened the challenges faced by graduates, influencing their responses and the study's outcomes.

Given the impact of these external events, it is crucial to consider how such factors might continue to affect the value and perception of two-year technical degrees in future studies. Researchers could explore how graduates from different periods, including pre- and post-pandemic eras, perceive their education and employment opportunities. Additionally, understanding the long-term effects of such significant events on the job market and educational outcomes could provide valuable insights into how to better support graduates during times of economic and social upheaval.

Technology Issues. There were occasional technology failures during the data collection process, particularly with virtual interviews and focus groups. These issues sometimes interrupted the flow of conversation and may have affected the depth and quality of the data collected. Technical disruptions could lead to incomplete data or missed nuances in participants' responses, impacting the richness and accuracy of the findings. Moreover, the reliance on virtual communication may have also affected participants' comfort levels and engagement, potentially limiting the depth of insights gathered during the study.

Addressing these technological challenges in future research could involve adopting more reliable and user-friendly virtual communication tools, providing participants with technical support, and ensuring backup plans for data collection processes. Enhancing the technical infrastructure and support for virtual data collection can help minimize disruptions and ensure that the quality and depth of data collected are maintained. Additionally, exploring hybrid data

collection methods that combine virtual and in-person interactions could offer a more flexible and resilient approach, accommodating various participant preferences and technological capabilities.

Non-Participation. Some potential participants either refused to participate or withdrew from the study, which may have resulted in a less comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being studied. Their absence might have excluded critical perspectives that could have enriched the findings. This non-participation could particularly impact the study's ability to capture a full range of experiences and views, especially from those who may have had more negative or diverse perspectives on the value of two-year technical degrees. Addressing this limitation in future research could involve strategies to increase participant retention and encourage broader participation across different demographics and experiences.

To enhance participant engagement and retention, future studies could implement more proactive recruitment strategies, such as offering incentives, ensuring clear communication of the study's importance, and providing flexible participation options. Additionally, reaching out to underrepresented groups and making concerted efforts to include a diverse range of participants could help capture a wider array of experiences and perspectives. Employing follow-up techniques to understand reasons for non-participation or withdrawal could also inform better strategies for maintaining participant involvement in future research endeavors.

Delimitations

Delimitations are purposeful boundaries set by the researcher to narrow the focus and scope of the study. They help define the study's framework and ensure a concentrated examination of specific elements that align with the research objectives. In this study, several delimitations were established to provide a clear and focused exploration of the value of two-

year technical degrees. These delimitations include participant selection criteria, geographic focus, research design, time frame of data collection, and focus on specific industries. Each of these delimitations shaped the study's approach and findings, offering insights that are deeply relevant to the targeted aspects of technical education and employment outcomes.

Participant Selection. This study was delimited to individuals who had completed a two-year technical degree program. This decision was made to specifically explore the experiences and outcomes of this particular group, thereby excluding those with different educational backgrounds. By focusing on graduates of two-year technical programs, the study aimed to gain a detailed understanding of how these degrees impact employability, job satisfaction, and career progression. This narrow focus allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the specific benefits and challenges associated with two-year technical education.

However, this delimitation also means that the findings may not apply to individuals with other types of educational backgrounds, such as those with four-year degrees or vocational training without formal certification. Future research could expand the participant pool to include these other educational paths to provide a broader perspective on how different forms of education influence career outcomes. Additionally, comparing the experiences of two-year technical degree holders with those of graduates from other educational programs could offer valuable insights into the unique contributions and limitations of technical education.

Geographic Focus. This study focused on participants from specific geographic regions known for their technical education programs and industries. This choice was made to provide a detailed examination of these regions, but it may limit the applicability of the findings to other areas. Concentrating on certain regions allowed the study to delve deeply into the local context, examining how regional job markets and industry demands influence the experiences of

technical graduates. This regional focus provided rich, context-specific insights into the value and challenges of two-year technical degrees within these locales.

However, this geographical delimitation also means that the findings may not fully capture the experiences of individuals in regions with different economic conditions, industry structures, or educational systems. Future research could explore similar studies in diverse geographic areas to assess whether the findings of this study hold true across different settings. By expanding the geographic focus, researchers can identify commonalities and differences in how two-year technical degrees are valued and how graduates fare in various regional job markets. This broader perspective would enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of technical education across different contexts.

Research Design. This study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically hermeneutic phenomenology, to deeply explore the lived experiences of the participants. This approach was chosen to gain rich, detailed insights, but it also means the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable. The qualitative design allowed for an in-depth understanding of how graduates perceive and experience the value of their technical degrees, capturing the nuances and complexities of their personal and professional journeys. This methodological choice provided a deep, narrative-rich perspective on the individual and collective experiences of the participants.

However, the reliance on qualitative methods also means that the findings are based on a relatively small sample and are shaped by the subjective interpretations of both the participants and the researcher. To complement these insights, future research could employ mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative depth with quantitative breadth, providing a more balanced

view that includes statistically generalizable data. This approach would allow researchers to validate the qualitative findings with larger-scale surveys or longitudinal studies, enhancing the robustness and applicability of the results across broader populations.

Time Frame. The data collection was conducted over a specific period, which may not capture long-term changes in participants' careers or educational experiences. The findings, therefore, reflect a snapshot in time rather than ongoing developments. By focusing on a particular time frame, the study was able to provide detailed insights into the immediate and short-term impacts of two-year technical degrees on graduates' employability and job satisfaction. This temporal focus helped in understanding the current state and recent experiences of the participants.

However, the limitation of this time-bound approach is that it does not account for the dynamic nature of careers and the evolving job market. Participants' experiences and perceptions may change significantly over time as they progress in their careers or as industry conditions shift. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to track graduates' experiences over extended periods, offering a more comprehensive view of how the value of technical degrees evolves and impacts career trajectories over time. This long-term perspective would provide deeper insights into the sustained benefits and potential challenges that graduates may encounter as their professional lives unfold.

Focus on Specific Industries. This study focused on industries such as EMS, welding, diesel technology, and aesthetics. This delimitation allowed for a more focused analysis but may not capture the experiences of graduates in other technical fields. By concentrating on these specific industries, the study was able to provide detailed insights into how two-year technical degrees are valued and utilized within these sectors. This focused approach highlighted the

unique demands, opportunities, and challenges faced by graduates in these fields, offering targeted recommendations for enhancing educational and career outcomes.

However, this focus also means that the findings may not be fully applicable to graduates in other technical disciplines, such as information technology, healthcare, or renewable energy. Future research could expand the scope to include a wider range of industries, exploring how two-year technical degrees impact graduates across different sectors. By broadening the focus, researchers can identify industry-specific trends and generalizable patterns, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the role of technical education in various professional contexts. This expanded analysis would help in tailoring educational programs to better meet the diverse needs of graduates and employers across multiple industries.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study highlight several areas where further research could deepen our understanding of the value and impact of two-year technical degrees. To build on these insights, future research should focus on exploring the long-term career trajectories of graduates, the effectiveness of support services and professional development programs, and the influence of local economic conditions and industry demands. These recommendations not only aim to fill gaps in the current literature but also provide practical insights for various stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, employers, and graduates themselves.

Long-Term Career Trajectories

Future research should investigate the long-term career trajectories of graduates with two-year technical degrees to better understand their career progression and the ongoing value of their education. While this study provides a snapshot of graduates' immediate post-graduation experiences, it is essential to track how their careers evolve. This research could reveal how two-

year technical degrees support sustained career growth, adaptability, and long-term job satisfaction. By examining these trajectories, researchers can identify patterns and factors that contribute to successful career outcomes and inform strategies for lifelong career development.

Understanding long-term career trajectories helps graduates make informed decisions about their education and career paths, ensuring they can maximize the value of their technical degrees. Insights into graduates' long-term success can guide curriculum development and career counseling services, aligning educational programs more closely with the needs of the job market. Information on career trajectories can inform policymakers that support technical education and workforce development, promoting sustained economic growth and employment opportunities.

Effectiveness of Support Services and Professional Development

Studies could explore the effectiveness of different types of support services and professional development programs in enhancing job placement and career satisfaction. Many technical institutions provide career services, job placement assistance, and continuing education opportunities, but the impact of these services on graduates' success remains underexplored. Research in this area could evaluate which support mechanisms are most effective in helping graduates secure employment, advance in their careers, and maintain job satisfaction. This information would be invaluable in refining these programs to better meet the needs of students and graduates.

By identifying effective support services and professional development programs, institutions can enhance their offerings to better support student success and improve their job placement rates. Understanding which professional development programs are most beneficial can help employers invest in initiatives that enhance employee skills and contribute to

organizational growth. Access to effective support services and professional development programs empowers students and graduates to navigate the job market more successfully and achieve their career goals.

Comparative Studies Between Different Regions and Industries

Comparative studies between different regions and industries could provide insights into how local economic conditions and industry demands influence the outcomes of technical education. The demand for technical skills and the availability of job opportunities can vary significantly across regions and sectors. Research comparing the experiences of graduates in diverse geographic and industrial contexts can highlight best practices and identify areas where technical education needs to be adapted to meet local needs. Such studies could also explore the role of well-established advisory boards in facilitating successful industry-education partnerships and aligning educational programs with labor market demands.

Understanding regional variations in job market outcomes can help local governments develop targeted economic and workforce development strategies that support technical education and address specific labor market needs. Comparative studies can inform industry leaders and advisory boards on how to effectively collaborate with educational institutions to create programs that meet local and sector-specific demands. Insights from comparative studies can guide institutions in tailoring their programs to better align with regional and industry-specific requirements, improving the relevance and impact of their technical education offerings. Expanding on these areas of research will provide valuable insights that can enhance the effectiveness and relevance of two-year technical education programs. These efforts will ultimately benefit a wide range of stakeholders, including graduates seeking successful careers,

educators striving to improve their programs, policymakers working to support workforce development, and employers looking for skilled workers to drive their businesses forward.

Conclusion

The problem addressed by this study is that college graduates in a southeastern state in the United States face difficulties securing employment, with many experiencing unemployment or horizontal skills mismatch. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how graduates of Zion Mountain Institute of Technology perceive the value of their two-year technical degrees, as they align with, and influence employability, job satisfaction, and career growth. The findings of this study indicate that two-year technical degrees significantly enhance employability, provide practical skills, and contribute to career satisfaction while recognizing that individuals inclined towards skilled trades might find a better fit with a two-year degree.

Graduates consistently highlighted the hands-on training and industry-relevant knowledge they gained, which directly translated to increased job opportunities, leadership roles, and further specializations, contributing to long-term career growth and advancements. Policies that encourage ongoing professional development and lifelong learning were also deemed essential, as employers should recognize the value of two-year technical degrees and provide opportunities for graduates to further develop their skills through on-the-job training, certifications, and continuous education programs. Challenges such as initial job placement difficulties and the limitations of a two-year degree in providing advanced opportunities were also noted, emphasizing the need for continuous professional development and adaptation to evolving industry standards. The study's implications for policy and practice highlighted an

institutional need for stronger career services, partnerships with local businesses, and more robust job placement programs to support graduates.

Overall, two-year technical degrees from Zion Mountain Institute of Technology are generally perceived as valuable for enhancing employability, providing practical skills, and facilitating career satisfaction. This comprehensive view underscores the role of two-year technical degrees in not only securing initial employment but also in fostering long-term career satisfaction and growth. The study offers insights for policymakers, educators, and employers to better support technical education and improve outcomes for graduates.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

December 15, 2023

Jonathan Hartwell
Sharon Farrell

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-724 PERCEIVED DEGREE VALUE AMONGST TWO-YEAR TECHNICAL SCHOOL GRADUATES, AND REGIONAL EMPLOYERS: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Jonathan Hartwell, Sharon Farrell,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data-safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at

irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Site Permission Letter

September 24, 2023

President
Zion Mountain Institute of Technology
123 College Circle
Southern, WV 25813

Dear President,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is PERCEIVED DEGREE VALUE AMONGST TWO-YEAR TECHNICAL SCHOOL GRADUATES, AND REGIONAL EMPLOYERS: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY, and the purpose of my research is to gain an in-depth understanding of how graduates of a community and technical college in a southeastern state in the United States perceive the value of their two-year technical degrees.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at Zion Mountain Institute of Technology to access and utilize graduate student contact data for recruitment purposes.

Participants will be asked to complete the attached survey, contact me to schedule an interview, and engage in focus groups. The data will be used to understand graduates' perceptions of the degree they have earned as it pertains to job satisfaction. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

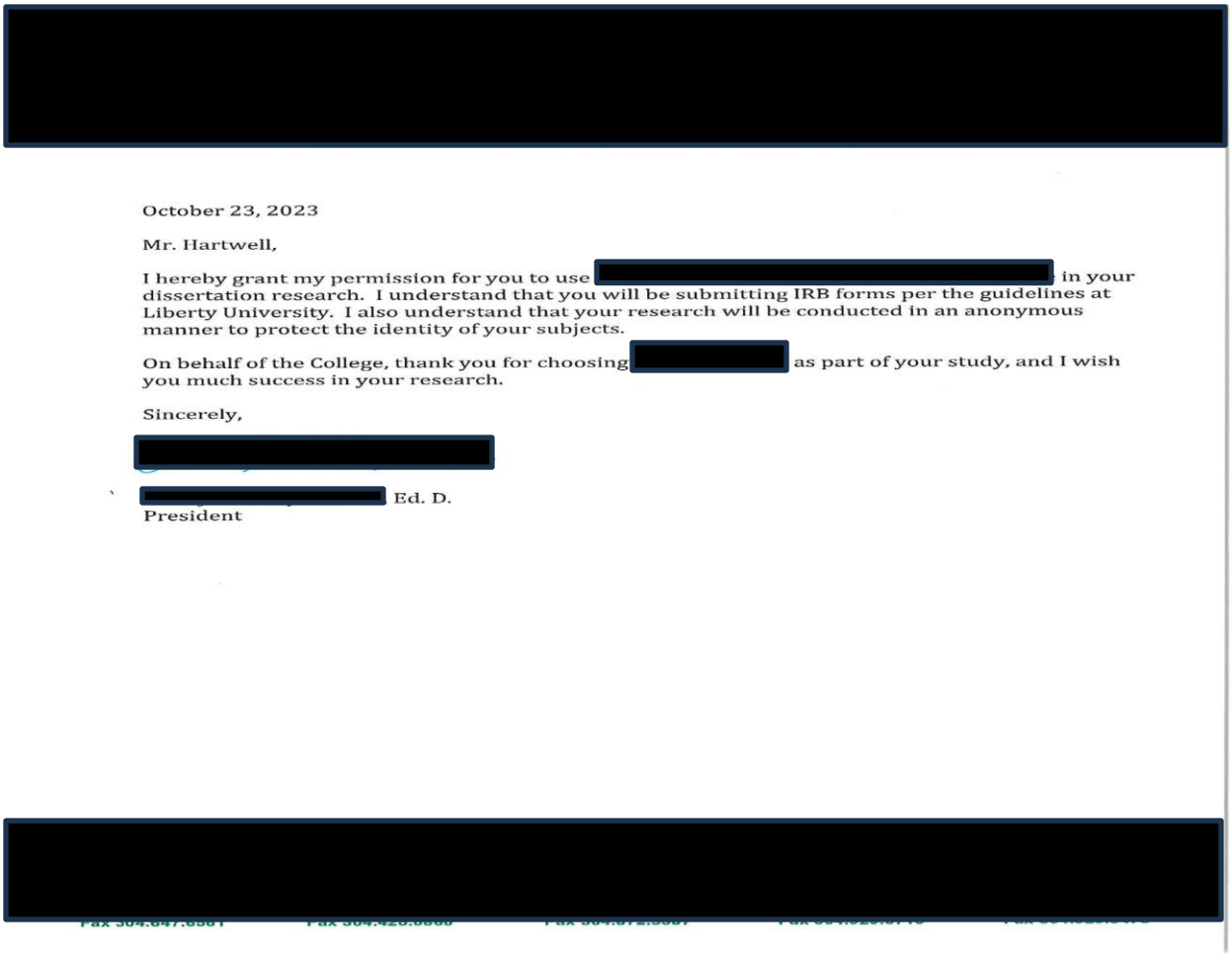
Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on an official letterhead indicating your approval.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Hartwell
Doctoral Candidate - Liberty University

Appendix C

Site Approval Letter



[redacted]

October 23, 2023

Mr. Hartwell,

I hereby grant my permission for you to use [redacted] in your dissertation research. I understand that you will be submitting IRB forms per the guidelines at Liberty University. I also understand that your research will be conducted in an anonymous manner to protect the identity of your subjects.

On behalf of the College, thank you for choosing [redacted] as part of your study, and I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

[redacted] Ed. D.
President

[redacted]

Appendix D

Participant Recruiting Letter

Dear Potential Participant:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand the relationship between technical school graduates, employment availability, industry buy-in with educational institutions, and the struggles of attaining employment in graduates' fields of study. The purpose of my research is to gain an in-depth understanding of how graduates of a two-year technical college in Southern West Virginia perceive the value of their two-year technical degrees, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older and currently classified as graduates of a two-year institution that received an associate degree (AAS), or a certificate of applied science (CAS) in a technical field of study. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an audio/video-recorded, one-on-one interview through Microsoft Teams (Approximately 45 minutes), one audio/video-recorded focus group session through Microsoft Teams (Approximately 60 minutes), and to compose and submit a concise 400-word letter that concentrates on advising their younger selves on the best practices toward securing employment in their chosen field of study. This guidance should reflect on their own experiences, lessons learned, and valuable insights gained throughout their academic and professional journey. (Approximately 45 minutes). Participants will be asked to review transcripts from their interviews and focus group sessions for accuracy. Participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected. As compensation, participants will receive a one-time Amazon gift card of $50 upon confirming the accuracy of the interview and focus group transcripts, specific to their participation. Additionally, participants will be entered into a raffle to receive a hand-made cigar box guitar, valued at $200.
To participate, please contact me at jhartwell2@liberty.edu or jhartwell@newriver.edu.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Hartwell
PhD Candidate, Liberty University
jhartwell2@liberty.edu

Appendix E

Participant Consent Form

Title of the Project: PERCEIVED DEGREE VALUE AMONGST TWO-YEAR TECHNICAL SCHOOL GRADUATES, AND REGIONAL EMPLOYERS: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
Principal Investigator: Jonathan Hartwell, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and currently classified as a graduate of a two-year technical college in a southeastern state in the United States. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to gain an in-depth understanding of how graduates of a community and technical college in Southern West Virginia perceive the value of their two-year technical degrees.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Participate in one audio-recorded face-to-face interview (45 minutes).
2. Participate in one audio-recorded focus group session (60 minutes).
3. Provide a 400-word letter (45 minutes).
4. Participants will be asked to review transcripts from their interview and focus group session for accuracy.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include a greater awareness of lifelong learning to achieve personal and professional goals.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with people outside of the group.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher and members of his doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

At the conclusion of the data collection process participants will be entered into a raffle to receive a $50 Amazon gift card. Any participant who chooses to withdraw from the study after beginning but before completing all study procedures will not be eligible to receive compensation.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Jonathan Hartwell. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at 304-XXX-XXXX

jhartwell2@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Sharon Farrell, at sfarrell4@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you agree to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date