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**Stewart, Dean H. *The Impact of Short Term Credentials: An Analysis of a Technical College Customer Service Certificate Program***

**Abstract**

This study sought to examine the lived experiences of participants of a grant funded, short term customer service certificate program for case managed unemployed adults, offered by a Midwestern technical college across two academic years; 2014 – 2015. This qualitative, phenomenological study employed personal interviews with selected program completers to gain a deeper understanding of their employment and educational attainment perceptions, in an effort to inform and guide the future development of short duration credentials. The study revealed that short term credentials can serve as a catalyst for enhanced employment and further educational opportunities, given the presence of several factors; the encouragement and support of others including employers, instructors and peers, the inclusion of a work based learning model that mirrors the conditions and behaviors required in the work environment, and the alignment of the training to in-demand occupations. The “Cliff Effect” was found to be an unintended outcome for some completers. Recommendations for future program design support the inclusion of employers in program design and delivery, the use of an Adult Learning Cohort Model, the creation of a speed to market occupational pathways, the addition of financial coaching to student support, and reinforcement of the concept of life-long learning.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Employers today are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain talent they need for positions they have available. A recent study by the Manpower Group indicated that 35% of 38,000 employers worldwide have difficulty finding available talent, while in the United States, that percentage rose to 39% (Bessen, 2014). This talent shortage has led many employers to seek speed to market solutions from post-secondary institutions. Essentially, companies need skilled workers; thereby, attaining credentials and skills in the least amount of time possible to meet their immediate and growing workforce needs (Austin, Mellow, Rosin, & Seltzer, 2012).

In response to employer demand for talent, there has been significant growth in short term credentials awarded by public community and technical colleges (Soliz, 2016). The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) identifies two forms of these types of credentials; long-term certificates; which require at least one year of education but less than two, and short-term certificates; which require less than one year of full time study (Soliz, 2016). Between 2000 and 2012, long-term certificates awarded grew by 63%, while short-term certificates awarded by community and technical colleges increased by 157%. In comparison, the number of associate's degrees granted by community and technical colleges grew by 47% during the same time period (Soliz, 2016).

Despite this growth, there is conflicting evidence that these certificates are of real value to the individuals who obtain them. While some studies have indicated these credentials provide enhanced job prospects and a pathway to further academic attainment, other research has shown that post-secondary certificates provide little or no additional benefit to the students who possess them (Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012).

The evidence supporting either position is limited. The majority of the research and literature to date is quantitative in nature, and has focused primarily on the economic return of bachelor and associate degrees (Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012; Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012). Considerably less resources have been spent assessing the value of credentials that exist that are less than an associate degree but more than a high school or its equivalent degree. Additionally, research about the social impact of the aforementioned credential attainment for both graduates and employers is largely absent (Carnevale, 2016; Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012; Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Ganzglass, 2014; Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012).

The social significance is important because the impact of a credential transcends the immediate wage increase (Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum, & Stephan, 2011). Post-secondary educational attainment can be life changing in many ways, particularly for those who have reached an impasse in their lives. As the world around them rapidly changes, those without post-secondary credentials often find themselves stuck, and unable to create the career and life that they desire (Austin, Mellow, Rosin, & Seltzer, 2012; Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016).

This stands in contrast to a generation ago, where students could graduate from high school, find a job, and live a comfortable middle class existence (Carnevale & Rose, 2015). Today, those individuals with only a high school education find themselves falling further and further behind both economically and socially from those who have at least some college (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016).

Pursuing a post-secondary credential can be problematic as many adults come to the realization that they need more education at a point in their life where they are constrained in their ability to pursue a degree (Rabourn, Shoup, & BrckaLorenz, 2015). Family circumstances

and support, financial limitations, academic preparedness and work responsibilities are most often cited as reasons that adults don't finish or don't start community college programs (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012).

### **Service Sector Employment**

Over the past few decades, the United States has transformed from a manufacturing driven economy to one dominated by the service sector (Wilson, 2014). This service sector employment growth has fueled the demand for a more highly skilled and trained workforce (Carnevale & Rose, 2015) In response, there has been tremendous growth in the number and type of post-secondary education and training options available to those wishing to pursue a degree (Carnevale & Rose, 2015 Soliz, 2016 ). As a result, the education level of the U.S. population is at an all-time high. Looking specifically at post-secondary educational attainment, 61% of the populace has at least some education beyond high school, versus just 25% just a half century ago (Carnevale & Rose, 2015).

One service segment experiencing significant employment growth is non-retail customer service. Comprised of diverse roles requiring at least some post-secondary training, total employment in this segment is expected to grow 10% nationally by 2024 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). This projected growth rate outpaces the anticipated 7% employment increase in all occupational sectors during this same time frame (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

The non-retail customer service segment spans multiple industries and incorporates a variety of occupations including; patient care, call center management, client relations and technical support (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). As in other industries, organizations engaged in this segment are finding it increasingly difficult to find the talent they need for the positions they have available. While multiple issues hamper recruitment efforts, low

unemployment rates and lack of skilled workers are most often cited as primary factors hindering results (Forward Service Corporation, 2014; Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, 2016).

### **Context in Which the Central Focus of Study Resides**

In response to this growing demand for skilled customer service labor, four major Midwestern employers approached a local technical college and two agencies providing case management to unemployed adults, to explore opportunities to enhance their local job market. After several months of scoping and development sessions, the partnership successfully applied for a state grant to fund the creation of a six-week customer service certificate program intended to transition service agency clientele from unemployment to occupations in the local service sector.

Each partner played a significant role in the creation, deployment and execution of the program. The technical college furnished the instructors, classrooms and curriculum development while the service agencies acted as the financial manager for the grant and provided prescreened students for participation in the program. In addition, the employers' imparted critical insight into desired outcomes during curriculum development, opened their doors for tours, and provided students assistance such as resume building and mock interviews.

Over two grant periods across 2014 and 2015, three cohorts participated in the program. In total, 72 students were served, with 65 successfully completing and graduating with the certificate (Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, 2017).

### **Statement of the Problem**

While there has been significant growth in short term certificates awarded by public community and technical colleges over the past few decades due to workforce demand (Soliz,

2016), there is little empirical evidence that these credentials provide the outcomes or value for which they are intended (Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012).

Research that exists is primarily quantitative in nature and focuses chiefly on the wage return of credentials for those attain them (Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012; Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012). Currently, empirical data exists related to short-term credential attainment; however, there is a lack of direct insight whether short term certificates provide adult completers a viable pathway towards immediate and future employment and educational success.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The study sought to examine the lived experiences of participants of a grant funded, short term customer service certificate program for case managed unemployed adults, offered by a Midwestern technical college across two academic years; 2014 – 2015. In particular, this qualitative, descriptive study explores the program through a deeper understanding of program completer's future employment and educational attainment perceptions. Specifically, the purpose of the study is to inform and guide future development and assessment of short duration certificates.

### **Self-efficacy**

This research is informed by the theory of self-efficacy. Developed by psychologist Alfred Bandura, the theory supports the notion that optimism in one's abilities plays a key role in determining a successful outcome (Akhtar, 2008; Buchanan, 2016). Bandura's believes that "self-efficacy is not a trait that some have and others don't...Instead he proposes that anyone, regardless of their past or current environment, has the ability to exercise and strengthen their self-efficacy" (Buchanan, 2016, para. 10).

Bandura proposes that there are four ways in which to do this. These are through *mastery*; building self-confidence by overcoming challenges and mastering tasks, *social modeling*; through choosing role models that have overcome adversity or similar challenges, *social persuasion*; by finding a positive mentor to support and challenge an individual's growth, and finally *states of physiology*; by relieving tension, anxiety and weariness and replacing them with feelings of positivity through introspection and education (Akhtar, 2008; Buchanan, 2016).

Self-efficacy plays a critical role in determining successful future outcomes, especially for those from challenging environments (Buchanan, 2016). Akhtar (2008) suggests that "some psychologists rate self-efficacy above talent in the recipe for success" (para. 4).

### **Research Questions**

The study set out to answer the following research questions:

- What was the certificate completers perceived experience of entering, committing to, and completing the certificate program?
- What employment and further educational outcomes occurred for completers as a result of participating in the customer service certificate program?
- How do completers of the customer service certificate program describe their preparedness for the occupations they were trained for?

### **Assumptions of the Study**

This research is influenced by the following assumptions that the researcher perceived to be true based on their proximity to and involvement in the development and implementation of short-duration credential programs.

- Certificates are valued by employers as a means to acquire competent employees with specified needed skillsets.

- Prospective employees realize occupational competence and financial benefits by earning them.
- The participants will answer the interview questions in an honest and candid manner (Wargo, 2015).
- Participants have a sincere interest in participating in the study and are not driven by any other motives (Wargo, 2015).
- The inclusion criteria of the sample are appropriate and therefore, assures that the participants have all experienced the same or similar phenomenon of the study (Wargo, 2015).

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions are provided as a means of ensuring consistency and comprehension throughout the study.

**Capta.** As this is a qualitative, phenomenological study, capta will be a primary source of information to the research. Capta is defined as “conscious experience that is given significance through one’s own interpretation” (Orbe, 2009, p. 750). Drucker (2011) maintains that capta differs from data in that “capta is taken actively, while data is assumed.....to be recorded and observed” (para. 3).

**Completer.** One who has come to an end; finished (Dictionary.com, 2017). For this study, this translates to one who has finished a short term certificate.

**Short term certificate.** A post-secondary credential that requires less than one year to complete (Soliz, 2016).

**Speed to Market credentials.** “Speed to Market” is a strategy employed by organizations in an effort to gain a competitive advantage. Primarily used in new product

development, it typically measures the time from inception to introduction in the marketplace (Chen, Reilly, & Lynn, 2005). In relation to credentials, organizations are looking to fill critical positions with qualified individuals as quickly as possible in order to maintain their competitive edge over their competitors.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations to this study. As the author is a senior leader at an institution in the Wisconsin Technical College system, unintended bias may be introduced into the interview process, as well as the coding, analysis and interpretation of data and capta. An additional limitation is that the researcher is focusing on select completers of a single certificate program from one community college in the Midwestern United States. As the sample size is limited, the results of the research may not be generalizable to a larger population. A final limiting factor may be access to participants. In particular, the researcher may encounter difficulty when reaching out to former students of the program.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

In response to growing labor shortages in certain sectors of the workforce, public community and technical colleges have increased the number of certificates awarded (Soliz, 2016). The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) identifies two forms of these types of credentials; long-term certificates; which require at least one year of education but less than two, and short-term certificates; which require less than one year of full time study (Soliz, 2016). Between 2000 and 2012, long-term certificates awarded grew by 63%, while short-term certificates awarded by community and technical colleges increased by 157%. In comparison, the number of associate's degrees granted by community and technical colleges grew by 47% during the same time period (Soliz, 2016).

While this strategy addresses the speed to market solution desired by employers, there is conflicting evidence that these certificates are of real value to the individuals who obtain them. While some studies have indicated these credentials provide enhanced job prospects and a pathway to further academic attainment (Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012; Schneider, 2015), others have shown that these post-secondary certificates provide little or no additional benefit to the students who possess them (Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Gitterman, Moulton, Bono-Lunn, & Chrisco, 2015; Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012; Soliz, 2016).

The research surrounding the value of certificates remains limited; and what has been undertaken has focused primarily on the economic benefits of these credentials (Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012; Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012; Schneider, 2015). There is considerably less study on other potential paybacks associated with earning a certificate.

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight literature related to the need for, and the impact of post-secondary certificates. In particular, the literature is arranged to explore the

following major subject areas: theoretical background for exploring credential attainment; the need for a more educated workforce; types and providers of short term credentials; the value of work and finally, rethinking credentials in today's environment.

### **Theoretical Background**

Career Development Theory provides a useful framework for studying the value of credentials. In particular, Donald Super's Life Span/Life Space Theory of Career Development offers a compelling theoretical construct (National Institute of Health, 2016).

Originally formulated in the 1950's, the Super Developmental Model emphasizes "how personal experiences interact with occupational preferences in creating one's self concept" (National Institute of Health, 2016, para. 1). Broken into five life stages, and nine life spaces, the theory emphasizes that one's self concept can develop and change over time based on their experiences (Okocha, 2001).

While these five stages are typically associated with biological age segments, persons will cycle through stages throughout their life based on their career and life experiences (Canadian Career Development Foundation, n.d.). The National Institute of Health (2016) identifies these life stages as:

- Growth – the development of self-concept attitudes;
- Exploration – tentative choice and skill development through trial;
- Establishment - entry-level skill building and stabilizing work experience;
- Maintenance - continual adjustment process to improve position;
- Disengagement - reduced output, preparation for retirement (para. 5).

The major implication is that vocational maturity does not necessarily correspond with biological age (National Institute of Health, 2016). For example, while one person may be

experiencing exploration during their teens, another may be going through a mid-life crisis, and recycling through this stage in their late 30's (National Institute of Health, 2016).

People will often seek career satisfaction through roles in which they can express themselves, and implement and develop their self-concept (Canadian Career Development Foundation, n.d.). Individuals play different roles throughout their lifetime such as child, student, worker, citizen, leisurite and parent (National Institute of Health, 2016). Super believes that job satisfaction increases when a person's self-concept includes their working self as being integrated with the other roles an individual plays (Canadian Career Development Foundation, n.d.).

Okocha (2001) believes there are implications when applying this construct to individuals who have been marginalized by society; such as persons of color, LGBTQ, and those with disabilities (p. 5). She notes that lack of positive role models, self-efficacy issues, and forms of discrimination often play a role in limiting one's development of self-concept (Okocha, 2001). As a result, the ideal personal state for these populations may be negatively impacted or significantly underdeveloped (Okocha, 2001). This plays a key role in life choices, including the decision to pursue post-secondary education.

### **The Need for a More Educated Workforce**

Today's economy requires a more highly competent workforce. This demand has resulted in a *skills gap*; or that point where an organization, business sector, geographic region, or even nation can no longer fill critical jobs with individuals possessing the proper mix of knowledge, skills and abilities to be successful (ASTD, 2012). This skills gap is causing havoc for employers worldwide. It is estimated that by 2020, there will be a global shortage of approximately 95 million workers in high and middle skill jobs (ASTD, 2012), or those

occupations requiring at least some training and education beyond high school (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013).

This gap, and the resulting need for a more highly educated workforce stands in stark contrast to the economy of just 50 years ago. In the United States in 1970, 70% of jobs only required a high school diploma, and most occupations in this segment allowed for middle class or family sustaining earnings (Carnevale, 2016). In comparison, it is estimated that over 60% of jobs today require some sort of post-secondary training or education (Carnevale, 2016).

Job growth since the bottom of the Great Recession (mid 2008) has reinforced the need for a more highly skilled workforce. During the most recent economic downturn, the United States lost 7.2 million jobs; 5.6 million in occupations requiring only a high-school diploma (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). Since January 2010, the economy has added 11.6 million jobs; 11.5 million going to workers with at least some college education (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). The resulting impact is that workers possessing only a high school diploma recovered just 1% of the jobs that disappeared during the previous six years.

While this lack of recovery in low skill occupations appears to be a recent development, this segment has been slowly declining over the last few decades. As noted by Carnevale et al. (2016),

Between 1989 and 2016, total employment grew by 31 percent, from 114 million to 149 million jobs — a net increase of 35 million jobs. Yet the number of jobs for workers with a high school diploma or less actually declined by 13 percent over that period, a loss of 7.3 million jobs. (p. 13)

A factor influencing this decline in low skill jobs is growth in major business sectors whose occupations require at least some postsecondary education. These industry segments;

healthcare, business and financial services, education, and government, account for 46 percent of the current labor force (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). In contrast, these segments made up only 28 percent of the workforce in 1947 (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016).

On top of the employment advancement in these sectors, it is also estimated that 13 of the 20 fastest growing occupations projected by 2018 will require some postsecondary education while 18 of the 20 occupations projected to decline most rapidly will require only on-the-job training (Kazis, 2011).

To fill this need for a more highly educated workforce, the U.S. wants more adults to pursue some sort of post-secondary education (National Adult Learner Coalition, 2016). The reverse is actually occurring. While the United States is second in the world to Norway in baccalaureate degree attainment in percentage of adults over 25 (31%), the U.S. ranks only 16<sup>th</sup> in *sub-baccalaureate* attainment (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Hanson, 2012). What is even more startling is that while the demand for additional individuals with some post-secondary education continues to rise, the current generation of adults 24 – 34, have the same share of sub-baccalaureate achievement (10%) as the current baby-boomer generation in the workforce 55 – 64 (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Hanson, 2012).

This level of completion stands in stark contrast to other industrialized nations. For example, 27% of Canadians over 25 hold a baccalaureate degree, with another 24% earning a sub-baccalaureate credential. Japan has similar numbers with 27% and 16% (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Hanson, 2012). In a world that is increasingly integrated, this disparity can have a significant negative impact on the U.S. economy in the future (Heim, 2016).

## **The Value of Work**

Over the last third of the 20th century and into the next, the U.S. economy has shifted from one “driven by high school educated labor to one in which two in three jobs require some form of postsecondary education or training” (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016, p. 4). For those individuals who have kept pace, the rewards have been great (Carnevale & Rose, 2015). But those with only a high school education are increasingly left behind as they lose access to family sustaining wage careers and are forced to settle for the low skill, low wage jobs that are left (Austin, Mellow, Rosin, & Seltzer, 2012; National Adult Learner Coalition, 2016).

Unfortunately, it’s not just individuals that are impacted. As Carnevale et al. note (2016), families and entire communities are feeling the effects of this educational shift:

The human cost of these trends for workers without postsecondary education, their families, and their communities has been immense. As factories and mines have closed and office and administrative support functions have been automated, men and women without a college education — who were previously able to build a middleclass life and raise a family — found themselves out of a job, often for prolonged periods of time and, in some cases, even detached from the labor force.....The negative effects of joblessness have even been shown to transcend generations, with children whose fathers have been displaced from their jobs earning percent lower annual wages as adults compared to similar children whose fathers did not face this challenge. (p. 16)

Since the most recent financial crisis, the importance and value of work and the “theme of employment has returned to the forefront of the international (economic) development agenda” (Fischer, 2014, para. 1). As Fischer (2014) notes, “the social value of work has been

recognized within this revived attention” (para. 1), and a more human development approach is being implemented.

This human development approach is broader and deeper than simply creating employment opportunities for individuals (Jahan, 2015). It is about recognizing that work transcends the wage, and creates multiple “spillovers” that impact both individuals and society (Fischer, 2014). This includes the introduction of communal complexities such as the environmental impact of job creation (Jahan, 2015), and of benefits such as social identity, sense of fairness, and gender equality (Fischer, 2014).

As economist Richard Layard notes, “Work is good.....because it gives people meaning, self-respect and the chance to make a contribution; unemployment is bad because it robs them of all this” (Macaro & Baggini, 2011, para. 1). Jahan (2015) reinforces this notion in stating that work, “allows workers to participate fully in society while affording them a sense of dignity and worth” (p. 29).

Post-secondary education is the key to meaningful work and social mobility, especially for those in the lower economic strata (Greenstone, Looney, Patashnik, & Yu, 2013). Family wealth and societal factors are limiting many from pursuing that opportunity. As Greenstone, et al. (2013) explain:

Investments in education and skills, which are factors that increasingly determine outcomes in the job market, are becoming more stratified by family income. As income inequality has increased, wealthier parents are able to invest more in their children’s education and enrichment, increasing the already sizable difference in investment from those at the other end of the earnings distribution. This disparity has real and measurable consequences for the current generation of American children. (p. 1)

**The pursuit of a post-secondary education.** Of the 17.6 million individuals pursuing some post-secondary education in 2011, 2.6 million were first year students directly from high school, attending a four year college and living on campus (Ganzglass, 2014). The remaining 14.9 million were contemporary, or non-traditional students; including adults who are struggling “who must balance education, work, and family responsibilities as they work toward credentials that will help them advance in the labor market” (Ganzglass, 2014, p. 12).

A more recent study conducted in 2014 showed that 17.3 million students were enrolled in 2 and 4 year colleges and universities, with 6.7 million attending a private or public community or technical college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). At public funded 2-year colleges, over 27% of the population was over the age of 25; while at private non-profit and for-profit 2-year institutions, that total increased to 39% and 53% respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). When segregating part-time students in that same segment, the percentage of students over 25 rose dramatically, with 45% of public 2 year, 58% of private non-profit, and 65% of private for-profit populations falling in that category (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Focusing on race and ethnicity, white students enrolled at 2-year colleges make up the largest share of attendees at all types of degree granting institutions; 52% at public 2-year, 50% at private non-profit, and 38% at private for-profit (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Black students account for the second highest percentage of enrollees at private 2-year colleges; 27% non-profit and 28% for-profit, while Hispanic students comprise the second highest percentage (23%) at public institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). These percentages stand in contrast to the demographic make-up of the total U.S. population.

Based on recent census data, of a total population of 323,127,513, 61.6% are White non-Hispanic, 17.6% are Hispanic, and 13.6% are Black (United States Census Bureau, 2016).

Community and technical college attendees are more likely to come from a distressed socio-economic environment than their 4-year college counterparts (Eisenberg & Goldrick-Rab, 2016). This situation creates a framework of challenges and barriers that can have a significant impact on student success.

A recent study supports this. Research focusing on community college students revealed that 33% of the students studied face housing issues while 12% experience food insecurity (Wood, Harris III, & Delgado, 2017). In addition to basic financial challenges, these additional stressors impacted enrollment, persistence and completion (Wood, Harris III, & Delgado, 2017).

**The Cliff Effect.** As individuals of lower economic strata pursue credentials to improve their circumstances and move towards a more family sustaining wage, unintentional negative outcomes can occur. One of these consequences is the *Cliff Effect*. The *Cliff Effect* occurs when individuals who are eligible for public assistance programs, lose eligibility for those benefits due to increases in earned income, but are unable to generate enough income to replace the value of the subsidies (Circles USA, 2014; Pearce, 2007; Thomas, 2012). The unintended impact is that rather than having full time employment move a person towards greater economic independency, the reverse actually occurs.

### **Role of Post-Secondary Education Providers**

To allow adults to pursue meaningful work, higher education needs to break down those barriers that limit success (Eisenberg & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Carnevale, 2016; Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum, & Stephan, 2011). There are very specific challenges that post-secondary institutions of all types need to overcome to properly serve this population (National Adult

Learner Coalition, 2016). According to the National Adult Learner Coalition (2016), these challenges include:

- Multiple options in the educational marketplace create difficulty for adults to know what to study and what credentials are needed to move ahead;
- To assist in balancing life's responsibilities, adults demand that institutions provide fast, flexible, programming.

**Short-term certificates as credentials.** As occupations become increasingly more complex and technologically driven, the post-secondary marketplace has responded with a growing number of credentials, professional and industry-based certifications, and occupational licenses (Ganzglass, 2014). Unfortunately, as Carnevale (2016) notes, there is limited “learning or earning data on postsecondary outcomes in place,” which has led to “growing uncertainty about the quality and value of certificates as credentials, and confusion about how they compare to and relate with each other” (p. 3).

Much of this misunderstanding is driven by the myriad of credential choices available in the marketplace. Each option not only uses its own terminology; but assessment methods, standards, and quality assurance mechanisms to determine successful progress towards credential attainment (Ganzglass, 2014). Ganzglass (2014) identifies multiple post-secondary alternatives including:

- Educational credentials awarded by accredited educational institutions for completion of credit-bearing courses;
- Noncredit certificates awarded for course completion by educational institutions, professional associations, community-based organizations, and other accredited and non-accredited organizations;

- Apprenticeship-related credentials governed by labor-management partnerships;
- Certifications awarded by industry and professional associations; and
- Licenses to practice awarded by states (p. 3).

Certificates are “are expanding rapidly in response to a wide range of educational and labor market demands” (Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012, p. 1). According to Carnevale, et al. (2012):

- Over 1 million certificates were awarded in 2010; up from 300,000 in 1994.
- Certificates have grown from 6 percent of postsecondary awards in 1980 to 22 percent of awards today.
- Certificates have superseded Associate’s and Master’s degrees as the second most common award in the American postsecondary education and career training system.
- Only 2 percent of workers reported a vocational certificate as their highest educational attainment in 1984. Today, that figure stands at 11 percent (p. 3).

**Industry certifications as credentials that differentiate.** The number of third party industry certifications awarded has been increasing, but data supporting the value of these credentials is limited (Association for Career and Technical Education, 2016). The popularity of industry recognized certificates is increasing for several reasons. The first is that in many sectors, industry recognized certificates are often the required for entry into employment in that field (Soliz, 2016; Buhl, 2013). Industry certifications are also sought as a means for completers to differentiate themselves from their peers. Within baccalaureate degree attainment these certifications allow the degree holder to project technical skills competence consistent with their degrees theoretical and conceptual focus; thereby appealing to the employers need for a job

ready beginning employee (Buhl, 2013; National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, 2017).

**University and post-secondary certificates.** “Programs of study offered by colleges and universities grew from 460 in 1985 to 2,260 in 2010” (Carnevale, 2016, p. 2). Despite this growth, colleges and universities still only make up “35% of the entire post-secondary training and education system” (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013, p. 1)

Within this segment, certificates are the fastest growing credential awarded. According to the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) administered by the U.S. Department of Education (2009), over the past 30 years certificates granted grew by over 800%; with almost 12% of the population attaining this degree as their highest post-secondary award (Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012). While the number of short term post-secondary credentials offered through community and technical colleges has increased, the data supporting their value remains limited (Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Gitterman, Moulton, Bono-Lunn, & Chrisco, 2015; Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012; Soliz, 2016).

Jepsen, Troske and Coomes (2012) conducted one of the first comprehensive studies that examined in depth the labor market returns for all community college credentials; including certificates. The study followed Kentucky community college students’ intent on receiving an award, who enrolled during two academic years; 2002 – 2003 and 2003 – 2004. In the report, the authors noted that earlier research showed significant gains in income for each additional year of education or degree earned above a high school diploma, with the largest earnings returns coming from bachelor’s degrees (42% men and 51% women) and associate degrees (24% men and 31% women) (Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012). That earlier cited research also showed

that short term credentials provided higher earning potential over time, but the differences were considered to be statistically insignificant (Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012).

In their own research, the authors found similar returns to the previous studies. Their examination established that Kentucky certificate graduates earned only \$300 per quarter more than a high school graduate (Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012). This stood in stark contrast to their peers who earned a diploma (\$1,990 women, \$1,017 men) or an associate degree (\$2,290 women, \$1,349) (Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012).

A second study, conducted by Dadgar and Trimble (2015) addressed three research questions aimed at understanding the returns for sub baccalaureate degrees offered by community colleges in Washington State. Following first time students from the 2001 – 2002 through 2008 – 2009 academic years, the authors looked at wage returns and employment opportunities as a result of earning a credential. The first major finding was that; “Long-term certificates and associate degrees are associated with an increased likelihood of employment, and a more modest positive association with hours worked per week for those who are employed, ...however, short-term certificates are not associated with an increased likelihood of employment” (Dadgar & Trimble, 2015, p. 409).

The second major conclusion was that field of study had the largest impact on higher earnings and chance for employment, rather than the credential itself. For example, women who received a degree or diploma in nursing earned considerably more than their counterparts who earned a similar credential in social sciences or the humanities (Dadgar & Trimble, 2015).

A third and final finding from the study was that the positive result of earning a certificate was often negated by the “unobserved characteristics” of the individuals who obtained them (Dadgar & Trimble, 2015, p. 414). As the authors (2015) noted, “...only students who earn

short-term certificates are those who cannot find jobs or are not accepted into some of the selective long-term certificate or associate degree programs” (p. 414).

A study by Schneider (2015) paints a more positive picture of the value of certificates and those who earn them. In a review of earnings data for certificate completers from Texas and Colorado, the researcher found that while bachelors and associate degree graduates earn more on average over time, certificate completers with a focus on “fixing things or fixing people can earn a middle class wage” and oftentimes out earn those who earn a liberal arts degree (Schneider, 2015, para. 18). This includes occupations in segments as diverse as business, health and manufacturing (Schneider, 2015).

Certificates are also a popular choice for lifelong learners. As noted by Carnevale, et al. (2012), “Compared with other credentials, (there) is a relatively high percentage of workers who obtain certificates at an older age” (p. 7). While only 11% of associate degrees and 6% of bachelor’s degrees are earned after the age of 40, one third of all certificates are earned after 30 (Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012).

Certificates are also seen as a critical component of community and technical college student success, because they offer the opportunity for quick achievement (Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum, & Stephan, 2011). They reason that success builds confidence, and the earlier this happens in the process, the more likely individuals will persist and succeed in their educational journey (Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum, & Stephan, 2011).

They also note that while wage increases are the most traditional way to measure success, nonmonetary payoffs such as job status, job satisfaction and autonomy can be very valuable to the student (Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum, & Stephan, 2011). The belief is that as opportunities increase, quality of life is enhanced.

**Non-credentialed employer-based education and training.** It is estimated that U.S. companies spend over \$70 billion per year in training for employees (Training, 2015). Of that total, 68% is spent on non-exempt or exempt non-management employees, while 22% is spent on managers (Training, 2015).

The majority of these training programs are non-credit; meaning that while the employer benefits from the increased knowledge and skills of the employee, the individual typically receives no formal acknowledgement of what they have learned or completed (Ganzglass, 2014). This lack of recognition leads to these adults becoming trapped, especially if they are in low skill, low wage jobs. If these employees want to move up in their organization, change careers, or in a worst case scenario, find themselves a victim of downsizing, they don't have the formal credentials to gain better employment opportunities (Ganzglass, 2014).

This challenge of recognition extends throughout industry, regardless of the credential provider. As oftentimes certificates are not viewed as the entry level degree in the industry served, their value in the marketplace is diminished (Soliz, 2016). This lack of industry recognition is problematic and may have a direct negative correlation to both earnings and enhanced employment (Soliz, 2016).

An example of this is in health care. Soliz (2016) notes that since most positions in the industry segment require a national licensing exam, a certificate's importance is significantly diminished. This also appears to be the case in other occupational areas such as welding, where licensing exams are the preeminent step towards entry level employment (Soliz, 2016).

### **Rethinking Credentials**

Over the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the U.S. economy has shifted from one "driven by high school educated labor to one in which two in three jobs require some form

of postsecondary education or training” (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016, p. 4). Certificates, with their comparably low cost and short duration to completion, may offer a good starting point for those looking to pursue a post-secondary credential (Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012).

This notion of certificates as a starting point is supported by some of the achievement data provided by community colleges around the country. For example, 19% of individuals who have earned an associate degree, also have a certificate. More telling is that of that group, 62% earned the certificate prior to the associate degree (Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012).

Soliz (2016) supports the idea of certificates providing a stepping stone for those who need enhanced access. But with that endorsement comes a note of caution:

The rapid growth in short and long term certificates awarded by public community colleges may be a positive development if these programs are providing access to higher education for students who wouldn't otherwise attend. However, these credentials must be thoughtfully designed if they are to have any hope of improving students' labor market outcomes or their access to further education. (Soliz, 2016, para. 8)

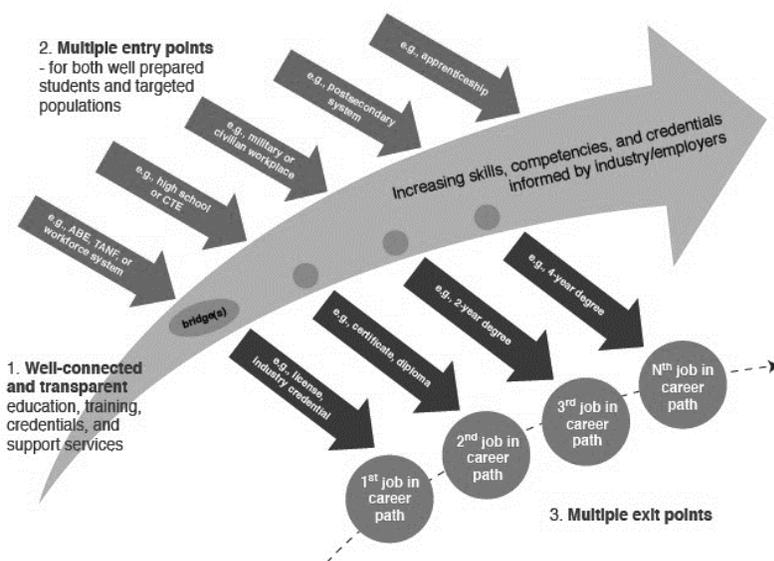
Certificates are also seen as a critical component in backing community college student success by offering an opportunity for quick achievement (Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum, & Stephan, 2011). To accomplish this, Rosenbaum et al. (2011) suggest the inclusion of a credential pathway, starting with certificates. They reason that success builds confidence, and the journey becomes more real with early success, and well-defined benchmarks embedded along the way.

Rosenbaum et al. (2011) also note that while wage increases are the most traditional way to measure success, non-monetary payoffs such as job status, job satisfaction and autonomy can be very valuable to the student. The belief is that as opportunities increase, quality of life is

enhanced. The earlier this happens in the process, the more likely individuals will persist and succeed (Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum, & Stephan, 2011).

**Stackable credentials.** One way that community colleges have addressed the challenge of aligning degree programs with occupational outcomes is through the introduction of *stackable credentials*. The United States Department of Labor identifies stackable credentials as “...part of a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual’s qualifications and help them to move along a career pathway or up a career ladder to different and potentially higher-paying job” (Ganzglass, 2014, p. 2).

The strategy behind stackable credentials is that coursework and credentials build upon each other, leading to higher attainment and enhanced workforce opportunities (Austin, Mellow, Rosin, & Seltzer, 2012). The intent is that students can earn a credential, step off the pathway for employment, and return in the future with the earlier earned credits counting towards their next degree (Fain, 2016).



*Figure 1.* Three essential features of career pathways. (Alliance for Quality and Career Pathways, 2014)

A properly constructed career pathway contains three essential features (Alliance for Quality and Career Pathways, 2014). The first is that the design is well connected and transparent linking related credentials with specific sector employment. The second feature ensures for multiple entry points for not only well prepared students, but also for those with limited education, English, and work experiences. The third allows for multiple exit points with successively higher employment and wage opportunities.

This career pathways approach is a “paradigm shift” in how persons are prepared for work by creating a clear approach that focuses both on the needs of employers and those activities that provide for individual success (Alliance for Quality and Career Pathways, 2014, p. 1). As noted by the Alliance for Quality and Career Pathways (2014):

When implemented fully, service providers align their programs and services, employers and industry representatives deeply engage, and participants seamlessly earn credentials and access career-focused employment. In some communities, the career pathway approach includes an explicit focus on reducing racial and ethnic disparities in education and employment while at the same time increasing diversity in employers’ talent pipelines. Still other communities have merged the sector strategy approach with a career pathway approach in order to meet the needs of both workers/job seekers and employers. (p. 1)

Some worry that stackable pathways can have a negative impact and actually turn underserved populations towards certificates with “questionable value” (Fain, 2016, para. 2). A recent study that looked at 11 community college health care pathways showed that many

students who earned a short term credential went on to earn more advanced degrees and were more likely to find employment. However, those who earned a certificate of 12 credits or less did not earn a raise, and in many cases earned less than peers hired without a credential (Fain, 2016). Even more concerning to the researchers was that based on the data, Black and Latino students were more likely to earn a short term credential than their White or Asian counterparts, and were less likely to go on to earn an advanced degree (Fain, 2016).

### **Summary**

In this chapter several areas of literature were reviewed. First the theoretical background was explored. In this section, Career Development Theory was offered as a useful framework for studying the value of credentials. Second, the need for a more educated workforce, and the resulting skills gap was reviewed. Next, the value of work was investigated by focusing on the economic, societal and individual impacts of employment.

The role of post-secondary institutions in providing meaningful credentials to adults was explored in the fourth section. The current literature surrounding the value of short term credentials was examined, and a review of the types of certificates was presented. Finally a look at how institutions are rethinking the way credentials are offered, including the introduction of stackable credentials, was reviewed. This situation may actually lead to a disincentive for increased economic mobility for the individuals and families that it impacts.

### **Chapter III: Method and Procedures**

In response to growing labor shortages in certain sectors of the workforce over the past decade, public community and technical colleges have increased the number of short term credentials awarded (Soliz, 2016). Research surrounding the value of certificates remains limited; and that which exists is focused primarily on the economic returns of these credentials (Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012; Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012).

This research aims to inform the future development and assessment of short duration credentials based on understanding their value to students with regards to future employment and educational attainment. It sets out to examine the lived experiences of participants of a grant funded, short term customer service certificate program for case managed unemployed adults, offered by a Midwestern technical college across two academic years; 2014 – 2015.

The following overarching questions guide selection of the research method and its processes. The research questions the study aims to inform are 1) what was the certificate completers perceived experience of entering, committing to, and completing the certificate program?, 2) what employment and further educational outcomes occurred for completers as a result of participating in the customer service certificate program?, and 3) how would completers of the customer service certificate program describe their preparedness for the occupations they were trained for?

#### **Research Methodology**

This qualitative descriptive study was designed to capture the stories of subjects who participated in a six-week customer service certificate program for case managed, unemployed adults. As noted by Marshall and Rossman (2016), qualitative research seeks to be a “broad

approach to the study of social phenomena” by being “pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people” (p. 2).

The design is informed by phenomenology. The discipline of phenomenology “studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013, para. 2). Phenomenology was introduced and advanced as a research discipline in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by several notable European philosophers (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013). Grounded in several key assumptions, it was intended to stand as an alternative methodology to more traditional empirical science approaches by focusing on discovery and analysis, and understanding that research findings may only be one possible answer to the questions being asked (Orbe, 2009).

One of the major assumptions of phenomenology is the rejection of the idea that researchers can be objective. Because of this, “phenomenologists believe that knowledge of essences is only possible by bracketing preconceived assumptions through a process known as phenomenological epoche” (Orbe, 2009, p. 750). Phenomenological epoche, also known as phenomenological reduction, is defined as a way to intentionally suppress our preconceptions and knowledge in order to encourage astonishment; where we stand in awe at what we have learned or experienced, often for the first time (Cogan, 2016). As Edmund Husserl, the “founder of phenomenology” described, reduction is the process by which the researcher “is able to liberate oneself from the captivation in which one is held by all that one accepts as being the case” (Cogan, 2016, para. 4).

Phenomenology also asserts that a deeper understanding of the meaning of life exists in the observation and analysis of daily practices (Orbe, 2009). In particular, phenomenologists believe that our interactions and experiences “reflect microcosms of larger cultural, political, and

societal structures” (Orbe, 2009, p. 750) and that we are able to make assumptions about the world around us based on human behaviors and perceptions.

This methodology is consistent with the researcher’s aim to understand and draw upon the voices of short-duration certificate completers. In particular, the researcher attempted to collect *capta* versus data, through understanding one’s opinions and beliefs by exploring their perspective of objects or events in the first person. As noted by Drucker (2011), *capta* differs from data in that “*capta* is taken actively, while data is assumed.....to be recorded and observed” (para. 3).

### **Context of the Study**

In 2014, four major Midwestern employers approached a local technical college and two agencies providing case management to unemployed adults, to explore opportunities to enhance their local job market. After several months of scoping and development, the partnership successfully applied for a state grant to fund the creation of a six-week customer service certificate program intended to transition service agency clientele from unemployment to occupations in the local service sector.

Each partner played a significant role in the creation, deployment and execution of the program. The technical college furnished the instructors, classrooms and curriculum development while the service agencies acted as the financial manager for the grant, and provided prescreened students for participation in the program. In addition, the employers imparted critical insight into desired outcomes during curriculum development, opened their doors for tours, and provided students assistance through resume building and mock interviews.

Over two grant periods across 2014 and 2015, three cohorts participated in the program. In total, 72 students were served, with 65 successfully completing and graduating with the

certificate (Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, 2017). The aforementioned cohorts become the subject frame.

### **Subject Selection**

Qualitative studies generally use smaller sample sizes than quantitative studies (Mason, 2010). A major factor driving this is diminishing returns, or the rationale that gathering more data in qualitative studies does not necessarily lead to more information since the goal is to find meaning versus the formation of a generalized hypothesis (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003).

Mason cites a study completed by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) that studied optimal sample sizes for qualitative research. In their literature review, the authors (2006) noted two sources that provided optimal sample sizes for phenomenological studies of five to 25 (Creswell, 1998, p. 64), and at least 6 (Morse, 1994, p. 225).

The subject pool for this qualitative, phenomenological study sought to invite nine short-term customer service certificate program completers into the study. These subjects were invited via email in accordance with the informed consent protocol (see Appendix B) in an effort to secure minimally six interview participants. The 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> name from a random draw of six from each class roster was used to select the subjects.

In the case that any subject indicated their wish to opt out of the research, the next name (2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup>) was selected in an effort to access additional subjects in an effort to reach the desired stratified respondent threshold of six.

### **Instrumentation**

As “qualitative methods are concerned with experiences, feelings and attitudes” (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007, p. 738), a series of open ended questions were designed to understand the participant’s perceptions of the program and its design and outcomes (see

Appendix A). These questions were validated through a three step process. The first step was a review of the questions with faculty from the University of Wisconsin-Stout. The second step was a pilot test that was conducted during the summer of 2016, consisting of interviews with three participants (student, employer, service provider) of the customer service certificate program. The final step was a review of the research questions, procedures, and process by the author and his doctoral research committee. After this final review, the questions were refined and reformatted for implementation.

### **Capta Collection**

At the beginning of the scheduled interview, the researcher was guided by a script (see Appendix A) designed to explain the purpose of the study and to ask the participant to authorize an Informed Consent Release form (see Appendix B). The researcher also used the script to guide the questioning of the participant. To obtain the participant's responses, the researcher employed a recording device to capture the interview for later transcription. Additionally, the researcher also used a journal to record notes and thoughts during the course of the interview. The journal served the purpose of noting observed subject nonverbal cues including reactions, interview site conditions, and other relevant data and capta.

### **Validity**

In preparation for this study, the researcher set out to experience and practice interviewing skills and obtain capta for coding and analysis by conducting a pilot test with three participants of the customer service certificate program that were not part of this study. The aforementioned assisted the researcher in developing and refining the inquiry through a disciplined interview that encompassed a consistent questioning technique including question tone and restraint in how the initial and ensuing follow-up questions were presented including

managing volume, enunciation, pitch, vocal magnification, inflection and cultural sensitivity. Additionally, the pre-study was employed to validate the questionnaire in respect to the studies overarching research questions and the data reduction process.

Environmental triangulation was used to increase the confidence of the findings of this study. Environmental triangulation “involves the use of different locations, settings, and other key factors related to the environment in which the study took place” (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, n.d., p. 2). To accomplish this, the participants in the study were drawn from three separate cohorts. The cohorts utilized the same instructors and location, but each class section took place during a different six-week period across two academic years.

As the researcher is a senior leader at an institution in the Wisconsin Technical College system, working primarily with adult learners, there may be unintended bias in the interview, review and coding processes.

### **Capta Collection Procedures**

This qualitative, phenomenological study employed personal interviews with selected completers of a cohort based, customer service certificate program for case managed, unemployed adults offered through a large Midwestern technical college. The researcher conducted 30-minute interviews with each participant. When a face to face interview was not possible, a voice only phone interview was selected. The researcher made every effort to conduct the interviews in a neutral environment that was convenient for the participant and minimized their risk.

In an effort to secure consent, every subject was presented with the consent statement which also indicated their approval to the recording of the interview so that it could be transferred into text for data reduction. At the beginning of every interview the researcher read a

short script to the participant outlining the intent of the study and for permission to proceed (see Appendix A). All participants were presented an Authorized Informed Consent Release form (see Appendix B). For face to face interviews this was done in person. For interviews conducted by phone or other means, the consent form was presented electronically via email. Upon review by the participant, the form was filled out according to their wishes.

Each participant was asked every question listed in order to maintain consistency across all interviews. Follow up questions; requesting the participant to expand on, or explain an answer, were asked based on verbal and non-verbal cues. All interviews were later transcribed using REV Transcription service, a professional web-based service specializing in voice to text transcription services.

The Authorized Informed Consent Release forms (see Appendix B) were collected for each participant and filed in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. The recorded interview files were saved on the researcher's computer; which is password protected. Field notes of all interviews, were also filed and locked in the researcher's office.

### **Capta Analysis**

The capta that was collected through the interviews, and subsequent transcription process were coded for key concepts and themes, and used in answering the initial research questions outlined in the rationale. Capta analysis to uncover the themes employed a three step reduction process which is common for phenomenological research.

Reduction is informed by the work of Richard Lanigan (2013) who is credited with developing a three step process for applying phenomenology as a research methodology. The first stage is bracketing; which consists of identifying preconceived ideas, assumptions, and beliefs. During this step, lived experiences of the research participants are gathered through in-

depth interviews, focus group discussions, and the use of critical-incident techniques such as direct observation (Orbe, 2009).

An inductive coding process was employed to develop themes from the capta during the reduction phase (see Table 1). This type of code theory seeks to do three things; (1) condense raw data into summary format around common themes; (2) establish clear links between research objectives and summary data; and (3) develop a theory about the underlying summary findings and themes (Thomas, 2003). For this process, the researcher developed a simple matrix to assist in capturing codes and themes (see Appendix C).

The second stage of inquiry involved reviewing and reducing the capta into common themes. Ultimately these themes were verified by rereading text across the reduction stages thereby providing a series of analytical filters in an effort to set the stage for the final step; reflection (Orbe, 2009). During this stage, the capta and themes were analyzed to fully understand their meaning and significance (see Table 1).

The researcher also used memos as a means to analyze and interpret capta throughout the reduction phase. In particular, the researcher used thematic memos to develop thoughts around the meaning of the capta; and theoretical memos to explore ways the emerging meanings relate to the initial theory and related literature (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). These memos were captured in the researcher's journal while recording the respondent's responses.

Table 1

*Thematic Analysis Process*

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Listing and reading raw text	Eliminating extraneous words and clarifying meaning	Sorting and identifying common ideas	Declaring theme

(Orbe, 2009)

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. As the author is a senior leader at an institution of higher learning in the Wisconsin Technical College system, unintended bias may be introduced into the interview process, as well as the coding, analysis and interpretation of data and capta. An additional limitation is that the researcher is focusing on select participants of a single certificate program from one college in the Midwestern United States. As the sample size is limited, the results of the research may not be generalizable to a larger population. A final limiting factor may be access to participants. In particular, the researcher may encounter difficulty when reaching out to former students of the program.

**Summary**

This chapter introduced the methodology and procedures to be used in the study. The chapter started by reintroducing the problem and purpose of the study, along with the research questions. The research methodology and rationale for use was then explained. The subject selection and development and use of the instrumentation were outlined. The validity of the study was explored through the examination of a past pilot study. The capta collection process and analysis through reduction and inductive coding was explained. Finally, the limitations of the study were introduced.

## **Chapter IV: Presentation of the Findings**

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of a study to examine the lived experiences of participants of a grant funded, short term customer service certificate program for case managed unemployed adults, offered by a Midwestern technical college across two academic years; 2014 – 2015. In particular, this qualitative, descriptive study explored the program through the use of semi-structured interviews with several program completers. In this chapter, the researcher uses the participants' own words to tell their story.

The study posed the following research questions: 1) what was the certificate completers perceived experience of entering, committing to, and completing the certificate program? 2) what employment and further educational outcomes occurred for completers as a result of participating in the customer service certificate program?, and 3) how would completers of the customer service certificate program describe their preparedness for the occupations they were trained for?

### **Background**

In 2014, four major Midwestern employers approached a local technical college and two service agencies providing case management to unemployed adults, to explore opportunities to enhance their local job market. After several months of scoping and development sessions, the partnership successfully applied for a state grant to fund the creation of a six-week customer service certificate program intended to transition service agency clientele from unemployment to occupations in the local service sector.

Each partner played a significant role in the creation, deployment and execution of the program. The technical college furnished the instructors, classrooms and curriculum development while the service agencies acted as the financial manager for the grant, and

provided prescreened students for participation in the program. The employers' imparted critical insight into desired outcomes during curriculum development, opened their doors for tours, and provided students assistance through resume building and mock interviews.

The program parameters were designed to mirror a typical work environment in a professional customer service organization. Over the six weeks the students attended class from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Monday through Friday; received a half hour lunch and 2 – 15 minute breaks per day; and were expected to dress in attire that was considered appropriate for an office setting. Participants unable or unwilling to abide by these parameters were given escalating consequences up to and including termination from the program.

Over two grant periods across 2014 and 2015, three cohorts participated in the program. In total, 72 students were served, with 65 successfully completing and graduating with the certificate (Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, 2017). The aforementioned cohorts become the subject frame.

### **Demographics**

The researcher invited a total of eighteen customer service certificate completers to participate in the study. This was achieved through a random draw of six names from each of the three cohorts. Each person selected was contacted via email to ask for their consent to be interviewed for this study (see Appendix D). In total, seven individuals agreed to participate. Of that group, one person withdrew their consent a week before their scheduled interview date; and a second person did not respond to repeated follow up requests to schedule an interview. Ultimately, a total of five respondents participated in the study and were interviewed.

The researcher conducted 30 minute interviews with each participant. When a face to face interview was not possible, a voice only phone interview was selected. The researcher

made every effort to conduct the interviews in a neutral environment that was convenient for the participant and minimized their risk. All interviews were later transcribed using REV transcription service, a professional web-based service specializing in voice to text transcription services.

**Respondent profile.** Five completers of the customer service certificate program were interviewed for this study. Each of the respondents were unemployed or underemployed at the time they took the program, and were working with a service agency case manager.

The following is a broad profile of each respondent. Their names have been changed for this study in an effort to protect anonymity:

Dawn is a white female who is currently employed at a deli. She is a single mother, and entered the program with some college experience, having earned a Certified Nursing Assistant technical diploma from a local technical college.

Serena is a black female who is currently employed as a benefits specialist at a major employer sponsor of the customer certificate program. She earned a GED, and a Certified Nursing Assistant technical diploma from a local technical college prior to entering the program.

Lynn is a white female who is currently employed as customer service specialist at a major employer, not affiliated with the program. She was employed for over a year with one of the major sponsors, and left for a better opportunity at her current company. She is a single mother, and entered the program with considerable post-secondary experience, having earned a bachelor's degree in Human Resources from a major for-profit university, and some coursework from a community college in medical coding.

Hannah is a white female who is currently employed as a customer service specialist, with office manager responsibility at a small regional employer. She had previous coursework in

micro-computing through a Midwestern technical college, and had earned a Licensed Practical Nursing degree through that same institution. She had worked for over 20 years in that field prior to entering the program.

Evonne is a black female who is currently employed as a customer service associate. She was employed for two years with a major employer sponsor, before moving out of state. She entered the program as a high school graduate, with some on the job training.

### **Capta Analysis**

The sources for the capta analysis were the transcriptions of the interviews that were conducted, and the researcher's journal which was used to record notes, thoughts and observations regarding reactions, interview site conditions, and other relevant data.

The capta that was collected through the interviews and subsequent transcription process were coded for key concepts and themes. Data reduction to uncover the themes employed a three step reduction process which is common for phenomenological research.

Data reduction is informed by the work of Richard Lanigan (2013) who is credited with developing a three step process for applying phenomenology as a research methodology. The first stage is bracketing; which consists of identifying preconceived ideas, assumptions, and beliefs. During this step, lived experiences of the research participants are gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and the use of critical-incident techniques such as direct observation (Orbe, 2009).

An inductive coding process was employed to evolved themes from the capta during the reduction phase (see Table 1). This type of code theory seeks to do three things; (1) condense raw data into summary format around common themes; (2) establish clear links between research objectives and summary data; and (3) develop a theory about the underlying summary findings

and themes (Thomas, 2003). For this process, the researcher developed a simple matrix to assist in capturing codes and themes (see Appendix C).

The second stage of inquiry involved reviewing and reducing the capta into common themes. Ultimately these themes were verified by rereading text across the reduction stages thereby providing a series of analytical filters in an effort to set the stage for the final step; reflection (Orbe, 2009). During this stage, the capta and themes were analyzed to fully understand their meaning and significance (see Table 1, Appendix C).

The researcher also used memos as a means to analyze and interpret capta throughout the reduction phase. In particular, the researcher used thematic memos to develop thoughts around the meaning of the capta; and theoretical memos to explore ways the emerging meanings relate to the initial theory and related literature (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). These memos were captured in the researcher's journal while recording the respondent's responses.

### **Findings Relative to the Research Questions**

The analysis and subsequent themes that developed from the investigation assisted in answering the following research questions:

**Research question 1: What was the certificate completers perceived experience of entering, committing to, and completing the certificate program?** Multiple themes emerged during the interviews and subsequent capta analysis process. Ultimately the themes developed around an overarching framework consisting of several key focus areas including; why the respondent chose to pursue the certificate, who encouraged and supported them along the way, and the importance of peer learning.

***Desire to improve one's circumstances.*** All the participants of the customer service certificate program were working with a case manager affiliated with one of two different

agencies providing employment services and career counseling to individuals in need. While not all participants were unemployed, all were employed less than full time, and due to their situation, were receiving state benefits and financial assistance.

Each of the individuals interviewed expressed a desire to improve their life's circumstances as a driving factor in enrolling in the customer service certificate program. As Dawn related:

I (was) deadlocked applying for jobs...I was trying to transition into an office setting ...customer service role. It's hard to do that when you have zero experience...Most places require at least a little bit of call center experience or some sort of background in it...I had been applying for jobs for six months and getting nowhere...I needed help getting from just being a fast food worker to being taken serious in a office type of setting. (Dawn)

Evonne was compelled to join the program by her caseworker. She felt like it was a great opportunity to move beyond unemployment and start anew:

I was new to the area and wanted to know my way around a little more. It felt like a...good opportunity to get back working. Since I was new...and didn't know people...as far as getting employment...this seemed like a good opportunity to brush up on some skills and let that help out. (Evonne)

Hannah had been working in the health care industry, but was having difficulty finding stable employment in that field. She noted:

I was at a really low point in my life. I needed something...I had been applying for jobs for months and nothing, so I decided it was time to...take a little career turn...I like working with people...I just like making people's lives better. (Hannah)

Serena had also been employed in the health care industry, but had been terminated from her most recent position. Due to the physical demands of her field, she recognized that she needed a change in careers. However, she also knew that she was missing some critical knowledge and skills that were holding her back from enhanced employment:

...when I figured out that wasn't going to work and my body wasn't going to allow me to do that for a long time...I started thinking about other avenues...I...figured at that point in time I pretty much should have everything I need. I had a GED...I did some classes and everything else, but it was something more that I was missing...so...I kind of went on a limb. Just was like, okay, let me see what this is, where it leads me to. (Serena)

Lynn's circumstances were different from the others as she was employed at the beginning of the program, but she also recognized that she needed change in her life:

I...wanted to get a more professional job...It's not that I wasn't holding a job, I just wanted to get into a more professional atmosphere...I was actually working two-part time jobs at the time...I just wasn't happy. I didn't have the schedule I wanted; the pay was less than I wanted and...neither of them came with any type of actual employment benefits such as health insurance, paid time off...et cetera. I really wanted to try to get a job that offered...those types of extras. (Lynn)

***Critical role that the encouragement and support of others has on success.*** All the respondents noted the important role that others had on their decision to not only enroll in the program, but to persist and complete. The program participants that were interviewed all remarked that either their caseworker, or a close friend encouraged them to pursue the certificate. During the instructional phase, both the instructors and the employer participants were identified as having significant positive influence on the completer's persistence.

Dawn, a participant in one of the last two cohorts, talked about the influence of her caseworker and the service agency to enroll in the program:

They (the service provider) was partnered with (the technical college)...while working with them I heard of the program and they had a really high success rate of getting people...good paying jobs....the key goal is to lock you in with a great job match to eventually (gain employment). (Dawn)

Lynn had a friend who told her about the program and planted the seed that this might be a good opportunity to find employment in the customer service sector.

When I first heard about it, I was told, "...I can help you get into customer service...the job that you really want". The person...mentioned some of the partnering companies that would participate in the program. I...thought about it and...I'm like, "... I don't know if I can really afford to drop one of my jobs (to enroll in) the program". So I had to think about it. After continually trying to get a professional job and just not getting one...I decided, "Hey what is that information?". I called my friend back and I was like, "Who do I contact to get into this? How do I get the ball rolling?". (Lynn)

Serena's motivation was a bit different than some of the other respondents. Her family was supportive of her pursuit of the certificate, but her inspiration was to actually see less of them:

I was like killing myself not to go back home. You know what I mean? 28, 29 years old and you have to go back home...I mean I love my parents but I don't want to do that. I left when I was old enough and I said I was not coming back. Lock the door and take the keys...that's pretty much how I kept it...going. Do everything I can. (Serena)

All the respondents commented on the positive influence of the instructors. Due to the length and scope of the program, two trainers were used during the instructional phase. Each cohort began with both instructors in the classroom for the first few days, and would progress to a schedule with each trainer alternating their time dependent on the topic.

The respondents noted that the instructors focused not only on developing technical talents, but in building up and improving the participant's social and soft skills as well. This multi-faceted approach was perceived by the respondents to have been critical to the student's growth and development.

When asked by the researcher about the influence of the instructors on her success, Evonne responded:

They were very, very instrumental. They...taught us how to move away from self, and get us out of the way. But they also brought in the knowledge and the tools we needed for customer service. They were very influential.

They took you on a self-journey for you to get stuff out of the way to build confidence, to show who you really are...they gave you that confidence...so that you can be the best.

(Evonne)

Dawn appreciated the rigor of the program, and the fact that the class modeled a real life work environment. The instructors were ultimately responsible for supporting this. As she put it:

...they run a class like it's your job. They don't expect you to be late. They expected you to be early. They expected you to look business professional...There was a lot of just basic expectations that they had which carried right into the job force. (Dawn)

Lynn noted that the positive influence of the instructors started in the classroom, but extended beyond the end of the program:

(Instructor #1) helped me all the way through the program...I had correspondence even after. She was...a solid foundation to keep me on the right path even when I was done with the program...They (both instructors) were...excellent when it came to providing that help. I always felt comfortable going to them with any questions that I had...I never felt hesitant to reach out to them and say, "Hey, you know, I'm really not sure about this. How would you handle this? What is your input? Do you have any suggestions?". (Lynn)

Hannah also noted the positive influence her relationship with the instructors had on her success:

I loved the course so much. I was so sad when it ended. I thought (the instructors) did an amazing job. They were absolutely...wonderful...I think they really helped prepare me more. (Hannah)

The role the employer partners played was also highly valued by the program participants who were interviewed. In addition to assisting in curriculum development with the instructional team, the employers also provided office tours, resume critiques, and mock interviews for the students.

For several of the respondents, this was the first time that they had a chance to interact with a corporate entity regarding an employment opportunity. Dawn reflected on this:

That was a majority of the reason I wanted to be in there because having an opportunity to get into places like (major employer sponsor #1 and major employer sponsor #2) ...

You don't get that every day. They're very good companies; they're very established...

Being able to see what they do...We got to sit with a customer service rep. We got to see

kind of their routines and things. That was very, very helpful as far as knowing what you're walking into. (Dawn)

The respondents also noted that the employer partners provided critical learning around the job search process. This included topics such as crafting a more effective resume, and the enhancement of interview skills. Serena commented on the significance of the role that the employer partners played in this area:

I think it was very important. When we did the mock interviews with the actual companies, they were able to give honest feedback and say “Hey, I wouldn't have hired you because of a, b, c, and d”, you know? We wouldn't know that, just walking in off the street...

So, them being there and actually saying, this is what we're looking for; this is what we want . That was a great thing that happened cause you can sit people in a classroom all day and tell'em, tell'em, tell'em but, if the employer is not there saying hey I got you, I just need you to do this. Then, you know, it just opened up all our avenues. (Serena)

Evonne also talked about the importance of having employer partners offer office tours and mock interview assistance:

Those were definitely important because it helps you understand the issues that you were having...or how you could get better. It helped...with nervousness or...being articulate with your words as far as...describing yourself, or knowing exactly how to reach the employer and tell them what you want them to know. (Evonne)

Dawn discussed the crucial role that the employers provided through their partnership with the program:

We also were partnered with three businesses and we were able to take tours, meet the head of HR for their companies, and gain tips from them as far as how to interview, what they're looking for...we had a lot of prep of how to interview. We did some practicing...answering questions; using the computer...So that really helps. You're always going to be nervous for an interview, but all that information just helped build you up towards being a better interviewer and help landing that great job. (Dawn)

Serena felt that the employer partners validated the program; that there truly was opportunity waiting for the participants if they persisted and completed:

Well, seeing them...made me realize that it was real. Cause nobody takes the time out of their busy schedule to just sit and have nothing accomplished...(Serena)

Ultimately the goal of the program was to provide the participants an enhanced pathway towards employment. To that end, all the respondents indicated that they received actual job interviews with the employer partners at the completion of their program. Several, like Lynn, received offers:

...they were very welcoming. Before I actually finished I had some interviews lined up, and when I was done with the program, I actually had two offers. (Lynn)

***The value of a cohort.*** The respondents noted that the cohort based learning model that was employed in the delivery of this certificate program was particularly effective in supporting their efforts. As Evonne put it, “we kind of built...a family dynamic”.

Hannah also used the same imagery to describe her experience with her classmates in the program:

...we had quite the bonding experience. I feel very close to quite a few of the students that were in our class. I've stayed in touch with all of them and I thought that that was kind of unique that we kind of became one great big family...

We periodically talk and it's nice, because it's like the other one needs a little bit of a boost, a reminder, "Yeah, remember. You still got your Post-its on the bathroom mirror." Little bitty things, but they help give you that fortitude to go forward and never give up.  
(Hannah)

The family atmosphere that was created was not without its challenges. Each cohort had issues at some point related to their togetherness, and the actions of some of the program participants. Dawn commented on this:

We had a couple of personality clashes inside the class...we could be talking about a job and the next thing you know, you got (someone)...talking about her bipolar issues...We had some people that had attendance issues and showing up whenever they thought they could...that were removed. (Dawn)

Despite these occasional challenges, Dawn was supportive of the cohort model because it brought together a diverse group of individuals committed to the same journey:

Meeting the class was great because...people...are having the same struggles as you...There were people from (Service Agency #1) and people from (Service Agency #2) ...who were working with unemployment. And having that group of people sitting there...we would've never met; never known each other...and knowing that we all have different backgrounds, but we're all sitting here in the same place trying to find that great job.

...this was...really nice getting to know a lot more people that are going through the same struggles...it gives you extra support... It was a really good experience for me.

(Dawn)

**Confidence.** Each respondent talked about the added confidence that they received from participating and completing the customer certificate program. That confidence took on several forms; self-assurance in their enhanced job and life skills and a new level of trust in their ability to interview and pursue the career of their choosing.

Evonne summed this up when asked what she learned as a result of completing the program:

The program taught us so much. It...brought your confidence out a little more...Because I was new to the area, it also helped me deal with...personal issues that was stopping me from moving forward...(You) would address those situations and...look at it in a different light so that it can push you forward instead of...holding you back.

We learned the basics of customer service to get us prepared in that aspect, but also the personal, (and) interpersonal skills...some issues that it would deal with...on the inside, like self-esteem...So whatever we felt within our self that was stopping us, it just pushed it aside...I think every aspect of the program helped us build the confidence that we needed to continue on. (Evonne)

Lynn talked about the challenges she faced in interviewing prior to completing the course, and the turnaround that occurred immediately following:

I got interviews; I was never hired on. But then when I took the program, I had that extra confidence. Because I had that practice. The instructors, I knew were there every step of the way. I knew they would be there for me. I had that extra confidence. (Lynn)

Serena also talked about the role that confidence played in pursuing post program employment opportunities:

Until I went to the program, I didn't...realize that there was a possibility that I...could... get the position if I knew how to handle the actual interview.

...it was hard not to feel more confident because...we did numerous role plays;...sitting down in an interview where you go over questions...the situation and the actions...the steps...and the results. I felt more confident...when I left the program than when I entered. (Serena)

Hannah discussed how she has mentored others to pursue a certificate based on her own experience with the program. She noted the role that confidence has in gaining meaningful employment. As Hannah described it:

A lot of what was worked on was your personality, the way you see things; but I think if a person is more positive when they go out into the workforce, more confident in themselves, they tend to get a job where if they're angry, more spiteful and hateful, it's going to hold you back. Who's going to want to hire somebody that's crabby? (Hannah)

**Research question 2: What employment and further educational outcomes occurred for completers as a result of participating in the customer service certificate program?** Themes developed around an overarching framework consisting of several key focus areas including; the role that the certificate played in employment outcomes and the impact of completion on educational aspirations.

*Employment outcomes.* At the time of the interview, each of the respondents indicated that they were currently employed. Of those questioned, only one felt that the program had little influence on their post-completion work situation. This individual provided multiple reasons for

this; citing personal and family situations, as well as a desire to have a more flexible, non-office based work environment. For these reasons, despite being offered interviews at several major employers, she chose to pursue full-time employment in a deli that offered a day time work schedule.

The other respondents talked about the positive role that the certificate provided them in their job search. When asked about the impact of the certificate, Hannah stated:

Shortly after I got done with the program I got an email from my current boss and he asked if I was done with the program and I said, "Yes." He's like, "Do you want to come in and interview?" I didn't even search, he sought me out. (Hannah)

When asked if she would have received the job offer without the credential, Hannah replied,

"Oh no, I wouldn't have, no. I've known him (current employer) for...about 35 years, but no he wouldn't have hired me...". (Hannah)

Evonne noted that the certificate, combined with her previous work experience let employers know that she was a serious candidate with the right set of skills to succeed. As she put it, earning the customer service credential:

...let employers know that I was looking at this particular field to go into, and...I was taking the field seriously...With the added training, especially when they see it separately...specifically for customer service, it definitely helped. (Evonne)

Lynn discussed how earning the certificate helped her to portray a different image to prospective employers during her job search:

I think it definitely showed employers...strengthened what they would look at as far as my ambition, my dedication...not only did they see that I had customer service

experience, but they saw that I was dedicated enough to go to the program and learn those additional skills...I...think that was a big bonus, when they would look at my resume....I took the time and I went out...and I completed the program. (Lynn)

Serena offered a different perspective on the outcomes that certificate completion offered. As she found employment with one of the major employer sponsors, she valued the interaction with those organizations that the program afforded. When asked about the impact, Serena replied:

I think it helped a lot because of the networking that the actual program did. When... (major employer sponsor) come out or (another major employer sponsor vice-president) come out and talk to us to...tell us what we need to give them...to succeed in your company. I think it made me more employable here...and then it's up to me to keep it going. (Serena)

***Educational aspirations.*** The educational background of the respondents varied from one completing a GED, to several earning community college credentials, to one completing a Human Resource Management degree through a for-profit four year program.

Despite the fact the majority of respondents had post-secondary educational experience, each individual found themselves unemployed, or under employed and working with a case worker to find future employment. The short term certificate provided an opportunity to enhance their educational background, and pursue a career in a customer service related role.

Each respondent expressed the desire to continue their education beyond the customer service certificate. However, most did not have a clear idea of the pathway that they would follow. They stated a desire to go back to school in some manner, but appeared to be unsure of where or what to definitively pursue.

Hannah was an example of this. Having earned a LPN degree early in life, she recently found it difficult to find good employment in that field without further education. She talked about potentially going back to pursue a new degree:

I have debated on whether or not to go back and get more. Part of me wants go back and get my RN, but I'm also 50 so do I do that? I know a woman that was quite a bit older than that when she went back for hers, so I don't know. (Hannah)

Serena also had a background in health care, having previously earned a Nursing Assistant Technical Diploma. Upon completion of the customer service certificate, she obtained a job with a major employer, where she has gone on to become a trainer for new employees in her department.

This new found stability in her life has her thinking she may pursue a path towards business management.

Now that I'm actually comfortable with what I'm doing... I can continue my education. I have more steady life...a reliable source of income. I know exactly what I can do, I know what time I have to wake up, I know what time I have to go to sleep. I know I got days off, things like that.

...definitely going back to school. Thinking about doing something in business management cause I love the corporate world. I think it's awesome. (Serena)

Evonne only had a high school diploma and some work force training when she applied to the customer service certificate program. After completion, she found a job with another major employer in the region handling major account logistics. After a year she moved from the area, but continued to work in a customer service role. During that time she went back to school

and earned an Associate's Degree in Human Services. This year, she intends to start a bachelors program in Psychology.

She agrees that the customer service certificate served as a catalyst for her success. She also feels the skills she gained will help her in her future:

I'm still going to continue to need those skills. I don't think customer services skills ever gets old, or ever goes out the window with any field that you're going into. (Evonne)

Dawn had several years of business management coursework at a local technical college, and had also earned a Certified Nursing Assistant Technical Diploma from the same institution prior to completing the certificate program. After completion of her credential, she found employment, but personal and family issues impacted her prospects. These same issues also seem to be influencing her decision making towards continuing her education.

I actually...want to go back to school. I have three small children, so I'm kind of waiting for a couple years...I want to continue my education because honestly, I still do have interest in getting into (a local major employer program partner)...But I don't want to be in that type of role until I can fully commit and I don't have so much going on at home. (Dawn)

She did note that her current employer offered assistance to continue her education if she chose to do so:

I have to give myself some time, but I definitely anticipate going to school. My company actually offers 10% tuition reimbursement towards college. So I'm possibly thinking about either pursuing finishing my business management degree or kind of switching over into human resources. (Dawn)

**Research question 3: How would completers of the customer service certificate program describe their preparedness for the occupations they were trained for?** The respondents noted the customer service certificate prepared them in multiple ways for their new found occupations.

*Preparedness.* Throughout the interviews the completers noted aspects of preparedness such as increased self-confidence, enhanced interpersonal skills, and improved technical abilities. As was noted in several of the emergent themes, this mix of skills has supported the completers not only in their new occupations, but through their process of finding employment as well. Lynn commented on this:

I learned...more soft skills...through the program that...helped...not only in the interview process, but in my employment...for (dealing with) customers as well as co-workers. I had some customer skills...because I had employment history. But it (the program) strengthened the skills I already had, and...helped with some...I knew were...weak.  
(Lynn)

Evonne also talked about the well roundedness of the certificate program; how the curriculum prepared her not only for the job but for life:

We did a lot of learning...the basics of customer service, but also we learned...different things to help us develop our self...It went hand in hand.

The main thing getting out of it...they taught the basics of customer service, of the technical part...of the work...and becoming better and using those tools...also, they took you on a self-journey...to build confidence, to show who you really are. (Evonne)

Dawn noted that the program didn't just focus on developing a single aspect. There was attention given to advancing multiple skill sets in building the whole person:

There was a lot of...basic expectations...which carried right into the job. We had a lot of prep of how to interview. We did...practicing...answering questions, using the computer...Some of the people...in our class had very little computer skills...that was...key...getting people trained on programs and how to function because most of the jobs you're applying for are on the computer. (Dawn)

Serena had never worked in a corporate environment prior to participating in the program. She talked about the importance of the life skills that were learned in coping with that atmosphere:

It (the program) ...trained our brain to be able to work in the corporate world and set aside what you have going on in your life. You know, everyday things that happen but you have to be able to be a professional and come to work and do what you actually get paid to do. (Serena)

Hannah commented that while the program strengthened her overall abilities, there could have been a bit more emphasis on strengthening specific computer skills:

It (the program) helped me to...not take things so personally...Just being positive; not giving up. The new updates on the computer stuff. There's a few more things I wish I would have known about...there's so many new spreadsheets out there...Whether it's Excel, Word Perfect...there's so many programs to choose from and trying to learn which is the best.

Lynn also noted that the development of computer skills could have been a bit more emphasized in the program. While she felt she had adequate preparation, there wasn't enough time to further enhance her abilities. As she put it:

Maybe...a little more computer...time to go over different programs that you're not quite as familiar with...some people didn't even know how to make a Word document...you obviously have to accommodate everybody, but I think I could have used a little...more practice...but...I definitely learned a lot more than what I had. (Lynn)

### **Areas for Program Change or Refinement**

The respondents also discussed additional ways the program could have better prepared them for life, post-completion. When asked if there was anything the certificate program didn't properly prepare her for, Dawn expressed surprise at how long it took to finally gain employment:

How slow the process really goes. We had applied at some of these places before we even left the classes and the process takes a long time because of all the extensive background checks and things they do...you leave the class feeling like you're on top of the world...and then the phone calls kind of stop...it...leaves you...hanging a little bit. If there was a little bit more of a wraparound...that could have helped. (Dawn)

Serena talked about how difficult it was coming off of public assistance. Specifically, how do you plan your personal budget now that you have a steady income and are no longer eligible for certain benefits?

As soon as they got the job, they cut it so...you were kind of catching up. By the time you got your first check you were behind on everything...Like if you have 3, 4 kids you're pretty much screwed. The only thing I would have changed about the program...was the budgeting. Cause we pretty much...got it and we were out there screaming, "What do I do now? I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go from here." You probably

need to get some...financial...planning courses...cause everybody is not taught to budget...Some parents don't even know how to budget. (Serena)

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the results of a qualitative, phenomenological study that employed personal interviews with selected completers of a cohort based, six-week customer service certificate program offered at a Midwestern technical college across two academic years. A three step data reduction process was used to analyze capta, and to uncover themes to assist in answering the initial research questions.

The analysis uncovered multiple emergent themes expressed by the respondents. These included the desire to improve one's circumstances, the critical role that the encouragement and support of others has on success and how confidence is formed and developed and the positive impact of cohort based learning. In addition, evidence was offered to show how certificate completion impacted employment and educational aspirations, as well as how the program prepared completers for the occupations they were trained for.

## **Chapter V: Summary, Discussion and Recommendations**

This qualitative, phenomenological study employed personal interviews with selected completers of a cohort based, customer service certificate program for case managed, unemployed adults offered through a large Midwestern technical college. Specifically, the study sought to examine the lived experiences of selected program participants in an effort to inform and guide the future development and assessment of short duration certificates.

This chapter presents a discussion of my conclusions and recommendations regarding the aforementioned research. The research questions were 1) what was the certificate completers perceived experience of entering, committing to, and completing the certificate program?, 2) what employment and further educational outcomes occurred for completers as a result of participating in the customer service certificate program?, and 3) how would completers of the customer service certificate program describe their preparedness for the occupations they were trained for?

### **Inspiration for the Study**

Employers today are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain talent they need for positions they have available. This talent shortage has led many employers to seek speed to market solutions from post-secondary institutions. Essentially, companies need skilled workers; thereby, attaining credentials and skills in the least amount of time possible to meet their immediate and growing workforce needs (Austin, Mellow, Rosin, & Seltzer, 2012). In response, there has been significant growth in short term credentials awarded by public community and technical colleges (Soliz, 2016).

There is conflicting evidence however, that these certificates are of real value to the individuals who obtain them. While some studies have indicated these credentials provide

enhanced job prospects and a pathway to further academic attainment, other research has shown that post-secondary certificates provide little or no additional benefit to the students who possess them (Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012).

The research that currently exists is primarily quantitative in nature and focuses chiefly on the wage return of credentials for those attain them (Carnevale, Rose, & Hanson, 2012; Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2012). Empirical data exists related to short-term credential attainment; however, there is a lack of direct insight whether short term certificates provide adult completers a viable pathway towards immediate and future employment and educational success.

This backdrop framed a desire to explore this issue from a qualitative perspective. As a dean at a large technical college, the author had anecdotal evidence that short term certificates provided value to those who completed them. However, other than employing institutional graduate follow up survey data measuring employment and wage returns for selected credentials, there was little if any firm evidence that certificates were having the desired impact, from both an economic and social perspective.

## **Discussion**

While the study set out to answer three basic questions, the real impetus behind the research was to understand the lived experiences of the completers of a six week customer service certificate program in an effort to better inform and guide the future development and assessment of short duration certificates. The best way to do that is by focusing on the themes that developed through the literature review process, and the subsequent capta analysis.

**Self-efficacy.** The overall research was informed by the theory of self-efficacy. Developed by psychologist Alfred Bandura, the theory supports the notion that optimism in

one's abilities plays a key role in determining a successful outcome (Akhtar, 2008; Buchanan, 2016). Bandura's believes that "self-efficacy is not a trait that some have and others don't...Instead he proposes that anyone, regardless of their past or current environment, has the ability to exercise and strengthen their self-efficacy" (Buchanan, 2016, para. 10).

Bandura proposes that there are four ways in which to do this. These are through *mastery*; building self-confidence by overcoming challenges and mastering tasks, *social modeling*; through choosing role models that have overcome adversity or similar challenges, *social persuasion*; by finding a positive mentor to support and challenge your growth, and finally *states of physiology*; by relieving tension, anxiety and weariness and replacing them with feelings of positivity through introspection and education (Akhtar, 2008; Buchanan, 2016).

Self-efficacy plays a critical role in determining successful future outcomes, especially for those from challenging environments (Buchanan, 2016). Akhtar (2008) suggests that "some psychologists rate self-efficacy above talent in the recipe for success" (para. 4).

One of the major themes that developed from this study was the development of self confidence in the completers of the program. Despite being unemployed, and working with a case worker, each of the respondents moved from challenging environments to employment, and better circumstances. This was accomplished by working on one's self throughout the program.

Throughout the interviews the respondents noted aspects of the program that tie back to the four ways to master self-efficacy. There were multiple examples of mastering tasks, choosing positive role models with similar challenges in peers, finding positive mentors in instructors or employer partners, and developing positive self-imagery through journaling and positive affirmation.

It was clear that the completers needed to overcome their own feelings of self-worth before they could ever move forward to developing the skills, knowledge and abilities to be successful in the workplace.

**Theory of career development.** Donald Super's Life Span/Life Space Theory of Career Development provided a compelling theoretical construct for understanding the value of credentials. Originally formulated in the 1950's, the Super Developmental Model emphasizes "how personal experiences interact with occupational preferences in creating one's self concept" (National Institute of Health, 2016, para. 1). Broken into five life stages, and nine life spaces, the theory emphasizes that one's self concept can develop and change over time based on their experiences (Okocha, 2001).

While these five stages are typically associated with biological age segments, persons will cycle through stages throughout their life based on their career and life experiences (Canadian Career Development Foundation, n.d.). The National Institute of Health (2016) identifies these life stages as:

- Growth – the development of self-concept attitudes;
- Exploration – tentative choice and skill development through trial;
- Establishment - entry-level skill building and stabilizing work experience;
- Maintenance - continual adjustment process to improve position;
- Disengagement - reduced output, preparation for retirement (para. 5).

The major implication is that vocational maturity does not necessarily correspond with biological age (National Institute of Health, 2016). For example, while one person may be experiencing exploration during their teens, another may be going through a mid-life crisis, and recycling through this stage in their late 30's (National Institute of Health, 2016).

Super defined five primary dimensions of vocational maturity, “which denotes the readiness of the individual to make career decisions” (Greenhaus & Callanan, 2006, p. 790). These are *planfulness* or awareness of the need to plan ahead, *readiness* or the ability to move forward through the proper mix of aptitude and attitude, *informational competence* or having sufficient knowledge of available jobs, careers and employment opportunities; well-formed *decision making skills*, and ultimately, *reality orientation* or a true understanding of one’s surroundings and situation (Greenhaus & Callanan, 2006; Memory Matters, 2017).

Through the analysis, it was apparent that the participants in this study all lacked fully developed vocational maturity at the time they entered the program. There were several factors that contributed to this viewpoint. First, despite the fact that each of the respondents had at least a high school education, and the majority had earned post-secondary credentials, they all found themselves unemployed or underemployed and working with a case worker at the start of the program. The stories they told suggested a mix of challenges with all aspects of the primary dimensions of vocational maturity. Their ability to plan ahead, gaps in either aptitude or attitude, and in many cases, poor life choices led them to the circumstances they found themselves in.

Secondly, participants were cycling through a different life segment at the program start, inconsistent with their biological age. While one participant was in maintenance, the remainder were either in exploration, or establishment, where they appeared to be struggling with issues such as career choice, skill building, and finding a stabilized work and family situation.

Much of this stems from the third factor; lack of developed self-concept. As noted by the respondents, absence of confidence was a limiting factor in their lives prior to going through the program. This prevented them from achieving meaningful work and careers, impacted their personal lives, and contributed greatly to their state of affairs.

People will often seek career satisfaction through roles in which they can express themselves, and implement and develop their self-concept (Canadian Career Development Foundation, n.d.). Super believes that job satisfaction increases when a person's self-concept includes their working self as being integrated with the other roles an individual plays (Canadian Career Development Foundation, n.d.). These roles are defined as child, student, worker, citizen, leisurite and parent (National Institute of Health, 2016).

Okocha (2001) further believes there are implications when applying this construct to individuals who have been marginalized by society; such as persons of color, LGBTQ, and those with disabilities (p. 5). She notes that lack of positive role models, self-efficacy issues, and forms of discrimination often play a role in limiting one's development of self-concept (Okocha, 2001). As a result, the ideal personal state for these populations may be negatively impacted or significantly underdeveloped (Okocha, 2001). This plays a key role in life choices, including the decision to pursue post-secondary education.

The respondents were all marginalized by society in one way or another. All were female; two were black; and one had disabilities. All of these factors appeared to contribute to under developed self-concept, and contributed to their circumstances.

**The encouragement and support of others.** All of the respondents in the study noted the positive role that others had in reinforcing their persistence and completion of the certificate. This support structure included the employer partners of the program, the instructors, and their peers enrolled in the cohort.

**Employer engagement.** Industry partnerships with colleges help provide critical input "to identify core workforce and training challenges and develop solutions to those challenges" (Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, 2015, p. 5). This involvement can take on multiple forms.

The first is by identifying needed competencies and skillsets to help design curriculum and credentials relevant to the marketplace. The second way is through support of workforce preparation efforts by offering internships to students, hosting job fairs and providing other forms of assistance to both colleges and learners (Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, 2015).

The engagement of the employers in the customer service certificate program was vitally important. As noted by one respondent, their participation made the program “real”. Not only did they provide much needed input in designing market relevant curriculum, their on-going support of the program and its students played a significant role in their overall success. In addition, their continued presence gave students hope that there was a job; and a potential career, waiting for them when they finished.

This notion of career was supported in several ways. Facility tours and visits with employer partner’s key leadership provided a behind the scenes look that many do not get a chance to get. This offered the participants a unique opportunity to experience multiple work environments in an effort to gain a keen understanding of what types of careers would be available to them post completion.

Mock interviews between human resource professionals and the participants provided needed practice to refine and develop necessary communication skills to successfully compete for a job. The honest feedback given to participants in a non-threatening atmosphere, helped to build self-confidence; a trait mentioned repeatedly by the respondents as a significant contributor to their overall success.

***Instructor support.*** Students are more likely to succeed when they are *directed*; have a goal and know how to achieve it, *focused*; possess a clear vision of the future, *nurtured*; feel that someone is invested in their success, *engaged*; actively participating in their learning experience,

*connected*; with peers and the broader community, and *valued*; recognized for their unique personality and abilities (Booth et al., 2013). Instructors play a significant role in developing these factors. As noted by Booth et al,

...students most commonly recognized faculty as having the greatest potential impact on their educational journeys. Instructors can support student achievement by finding ways to incorporate elements of the six success factors into course content and delivery. Faculty can also work with others across the college to integrate different types of support into the classroom and help connect students with any assistance they might need outside their coursework (2013, p. 10).

It was clearly evident that the instructors of the program were a positive influence on the program completers. In particular, the instructors were singled out by the respondents not only for the work they did in the classroom, but for the continual support they provided outside the classroom. Their ability to motivate and nurture students, along with developing and delivering market relevant curriculum were significant components in the completers overall success.

***Peer advocacy.*** Adult Learning Cohort Models have been shown to provide multiple positive benefits to learning. This includes providing students with enhanced feelings of support and connection, increasing their exposure to diverse ideas and perspectives, and creating an environment of collaboration (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010; Stocker, 2014).

The cohort based model employed by this program was cited several times by the completers as a key element in their success. The respondents noted that the cohorts were like a “family” and the bonds that they formed continued on after the class was complete. These bonds created feelings of support, motivation, and commitment; all critical elements in their journey towards certificate completion.

**Work based learning environment.** The structure of the program also played a significant role in creating the necessary environment for success. In essence, the students were participating in a form of internship; where they were learning the roles and responsibilities of customer service in a work place setting under the tutelage of industry professionals. Aspects of the program such as modeling a typical work period by having students go to class for eight hours, five days a week with structured breaks, and enforcing a business dress policy, helped to create an atmosphere of professionalism that is demanded in the workplace.

Internships are an effective means of preparing students for occupations in a number of ways. First, internships provide opportunity for career exploration by exposing individuals to the rigors of the work, and the environment it takes place in. Second, internships offer a chance to build the knowledge and skills required to be successful in the role. This leads to enhanced self-confidence in personal abilities. Finally, internships provide a great opportunity for networking with industry professionals, who can provide mentoring and future job opportunities (Loretto, 2017; The University of Iowa, 2017).

**Alignment of training to in-demand jobs.** Over the past few decades, the United States has transformed from a manufacturing driven economy to one dominated by the service sector (Wilson, 2014). This service sector employment growth has fueled the demand for a more highly skilled and trained workforce (Carnevale & Rose, 2015).

One service segment experiencing significant employment growth is non-retail customer service. Comprised of diverse roles requiring at least some post-secondary training, total employment in this segment is expected to grow 10% nationally by 2024 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). This projected growth rate outpaces the anticipated 7% employment increase in all occupational sectors during this same time frame (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

The non-retail customer service segment spans multiple industries and incorporates a variety of occupations including; patient care, call center management, client relations and technical support (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). As in other industries, organizations engaged in this segment are finding it increasingly difficult to find the talent they need for the positions they have available. While multiple issues hamper recruitment efforts, low unemployment rates and lack of skilled workers are most often cited as primary factors hindering results (Forward Service Corporation, 2014; Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, 2016)

The completers experienced employment success because the focus of the certificate program was on high demand, in need occupations in the market. Each of the respondents found full time employment at the completion of the certificate, and several had moved to better opportunities either within their own organization, or with another company at the time of the study.

For those that experienced enhanced opportunities, additional education appeared to be a key component to their mobility. One respondent who had moved into a trainer position noted that while she had considered, but not pursued further credentialing, she had received an additional 16 weeks of in-house training beyond the certificate completion during her employment. A second respondent who moved out of state for an enhanced customer service opportunity discussed how she went back to school for an associate's degree, and was currently slated to begin her bachelor's degree in the fall.

**Impact of the Cliff Effect.** The *Cliff Effect* occurs when individuals who are eligible for public assistance programs, lose eligibility for those benefits due to increases in earned income, but are unable to generate enough income to replace the value of the subsidies (Circles USA,

2014; Pearce, 2007; Thomas, 2012). The unintended impact is that rather than having full time employment move a person towards greater economic independency, the reverse actually occurs.

The consequences of the Cliff Effect on this cohort was discussed during this research. Despite obtaining full time employment as a result of earning the certificate, completers found themselves behind as early as their first paycheck. This caused considerable angst and confusion, and left many, especially those with children wondering how to manage their new budget realities.

The inclusion of financial planning assistance was offered as suggested modification to the course. Because case managers are typically untrained in this subject, the reality is that individuals often don't know where to turn for budget advice.

**Short term certificates can work.** As Carnevale, Rose and Hanson (2012) note in a recent report, with their comparably low cost and short duration to completion, certificates offer a good starting point for those looking to pursue a post-secondary credential.

Certificates are also seen as a critical component in backing community college student success by offering an opportunity for quick achievement (Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum, & Stephan, 2011). To accomplish this, the Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum and Stephan (2011) suggest the inclusion of a credential pathway; starting with certificates. They reason that success builds confidence, and the journey becomes more real with early success, and well-defined benchmarks embedded along the way.

Rosenbaum et al. (2011) also note that while wage increases are the most traditional way to measure success, non-monetary payoffs such as job status, job satisfaction and autonomy can be very valuable to the student. The belief is that as opportunities increase, quality of life is

enhanced. The earlier this happens in the process, the more likely individuals will persist and succeed (Rosenbaum, Rosenbaum, & Stephan, 2011).

The respondents in this research all noted that the program was a catalyst for future success. They all came in to the program with a desire to improve their circumstances, and all left with full time employment and a new found sense of confidence. This confidence took on several forms; self-assurance in their enhanced job and life skills and a new level of trust in their ability to pursue the career of their choosing.

They also left with a desire to pursue additional educational opportunities. Unfortunately, only one completer had actually pursued additional credentialing beyond the certificate at the time of the study. A limiting factor that may have contributed to this is the fact that there was not a clearly defined career pathway identified to follow this certificate.

Ultimately, the study revealed that short term credentials can serve as a catalyst for enhanced employment and further educational opportunities, given the presence of several factors; the encouragement and support of others including employers, instructors and peers, the inclusion of a work based learning model that mirrors the conditions and behaviors required in the work environment, and the alignment of the training to in-demand occupations.

## **Recommendations**

The purpose of this research project is to inform and guide the future development of short duration certificates targeting adult learners. To that end, the literature review combined with the emergent themes of this study, lead to some specific recommendations for practitioners involved in those efforts.

**Recommendation #1: The inclusion of employers in program development and delivery.** The respondents noted the critical role that employers played in their success. That

support started at the very beginning of the program during the curriculum development process, where much needed input on desired knowledge, skills and abilities was defined. The short duration of a certificate program demands that instructional time be laser focused on areas of most importance.

Employer support continued through the delivery phase, company tours, mock interviews and resume support. These activities ultimately served a dual purpose. They created confidence in the program participants that there was employment waiting for them at the end of the program if they persisted and completed. These activities also created a level of trust in themselves that they could successfully interview and pursue a career of their choosing.

**Recommendation #2: The importance of a cohort for adult student support and success.** Cohorts have been shown to enhance adult learning by providing improved levels of support and connection, increasing exposure to diverse ideas and perspectives, and creating an environment of collaboration (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010; Stocker, 2014). Programs should be designed to support this. As self-efficacy plays a critical component in adult outcomes, cohorts can play a major role in creating an environment for social persuasion and social modeling.

**Recommendation #3: Creation of speed to market pathways.** Employers need skilled workers in the least amount of time possible to meet their immediate and growing labor force needs. Adults that desire to change their life's circumstances want employment and a more stable environment. Because of this, the creation of speed to market pathways, with opportunities for quick achievement, built around transparent, well connected credentials that lead to, good paying, in demand occupations should be encouraged. This should start with short term certificates informed and developed with the assistance of industry. These credentials can

provide an opportunity for quick success, and the creation of a more positive self-concept, by providing a path towards better employment opportunities.

**Recommendation #4: Inclusion of financial coaching services.** The addition of financial coaching resources should be considered; especially when working with individuals from disadvantaged economic environments. The Cliff Effect is real, and can have devastating consequences for those impacted by its effect. It seems to be a social imperative that community and technical colleges in particular, through the populations they serve, should factor this service in as part of their student success efforts.

**Recommendation #5: Instill the need for lifelong learning.** As noted by Carnevale, Rose and Hanson (2012), certificates can be a great starting point, but they should not be viewed as a terminal degree. The concept of lifelong learning needs to be reinforced to all who enter a short term certificate program. As noted by Tom McGuire (2012) “deciding to take charge of one’s career...by becoming a lifelong learner opens the door to life-changing, rewarding, fulfilling growth” (para. 1).

**Recommendations for further research.** In addition to the recommendations put forth for the design and implementation of short duration certificates, the researcher makes the following suggestions for further research.

The first recommendation is that the study be replicated using different variables. As the first study focused solely on females, the inclusion of males into the research would be a critical component. In addition, the study of programs of longer length, different delivery structure, or subject matter would also be helpful in defining the impact of short term credentials.

The second recommendation would be to replicate this qualitative, phenomenological study using the voice of the employers, service agencies and instructors to understand their

perspective of the program. This holistic approach would provide a clearer understanding of whether the program supporters viewed the outcomes a success. In particular, the question of whether the employers perceived that the program strengthened the local job market and provided additional qualified candidates should be explored.

A final recommendation would be to undergo a mixed methods study, incorporating employment and earnings data from a broader cross section of the three cohorts. The inclusion of quantitative data would provide additional information about the overall success of the program.

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## Appendix A: Interview Script

Introduction: “Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today.”

“I am conducting a research study to help understand the value that adults receive from participating in and completing short term certificate programs”

“As part of this study, I will ask you a series of questions about your experiences in relation to the customer service certificate program that you participated in. This will take approximately 30 minutes of your time. Your responses to my questions will be kept confidential. As the information is confidential, I will assign a number to your responses, and only I will have the key to indicate which number belongs to which participant. In any articles I write or any presentations that I make, I will use a made-up name for you, and I will not reveal details or I will change details about where you work, where you live, any personal information about you, and so forth.”

“The benefit of this research is that you will be helping us to understand whether short term certificates help individuals get better jobs and encourage them to pursue further education. In addition, you will help us to understand whether short term certificates provide the skills and knowledge that are needed to be successful in the jobs they were trained for. This information should help us to design future programs that better meet the demands of both employers and the students in these programs. The risks to you for participating in this study are minimal. If you do not wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.”

“May I start with the first question?”

Question 1. What compelled you to participate in this program?

Question 2. How did the program prepare you for a role in customer service?

Question 3. What impact did earning the certificate have on your employment search?

Question 4. What do you see in your future now that you’ve earned this certificate?

Question 5. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience?

## Appendix B: Informed Consent Release

### INFORMED CONSENT RELEASE

My name is Dean Stewart, and I am a graduate student pursuing my doctorate in Career and Technical Education at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not.

I am interested in learning more about the value that earning a short term certificate provides for adults. Specifically, I would like to understand the impact that these types of credentials have on job preparedness, employment opportunities and pursuit of further education.

You will be asked to answer a series of questions about your experiences. This will take approximately 30 minutes of your time. With your approval I will record the entire interview. All information will be kept confidential. As the information is confidential, I will assign a number to your responses, and only I will have the key to indicate which number belongs to which participant. In any articles I write or any presentations that I make, I will use a made-up name for you, and I will not reveal details or I will change details about where you work, where you live, any personal information about you, and so forth.

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping us to understand whether short term certificates help individuals get better jobs and encourage them to pursue further education. In addition, you will help us to understand whether short term certificates provide for the skills and knowledge that are needed to be successful in the jobs they were trained for. This information should help us to design future programs that better meet the demands of both employers and employment seekers. The risks to you for participating in this study are minimal. If you do not wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.

#### **IRB Approval:**

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University of Wisconsin-Stout's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator.

**Participant** - All of my questions and concerns about this study have been addressed. I choose, voluntarily, to participate in this research project. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I allow the investigator to record our interview.    Yes     No

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Print name of participant

---

Signature of participant

---

date

---

Print name of investigator

---

Signature of investigator

---

date

Contact Information

**Investigator**

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## Appendix C: Thematic Coding Example

	Trans 1 and Trans 2	Trans 3	Trans 4
	Listing and reading of raw text Elimination of extraneous words and clarifying meaning	Sorting and identifying common ideas	Declaring Theme
Interviewer:	So tell me a little bit about the instructors for the course. How influential were they in your success within the program?	Redirection Question: tell me about the instructors. How influential were they to your success?	
Respondent 5:	Oh, extremely. [REDACTED] is a really good instructor. I have a lot of respect for her. I did speak... just by chance... I did work a lot more with [REDACTED] I would say. For no specific reason. [REDACTED] helped me all the way through the program, even after, I had correspondence even after. She was definitely, you know, just a solid foundation to just keep me on that right path even when I was done with the program. So you know, they were definitely excellent when it came to providing that help. I always felt comfortable going to them with any questions that I had. If I had something I wanted to review, I never felt hesitant to reach out to them and say, "Hey, you know, I'm really not sure about this. How would you handle this? What is your input? Do you have any suggestions?".	Extremely, Respect helped me all the way through the program, even after (through correspondence) She was a solid foundation to keep me on the right path, even when I was done with the program They were excellent in providing help I felt comfortable going to them with any questions that I had. I never felt hesitant to reach out to them and (ask); How would you handle this, what is your input, do you have suggestions?	Respect  Support of instructors During class and beyond  Support of instructors
Interviewer:	And how about the role of the employers in the program? What... Did you feel like the employers have a positive impact or a negative impact on the program?	Redirection Question: how about the role of the employers in the program. Did the employers have a positive or negative impact?	
Respondent 5:	I think they all had a positive. You know, I mean obviously [REDACTED], I believe at the time wasn't a partner yet. But they were very welcoming. Before I actually finished I had some interviews lined up, and when I was done with the program, I actually had two offers. One through [inaudible 00:09:13] and one through [REDACTED].	Positive They were very welcoming. Before I actually finished I had some interviews lined up, and when I was done with the program, I actually had two offers	Positive role of employers

## Appendix D: E-mail Request to Participate in the Study

Hi,

I'm Dean Stewart and I am the dean of Corporate Training and Economic Development at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC).

I'm reaching out to you since you participated in a six week customer service certificate program through NWTC in 2014-15. I am working on my doctorate, and doing some research on the value of short term programs like the one you took part in. As you are a graduate of the program, I am wondering if you would be willing to let me interview you as part of my research.

If you agree to my request, I would like to schedule a half hour interview at a time that is convenient for you. I would ideally like to meet at the college, but can make other arrangements work as well. This includes another location, Skype, or a phone interview.

If you are interested in assisting me in my project, or have questions about my request, please contact me via email or phone at the contact information below. If you do not want to participate, please let me know that as well, and I will take you off of my contact list.

Thank you for considering my request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Dean Stewart

### **Dean H. Stewart**

Dean of Corporate Training & Economic Development

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#### **Northeast Wisconsin Technical College**

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