

ABSTRACT

Jordan Bullington-Miller, A REDEFINITION OF SELF: THE DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION, AND IMPACT OF A CAREER EXPLORATION COURSE FOR STUDENTS ON ACADEMIC PROBATION (Under the direction of Dr. David Siegel). Department of Educational Leadership, May 2022.

Students on academic probation are among the most vulnerable populations within higher education. Research indicates that following a semester of academic difficulty, students experience diminished self-efficacy and a decline in academic motivation. Evidence from a growing body of career development literature indicates that career exploration increases self-efficacy, improves decision-making, and enhances academic performance. Studies have explored the impacts of academic recovery programs and career development experiences as mutually exclusive interventions. No existing study previously explored the intersection of the two. This mixed methods case study assessed the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation. It examined the impact of the course on career self-efficacy and academic motivation, the value students assigned to such a course, and their experiences within it.

The study explored the experiences of 15 students on or at risk of academic probation. Qualitative data suggested that career exploration contributed to increased confidence for students on probation. Quantitative data demonstrated statistically significant increases in the five competencies of career self-efficacy (occupational information, goal selection, planning, problem solving, and self-appraisal). Academic motivation declined in all three extrinsic motivation constructs and two intrinsic constructs (EM: external regulation, introjected, and identified; IM: toward accomplishment, and to know) with an increase in intrinsic motivation: to experience stimulation. However, the change in academic motivation was not statistically significant overall. Additional research is necessary to understand the predictive and mediating factors that contribute to the decline of academic motivation for students on academic probation.

A REDEFINITION OF SELF: THE DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION,
AND IMPACT OF A CAREER EXPLORATION COURSE FOR
STUDENTS ON ACADEMIC PROBATION

Presented to

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

Jordan Bullington-Miller

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STUDENTS ON ACADEMIC PROBATION

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Dan, we share a life and we share a favorite book. It has been eleven magical years. And after all that time, I am still trying to impress you.

To our daughters, Everly and Quinn, and our son, Anders, you three have given my life the most profound sense of purpose. It is my sincerest hope that I have made you as proud as you make me every single day.

I dedicate this work to all of you. Thank you for believing that I could not fail.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE.....	i
COPYRIGHT.....	ii
SIGNATURE.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	xiv
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background of Focus of Practice (FoP).....	3
Context of Study.....	7
Statement of the Focus of Practice.....	10
FoP Guiding Question(s).....	12
Overview of Inquiry.....	12
Inquiry Partners.....	15
Theoretical Foundation.....	16
Definition of Key Terms.....	18
Assumptions.....	20
Scope and Delimitations.....	21
Limitations.....	22
Significance of Inquiry.....	22
Addressing Issues of Social Justice.....	23

Advances in Practice.....	25
Summary.....	25
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	27
Theoretical Foundation.....	28
Self-Efficacy Theory.....	28
Career Self-Efficacy Theory.....	31
Academic Probation.....	34
Academic Probation Causes and Consequences.....	36
Academic Recovery Programs.....	38
Academic Difficulty and Career Development.....	40
Career Indecision.....	41
Indecision vs. Indecisiveness.....	42
Origins of Career Indecision.....	43
Characteristics of Undecided Students.....	44
Career Indecision Typologies.....	45
Major Choice.....	47
Factors that Influence Major Choice.....	48
Frequency of Major Change.....	50
Barriers and Challenges to Major Change.....	51
Interest-Major Congruence.....	53
Relationship between Career Goals and Motivation.....	53
Self-Determination Theory.....	54
Autonomy and Self-Efficacy.....	56

Impact of Career Indecision on Motivation.....	56
Career Development Interventions.....	57
Historical Role of Career Counseling in Higher Education.....	58
Intervention for Traditional College Students.....	60
Interventions for Non-Traditional College Students.....	61
Interventions for Specific Populations.....	62
Career Course Intervention.....	64
Career Assessments and Measuring Tools.....	65
History of Career Assessments.....	65
Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale (CDSE) (CDSE-SF).....	68
Academic Motivation Scale (AMS).....	69
Summary and Conclusions.....	72
CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY.....	73
FoP Guiding Question(s).....	73
Inquiry Design and Rationale.....	76
Research Question 1.....	76
Research Question 2.....	77
Research Question 3.....	77
Research Question 4.....	77
Context of the Study.....	78
Inquiry Partners.....	80
Ethical Considerations.....	82
Inquiry Procedures.....	85

Phase I.....	86
Description of Participants and Recruitment Strategies.....	86
Instrumentation.....	89
Pilot Study/Baseline Data Collection.....	91
Data Analysis.....	93
Summary of Phase I.....	95
Phase II.....	95
Inquiry Approach/Intervention.....	96
Summary of Phase II.....	99
Phase III.....	100
Analysis of Approach.....	100
Summary of Phase III.....	102
Inquiry Design Rigor.....	103
Delimitations, limitations, and Assumptions.....	104
Role of the Scholarly Practitioner.....	105
Summary.....	108
CHAPTER 4: QUALITATIVE AND QUANTIATIVE RESULTS.....	110
Research Questions.....	111
Demographics of the Study.....	111
Data Collection.....	118
Data Analysis of Research Questions.....	120
Research Question 1.....	120
Themes.....	123

Theme 1.....	123
Theme 2.....	134
Theme 3.....	142
Research Question 2.....	147
Research Question 3.....	151
Research Question 4.....	158
Themes.....	162
Theme 1.....	162
Theme 2.....	173
Theme 3.....	181
Academic Outcomes.....	191
Summary.....	192
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	194
Discussion.....	194
Interpretations of Research Question 1.....	194
Interpretations of Research Question 2.....	196
Interpretations of Research Question 3.....	198
Interpretations of Research Question 4.....	203
Implications.....	205
Recommendations for Practice.....	207
Recommendations for Future Research.....	209
Summary and Conclusions.....	211

REFERENCES..... 213

APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL..... 254

APPENDIX B: IRB-TITLE CHANGE AMENDMENT APPRROVAL..... 255

APPENDIX C: IRB-APPROVED CONSENT FORM 256

APPENDIX D: INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL..... 260

APPENDIX E: FINAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL 261

APPENDIX F: DESCRIPTIONS OF ASSIGNMENTS 262

APPENDIX G: INDIVIDIAL PARTICIPANT PORTRAITS 264

LIST OF TABLES

1. Branchline Academic Recovery Program Options.....	8
2. Weekly Topics and Assignments within the Career Development Intervention.....	98
3. Age, Student Type, Gender Identity, Race or Ethnicity	113
4. Work Commitments, First-Generation, Course Load, Career/Major Challenges	114
5. Pre-/Post CDSE-SF Assessment Data	150
6. Pre-/Post AMS-C Assessment Data	157

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Bandura's Self-Efficacy Expectancy Model.....	32
2. Career indecision typologies.....	46
3. Gender representation of participants	116
4. Race and ethnicity representation of participants	117
5. Pre-/ and post-test data for AMS-C by attendance rate	159

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Despite the significant effort by students and higher education professionals during the admission process, 27% of first-year students enrolled in four-year public institutions leave before completing their degree (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018). While there are many mediating factors that affect student success, grades in college courses are the “single best predictor” of persistence and graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 396). The use of grades in assessing student preparedness and capability is negligible, yet it is grades that determine academic standing and academic policies that determine eligibility to remain at the institution.

At the majority of four-year institutions in the United States, when a student’s GPA drops to below a 2.0, the student is no longer in good academic standing. Four-year institutions place approximately 20% of students on academic probation within the first year of college (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2014). The language of academic standing policies varies, but common terms include “academic probation” or “academic warning” (Cruise, 2002). Regardless of the terminology, these academic standing policies introduce new threats to students, including financial repercussions with satisfactory academic progress (SAP) policies and expulsion from the institution.

The present study was conducted at a large public four-year institution. Given the in-depth nature of the case-study design herein, I have chosen to present the institution using the pseudonym Branchline University. Each academic year, Branchline University places approximately 3,000 students on academic probation or suspension. Of those students who are placed on probation, approximately 40% are ultimately suspended (Probation Data, 2020). If academically suspended, a student must apply for readmission to return to the University to

complete their degree. In many cases, the suspension period lasts approximately two years, as this is the minimum length of time for a break in enrollment under the academic forgiveness policy.

The design of the existing academic recovery program at the University offers intentional academic support to students experiencing academic difficulty. The population of students on academic probation varies in their gender, racial, ethnic, and social class identities. However, of significance the last two years of probation data indicates that more than 30% of students placed on academic probation within their first year at the University are housed within University College as students who are undesignated or undecided of college major (Probation Data, 2020). Furthermore, probation data looking at the full Branchline student population regardless of the length of time at the institution indicates that of all students placed on academic probation or suspension in the last five years, an average 24% fall within University College with no declared academic major.

A substantial number of students on academic probation are experiencing career indecision or struggling to gain entry into what Gordon and Polson (1985) refer to as limited-access majors, based upon their current standing in University College. However, existing programs at Branchline and similar institutions dedicate the focus of academic recovery programs primarily to academic skill building and utilization of campus resources rather than larger major and career goals. Jackson et al. (2011) note that students experiencing academic difficulty are unique in that they are the population who may benefit most from career development experiences but are the least likely to receive such support as attention is often paid to perceived academic deficiencies.

As such, the present study seeks to enhance the existing support offered to students on academic probation at Branchline University by designing, implementing, and assessing the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation. Potential implications of such an intervention may include an increase in the self-efficacy of students (Reese & Miller, 2006), thus leading to an increase in motivation (Scheel et al., 2009), and improvement in academic performance (Mushegyan, 2010; Olivera-Celdran, 2011; Oyserman et al., 2006).

This chapter explores the background and context of the present study within Branchline's academic recovery program and the existing efforts to support students on academic probation. It introduces the focus of practice and the research questions that drive the study. This first chapter will offer an overview of the inquiry including key inquiry partners and the theoretical foundation of the study. Additionally, the chapter offers definitions of key terminology and the assumptions, scope, and anticipated limitations. Finally, in this first chapter I offer an analysis of the study's significance as an effort to advance research and equitable practices within learning centers across higher education institutions

Background of Focus of Practice (FoP)

This study seeks to enhance the support offered to Branchline University students experiencing academic difficulty as defined by the academic probation indicator. Scholars consistently connect an understanding of purpose and interest-major congruence to academic motivation, and by extension, success and retention (Allen & Robbins, 2010; Robbins et al., 2006; Tracey & Robbins, 2006). However, at Branchline the academic recovery program primarily emphasizes other areas of support, offering only minimal career development experiences.

Career indecision is a difficult construct to measure. One method to capture indecision is the tracking of major changes. An analysis of the probation data spanning the last three academic terms at the University indicates that an average of 26% of students on academic probation changed their major at least once within the academic year of their probationary period. The caveat to this data is that it only tracks those students who engaged in the declaration process to change their major. It is not possible to accurately measure those students on academic probation who are experiencing career indecision but choose not to take action or those unable to do so due to institutional policies.

Another indication of career indecision is the volume of students on academic probation after their first semester at the University who have not declared an academic major. Probation data of the Spring 2019, Fall 2019, and Spring 2020 terms indicate that more than 30% of first-semester students on academic probation were undeclared of major. The substantial percentage of undeclared students on academic probation provides further evidence of the need for career exploration support.

The Branchline academic recovery program currently offers minimal major and career exploration assistance for students on academic probation. Those students targeted to enroll in the academic recovery program following difficulty in the first semester are provided support to strengthen academic success skills and increase the connection to Branchline overall. While this support meets a critical need of students experiencing academic difficulty, currently the program does not include a dedicated space to engage students in an extensive conversation regarding larger career goals that speak directly to motivation. Higher education literature widely references the benefits of such conversations (Bunn, 2009; Galambos et al., 2006; Gordon, 1995; Kosine et al., 2008; Murphy et al., 2010).

Career indecision may yield a negative impact on the motivation to persist for college students (Ferguson, 2007). Studies that explore the experiences of students who are undeclared of major compared to their declared peers indicate that undeclared students are at a higher risk of attrition and are less likely to be engaged in their educational experiences (Foote, 1980; Leppel, 2001; St. John et al., 2004). Historical data pulled from the initial assessment completed by students on academic probation when they enroll in the academic recovery program show that students articulate career indecision or a lack of career goals as a factor that contributes to academic difficulty. However, the final assessment data collected following the Spring 2020 term show that 22% of Branchline academic recovery students indicated that major and career concerns continued to affect their performance in courses during their time in the academic recovery program. In Fall 2020, initial assessment data collected from 135 student participants who enrolled in the Branchline academic recovery program revealed that 33% self-reported feeling uncertain about their current major, 22% had changed majors at least once, and 23% indicated a lack of career goals as a factor that affected their academic performance in the semester when they experienced academic difficulty. Additionally, historical data indicates that students on academic probation who are undeclared or undecided of college major during the probationary period may be at a higher risk of academic suspension. An analysis of probation data over the last three academic terms examining eligible Branchline academic recovery students shows that an average 34% of students who were ultimately suspended from the university were undecided or undeclared of college major at the point of their suspension.

Hwang et al. (2014) demonstrated the benefit of career development interventions for underachieving students. However, to date, no existing study explores the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation. The Branchline academic recovery

program possesses the unique ability to fill this gap in the literature by examining the impact of a targeted career exploration intervention for students on academic probation and its potential impact on the career self-efficacy and academic motivation of those enrolled students.

In Spring 2020, I conducted a pilot study to assess the potential impact of a single career exploration experience on the motivation and persistence of students deemed “high-risk” by the University based upon a decline in recent academic performance. Participants in the pilot study engaged in a meaningful work career workshop that I designed and implemented within a first-year seminar course. Following the workshop experience, I conducted semi-structured interviews to assess the student experience, as well as student perception of the workshop’s impact on their academic motivation.

Findings from the pilot revealed that those students who had experienced recent academic difficulty valued the meaningful work career workshop as a space where they were able to engage in goal setting and planning related to their future career pathways. Participants drew connections between their artifacts produced within the workshop to their decision-making process of college major. Additionally, participant responses indicated that the reflective components of the workshop contributed to what Ryan and Deci (2017) refer to as autonomous motivation. As such, I found a positive relationship between the meaningful work career workshop and the motivation to persist for students with recent decline in academic performance. Of significance, participants within the pilot study described an increase in confidence in both academic and professional contexts. These empirical findings provide further evidence in support of the present study, which seeks to enhance support offered to students experiencing academic difficulty. I will explore additional details regarding this baseline data produced from the pilot study in Chapter 3.

A note regarding the language presented herein. Existing literature extensively references students with lower academic performance or students who are underprepared for college as “at-risk.” This is due in part to the high risk of attrition. Such language is ubiquitous in education. However, I find validity in the points made by Pica-Smith and Veloria (2012) identifying “at-risk” as a deficit language model. Furthermore, their work highlights the economical and racialized assumptions educators and students alike bring to educational spaces when such a term is vocalized. As such, I will refer to the students involved in the present study as students experiencing academic difficulty based upon the academic probation indicator.

Context of Study

The Branchline academic recovery program was created to bolster the support for first-semester students experiencing academic difficulty. The program exists within the Branchline University Learning Center. Each fall and spring, the program targets Branchline students on academic probation following their first semester at the University and provides intentional academic support to assist students in their return to good academic standing.

Since its inception, the Branchline academic recovery program has evolved to strengthen the support offered to students on academic probation. As of Fall 2020, the program offers four options tailored for the diverse needs of its target population. Table 1 captures a description of each of the four options. Those options include: a credit-bearing academic success seminar course, an eight week academic success focus group, a non-credit-bearing asynchronous academic success course, and a peer mentor program. Eligible academic recovery program students are encouraged to work with their academic advisor to choose the option that works best amid time commitments and their academic course load.

Table 1

Branchline Academic Recovery Program Options

Option	Description	Considerations
UCOL 130	Academic Success Seminar: This is a 10-week, graded, 2-credit hour course designed to focus on academic skills and understanding campus resources. Students become part of a small classroom community that fosters connections with other students and the instructor.	As a credit-bearing course, the grade in UCOL 130 will affect GPA. Majors with significant caseloads may struggle to accommodate an additional credit-bearing course.
Peer Mentor	Peer Mentors: Students meet one-on-one with an undergraduate peer mentor on a weekly basis to develop an individualized plan to return to good academic standing. Mentors focus on developing effective academic strategies, time management, and connecting with campus resources.	Mentor/mentee meetings can be scheduled around other commitments. While flexible in scheduling, this is a significant time commitment with weekly, hour-long meetings.
UCOL 135	Focus Group: A weekly 75-minute zero credit, discussion group focused on skill development to help students succeed academically. Topics include time management, study skills, goal setting, and more. Each group is open to 12 students. Campus professionals facilitate the sessions.	Each focus group is restricted to 12 students for small group discussion. As a zero-credit course, UCOL 135 fits into any schedule. There is no graded work produced within the course.
UCOL 137	Academic Success Experience: This zero credit course is college-specific. Students will enroll in the appropriate section of UCOL 137 based upon their academic college. The course provides students with a menu of activities that will help promote the development of study skills, problem solving skills, and self-awareness that foster academic success.	UCOL 137 is a fully online, self-paced course. As a zero-credit course, UCOL 137 fits into any schedule. There is no graded work produced within the course.

While the variety of options does accommodate diverse scheduling needs, all four of the existing Branchline academic recovery options are limited in the type of support they offer. All program options address academic success skill building and connection to the campus community and the resources within. This is not without justification. A lack of academic success skills including time management and study strategies continue to be the most frequently cited factors attributed to declining academic performance by students and scholars (Astin, 1993; Balduf, 2009; Coleman & Freedman, 1996; Earl, 1988; Olson, 1990; Thombs, 1995; Tinto, 1993). This is true for Branchline academic recovery students also. Initial assessment data for academic recovery students at the start of Spring 2020 indicates that 54% attributed their academic difficulty to time management concerns, while 27% reported a lack of effective study skills as a top factor in their performance in the previous semester (Academic Excellence Data, 2020).

By prioritizing this necessary academic support, the Branchline academic recovery program currently misses the opportunity to support students in career and major decision-making. Unlike their peers with demonstrated higher academic performance, students experiencing academic difficulty often do not receive the same level of support in career development. As an example of this discrepancy, at Branchline the departmental honors programs offer a specific curriculum for high-achieving students that focuses on professionalism within the discipline, as well as the opportunity to work closely with a faculty member with years of industry experience and access to an Honors College advisor and mentor for individualized support. By contrast, those students on academic probation eligible for the Branchline academic recovery program are encouraged to engage in one of the four options for assistance. All options offer dedicated academic remediation components and encourage

the utilization of campus resources, but no explicit focus on professional career goals.

Students experiencing academic difficulty may benefit from career counseling with research indicating such experiences yield stronger GPAs and increased self-efficacy (Grier-Reed et al., 2009; Jackson et al., 2011; Legum & Hoare, 2004). Additionally, there is a demonstrated correlation between career interventions and an increase in motivation (Oyserman et al., 2006). Both motivation and self-efficacy play a critical role in student success. This is especially true for the students experiencing academic difficulty (Hsieh et al., 2007).

The academic recovery program at Branchline is well established, and therefore well positioned to implement and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation. Providing intentional support to students experiencing academic difficulty is a chief concern of key stakeholders within the Undergraduate Education division overall. The existing partnership of the Learning Center and University Career Services served as an invaluable asset during the design and implementation of the course proposed herein.

Statement of the Focus of Practice

The focus of this mixed methods case study was to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation at Branchline University, as well to assess the value students assign to such a course and their experiences within it. Evidence suggests that career development interventions can produce statistically significant increases in retention and graduation rates, in particular for first-year students (Clayton et al., 2019). The recognition of purpose and commitment to career goals are two of the most significant factors contributing to the success and retention of students in the first year (Wyckoff, 1999). Furthermore, career development experiences increase self-efficacy and motivation in college students (Ozlem, 2019). Both self-efficacy and academic motivation are

directly linked to academic achievement (Bandura, 1993; Pajares, 1996). By comparison, students experiencing academic difficulty are likely to indicate low self-efficacy or diminished motivation (Bandura, 1993; Mosier, 2018), in particular, if they have experienced failure in the academic context (Phan, 2014).

The Branchline academic recovery program specifically targets students on academic probation following their first semester at the University. In the present study, I designed and implemented a career exploration course and measured its impact on the career self-efficacy and academic motivation of Branchline students on academic probation. Additionally, I explored the perceptions of students on academic probation as they participated in the career exploration course. The Branchline academic recovery program was uniquely positioned to support the implementation of the career exploration course and to assess its impact. Furthermore, the mixed methods case study design was best suited for the present study given its contextual parameters as the case study design allowed for an in-depth examination of cases within a real-world setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

As described herein, scholars have indicated that career development experiences can improve motivation, academic success, and persistence to graduation. Additionally, studies have explored the effectiveness of academic recovery programs on assisting students to recover their academic standing. However, this study fulfilled a gap in the literature by exploring the intersection of career exploration and academic recovery. I investigated the influence of a career exploration course on career self-efficacy and academic motivation for students on academic probation following their first semester at the four-year institution. Previously, only minimal career development support was offered to the students on academic probation at Branchline through the academic recovery program. The addition of career exploration experiences within

the program was a necessary step to better support students experiencing academic difficulty as they sought to return to good academic standing. The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation at Branchline University, as well to assess the value students assign to such a course and their experiences within it,

FoP Guiding Question(s)

In order to assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation at Branchline, the following four research questions directed the present study:

- RQ1: How do students on academic probation at Branchline conceptualize the value of participating in a career exploration course as part of their own academic recovery?
- RQ2: To what extent does the career exploration course influence the career self-efficacy of those students on academic probation at Branchline?
- RQ3: To what extent does the career exploration course influence the academic motivation of those students on academic probation at Branchline?
- RQ4: What are the experiences of students on academic probation who participate in the career exploration course?

Overview of Inquiry

The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation at Branchline University, as well to assess the value students assign to such a course and their experiences within it. The study measured the impact of the intervention on career self-efficacy and academic motivation. To do so, I conducted pre-/ post-test assessment using Betz's et al. (2005) Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale Short Form (CDSE-SF) and the Academic Motivation Scale

modified for college students (AMS-C) (Vallerand et al., 1993). Most notably, through the case study research design, I engaged participants in interviews to understand the student experience as part of the intervention while on academic probation. In addition to interview data, I collected samples of students' artifacts or the written work produced as part of the course. I utilized both forms of data to compose individual portraits of the student experiences. Afterward, I shared these portraits with individual participants to confirm that the portrait accurately depicted their experience. This data triangulation of multiple sources of evidence is a core component of case study design (Yin, 2018).

I developed the career exploration curriculum within one of the existing academic recovery courses, UCOL 130, taught at Branchline to students on academic probation. The curriculum itself was the product of a career development course I taught previously in Spring 2019 and Spring 2020 at Branchline to upper division student leaders. I designed this course in collaboration with University Career Services. Alongside the Executive Director for the Career Services unit, I constructed strengths-based course activities. The course is infused by the tenets of positive psychology and its overlap with career counseling with a focus on the pursuit of purpose. I followed the recommendations of Dik et al. (2014) in the design of the course curriculum with assignments that focused on identifying and leveraging individual strengths, meaningful work, flow, and gratitude. Over the course of six months, I wrote learning objectives and built course activities based on the research of Dik and Duffy (2009; 2012), and the life design work by Burnett and Evans (2018). The course was offered to 24 students initially in Spring 2019. I collected feedback from students and modified the curriculum based on that feedback to include more life design course work and major mapping as recommended by Brooks (2010). The course was taught a second time to 29 students in Spring 2020.

For the present study, I continued to leverage the partnership of our Career Services partners to modify the curriculum to address the specific context of a course for students on academic probation within their first year at the University. Moreover, a combination of student feedback from the earlier course delivery and recommendations in the existing literature drove curriculum modifications for the career exploration course in the present study. These modifications included the addition of career planning activities and strengths-based assignments. As recommended in the literature, I added more reflection opportunities to both in-class discussions and assignments to allow students the space to reflect on their past challenges and successes. This form of reflection is pivotal in developing the self-efficacy of students experiencing recent academic difficulty (Bandura, 1986; Fong & Krause, 2014; Wernersabach et al., 2014). In Spring 2021, I implemented the career exploration course as a unique section of the UCOL 130 curriculum course. I conducted a pre-/ post-test assessment utilizing Betz's et al. (2005) Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale Short Form (CDSE-SF) to measure the impact of the course on career self-efficacy. To evaluate academic motivation, I conducted another pre-/ post-test assessment using the Academic Motivation Scale modified for college students (AMS-C) (Vallerand et al., 1993).

In addition to the administered assessments, I sought to understand the experiences of students on academic probation within the career exploration course. Through the case study design, I engaged participants in interviews during the semester to give voice to their experiences and perceptions. I transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim and synthesized larger themes from the data using the NVivo software. With the consent of the participants, I also collected and analyzed student artifacts as part of the course. I utilized these multiple sources of evidence to triangulate the data. The participants reviewed their individual portraits to ensure each accurately

captured their experiences. It is my hope and intention that the findings of the present study will provide practitioners with a meaningful glimpse into the experiences of students on academic probation as they engaged in a career exploration course.

Inquiry Partners

No part of the present study would have been possible without the guidance and support of pivotal inquiry partners within Branchline. These key stakeholders shaped and offered their expertise at every stage: design, implementation, and analysis.

The Director of the Learning Center provided guidance as to the development of the career development course and its place within the Branchline academic recovery program. I also solicited the knowledge of the Director in the design of initial assessment tools. Additionally, I engaged the support and expertise of the Associate Director of Learning and Instruction in the design of interactive experiences within the intervention itself.

Beyond the guidance of the Learning Center professional staff, I leveraged the existing partnership between the Center and Career Services. I sought the input of the Executive Director and the Associate Director for Employer Relations in the design of the career exploration curriculum to ensure that the course aligned with strengths-based career exploration practices.

As no research occurs in isolation, I am grateful for the opportunity to engage institutional partners in the present study. To keep inquiry partners abreast of progress, I met periodically with the stakeholders during the semester to inform them of progress, and again at the conclusion of the course to share preliminary findings. At the conclusion of this study and with the permission of participants, I shared individual portraits with the academic recovery instructors as part of the annual Instructor Institute. Institute serves as the primary training experience for all instructors teaching an academic recovery course. These portraits provided

contextual details that offered an in-depth glance into the student experience during not only the career exploration course, but also while in academic recovery.

Theoretical Foundation

Self-efficacy is the belief that one has the ability to approach a challenge and to execute the actions necessary to achieve the desired outcome (Bandura, 1977). It is deeply rooted in a sense of control, the need for which, Bandura (1997) posits, is human nature. Often confused with self-esteem, self-efficacy describes a person's confidence in their ability and capacity for success in a given situation, whereas self-esteem speaks to self-worth (Bandura, 1997; Lunenburg, 2011). The goal of this study was to increase the level of self-efficacy in students. It did not address or attempt to address self-esteem.

In this same vein, self-efficacy and motivation are often used interchangeably but represent different constructs. Self-efficacy theory posits that if one believes he or she possesses the power to produce desired results, that this belief will then influence the amount of effort and time devoted to producing those results (Bandura, 1977; 1997). While self-efficacy can have a positive or negative impact on motivation, it is but one factor that influences motivation levels. Broadly defined, the theory suggests that individuals are more likely to approach activities where they possess high levels of self-efficacy (Van der Bijl & Shortridge-Baggett, 2002). By contrast, weakened self-efficacy will likely result in an adverse effect on the motivation to attempt a task (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Deci & Ryan, 2008). Bandura (1977; 1997) defines this as avoidance behavior, rather than approach behavior. The goal of the career exploration course was to improve self-efficacy and circumvent avoidance behavior, fostering approach behavior within the population of students experiencing academic difficulty.

Hackett and Betz (1981) later applied Bandura's self-efficacy theory to the field of career counseling, specifically the career decision-making process. Career self-efficacy theory postulates that the anxiety produced by career indecision will affect career decision-making overall (Betz, 2000; Taylor & Betz, 1983). The theory suggests that when an individual possesses high levels of self-efficacy they are comfortable taking control of their career decision-making. Furthermore, just as Bandura's (1977) theory positions self-efficacy as the determining factor for either avoidance or approach behaviors, if an individual has internalized a low self-efficacy toward a specific occupation, that individual is likely to avoid any exploration of that career (Betz, 2000; Hackett & Betz, 1981). This limiting perspective hinders the career decision-making going forward.

The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation at Branchline University, as well to assess the value students assign to such a course and their experiences within it. Career interventions have proven successful at achieving educational and career outcomes when the focus of the intervention was career self-efficacy and career decision-making (Betz & Luzzo, 1996). Research indicates that addressing the career decision-making process through group interventions, such as a career course or career focus group, may positively influence the progression of students toward academic and career goals (Hackett & Betz, 1992; McAuliffe, 1991).

A more extensive review of Bandura's self-efficacy theory, as well as Hackett and Betz's career self-efficacy theory is explored in Chapter 2. Each theory is intertwined with the other, and each is instrumental to the purpose of the current study as I utilized the Career Decision Self-

Efficacy Scale – Short Form (CDSE-SF) to collect and analyze data to assess the course’s impact.

Definition of Key Terms

The following list of key terms will provide clarity for the purposes of this study:

Academic motivation - Activities that are achievement-oriented and take place in academic contexts (Campbell, 1973). Performances in such activities are evaluated using academic measures (Atkinson & Feather, 1966).

Academic motivation scale for college students (AMS-C) - A modified version of the Academic Motivation Scale specifically for use with college students. The AMS-C is an assessment that evaluates academic motivation in college students. Grounded in self-determination theory, the instrument measures intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation (Vallerand et al., 1992; 1993).

Academic probation – At Branchline University, an academic standing assigned to a student whose cumulative GPA has fallen below a 2.0. After two consecutive semesters with the cumulative GPA below this marker, a student is academically suspended from the institution unless the most recent semester GPA is a 2.3 or higher.

Career decision self-efficacy scale – short form (CDSE-SF) - A shortened version of the career decision self-efficacy scale. The CDSE-SF measures career self-efficacy based on responses to career decision-making tasks. Participants self-report confidence level in each task using a Likert scale rating system (Betz et al., 2005; Taylor & Betz, 1983).

Career indecision - The phenomenon of experienced difficulty in the career decision-making process (Di Fabio et al., 2012; Gati et al., 1996; Osipow, 1999). It is common for college

students to experience career indecision, as it is a normal stage in the life span (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007; Osipow, 1999).

Career self-efficacy - An extension of Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, career self-efficacy refers to individuals' perception of their own ability to perform in a specific vocation (Betz & Hackett, 1981).

Good academic standing – At Branchline University, an academic standing assigned to a student whose cumulative GPA is above a 2.0 and has earned two-thirds of all credits attempted at the university.

Locus of control - An individual's perception of whether or not they have control over the events in their own life (Ng et al., 2006). First conceptualized by Rotter (1954; 1966), an internal locus of control speaks to the belief that one possesses control over their own experiences and that their actions dictate rewards or consequences. An external locus of control, by contrast, is the belief that one has no control within a specific context and that there is no link between individual actions and outcome.

Limited-access majors - Majors that have additional criteria required for entry. In some cases, this involves higher academic criteria, such as a specific GPA. In others, these additional requirements may involve credentials specific to a field, such as the CNA licensure for the nursing major. Certain majors may also hold a limited amount of seats within a major (Gordon & Polson, 1985; Musoba et al., 2018)

Self-determination theory (SDT) - A theory that describes human motivation. The theory posits that individuals are motivated by three psychological needs: perceived autonomy or control within a specific experience, competency or mastery of a task or behavior, and relational

support by others in a given context. These needs affect motivation. If not met within a context, the motivation to perform or persist is weakened (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2008).

Self-efficacy - An individual's confidence in one's own ability to perform a specific behavior successfully (Bandura, 1977; 1997).

Assumptions

In the present study, I assume that all participants responded honestly to the assessment procedures using the CDSE-SF and the AMS-C instruments. My assumption is that this honesty on both assessments during pre-/ post-testing ensured an accurate assessment of the career exploration course's impact on academic motivation and career self-efficacy.

A second assumption I have made in the present study is that all participants fully engaged in the reflective and exploratory activities within the intervention in order to experience personal growth and a better understanding of individual purpose. As there is no way to substantiate the assertions of career decision or indecision, I assumed the information provided by the participants in interviews and in all student artifacts to be an accurate depiction of the students' experiences.

The above assumptions were necessary to conduct the present study as they spoke to the validity of the participant experience. The identities of all participants' are confidential. All participants were informed of this prior to beginning the study in an effort to encourage honest and factual responses during both the course activities, reflections, and the pre-/ post-test assessments. In an effort to avoid coercive pressure, real or perceived, I communicated to all students that participating in the research study was not a requirement for the course and choosing to forego participation would in no way impact the grade in the UCOL 130 seminar. I

also communicated to participants that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without providing any explanation.

Scope and Delimitations

The inquiry engaged only participants who choose to both enroll in the Branchline academic recovery program and those who selected the UCOL 130 course as their program option. Furthermore, students were only eligible to participate in the study after providing their written consent at the beginning of the Spring 2021 semester.

I am aware that by relying solely on participants who elected to enroll in the Branchline academic recovery program, the present study runs the risk of a skewed sample insofar as students who choose to engage in an academic recovery program are assumed to be somewhat committed to improving their academic efficacy. However, merely electing to enroll in the program does not guarantee success. Participants, even those who indicated openness to assistance, faced the same obstacles they self-reported on the initial assessment as factors that hindered their previous academic performance. Therefore, the limitations of the sample will have a minimal impact on the study.

Additionally, while not all participants who elected to engage in this study may be officially undeclared of college major, more than 30% of students in each academic recovery program cohort over the last four terms have been undecided or undeclared as University College students. Given this, and the substantial research that correlates career development experiences with improved academic performance (Jackson et al., 2011; Legum & Hoare, 2004), the career exploration course may be useful to all students. I designed the course to provide a space to engage in meaningful career exploration as such experiences are linked to increases in academic success and retention (Evans & Burck, 1992; Fouad et al., 2016). This link has also been proven

when working specifically with students experiencing academic difficulty (Grier-Reed et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2013).

Limitations

Participants involved in the present study were Branchline students either on academic probation following their first semester at the university, or those students who were in danger of academic probation prior to utilizing the Pass/No Credit policies implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants consisted of traditional first-year students and transfer students. The age of participants was 18-27. As such, the results of the intervention may not be generalizable across other institutions with varying sizes or more or less diverse student populations. Additionally, all participants selected to enroll in the Branchline academic recovery program with the specific intention of returning to or remaining in good academic standing to remain at Branchline. The impact of this may translate into the inability to generalize findings to all four-year institutions.

Furthermore, the participants in the present study had experienced academic difficulty as indicated by their performance in their most recent college coursework. However, all participants met the criteria for admission to Branchline, which is a moderately selective institution. This means that despite experiencing academic difficulty, all participants had demonstrated successful academic performance in order to receive an offer of admission. Therefore, the results of the present study may not be generalizable to other students experiencing more severe academic concerns or students identified as underprepared at other institutions.

Significance of Inquiry

All participants in the present study were either on academic probation, or in danger of academic probation prior to utilization of the Pass/No Credit policies implemented in response to

the COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed students to elect grades of P or N in lieu of earned grades in Fall 2020. As such, the attrition of this population was a top concern for the institution. Existing studies speak to interventions that have been designed to support students experiencing academic difficulty including academic success seminars (McGrath, 2011; McGrath & Burd, 2012; Mellor et al., 2015), academic coaching models (Robinson, 2015; Vanacore & Dahan, 2019), and goal-setting interventions (Bowman et al., 2019). However, no existing study explores the impact of a career exploration course on the career self-efficacy and academic motivation of students on academic probation. This study seeks to fulfill this gap in the literature.

At a contextual level, the support offered to Branchline students on academic probation provides a wealth of resources and assistance. The faculty and professional staff within the program coach students to increase their academic skills and encourage students to connect with campus resources. Historically, the Branchline academic recovery program collaborated with Career Services to provide an in-class overview of their services or required students to attend a single career workshop event throughout the semester. These experiences did not provide this student population with a space to engage in meaningful career exploration. The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation at Branchline University, as well to assess the value students assign to such a course and their experiences within it.

Addressing Issues of Social Justice

The attrition of students on academic probation is cause for alarm given academic standing policies that dictate suspension due to consecutive semesters of low performance. Across the country, institutions have designed academic recovery programs to offer intentional assistance to students experiencing academic difficulty. However, the dichotomy of support

offered to the students experiencing academic difficulty compared to high-achieving peers may result in their academic marginalization (Deil-Amen, 2011). Branchline prohibits students on academic probation from changing their academic major until they have returned to good academic standing. This policy denies access to major-specific courses that are restricted to students within the major. As a result, students must defer the opportunity to explore a new major and new potential career pathway until they return to good academic standing. The longer this delay, the more time a student spends at the institution, thus adding the financial burden of additional tuition costs.

The students on the margins of the academically prepared exist on the campus of the four-year institution with an unspoken division between themselves and high-achieving peers. The psychological impact of this divide can be damaging as students may experience feelings of inadequacy and a fear of exposure as an underprepared student (Deil-Amen, 2011). Students experiencing academic difficulty are statistically more likely to stop-out of college and to produce lower GPAs while enrolled compared to their peers (Radford et al., 2010). Additionally, research has indicated that this population is more likely to demonstrate an external locus of control and indicate lower levels of self-efficacy (Lease, 2004). Not only are both of these concerns linked to low academic performance, but research has also shown a correlation of the external locus of control and low self-efficacy to a lack of self-confidence in vocational goals (Baiocco et al., 2009; Gati et al., 2011; Lease, 2004).

Fear of exposure or perceived inadequacy often prevents those students experiencing academic difficulty from seeking help from support services on campus despite personal struggle (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002; Palmer et al., 2009). Furthermore, despite the research that suggests that although students experiencing academic difficulty are more likely to struggle with

major and career decision-making than their peers, they are less likely to seek out support from career services on their campus (Lease, 2004).

In the present study, I sought to address the inequity of remediation solely dedicated to academic skill building and connection to campus resources. Research shows that by focusing on the needs beyond academic content, institutions can better support those students experiencing academic difficulty (Melzer & Grant, 2016). Career development interventions have been shown to offer these students a space to connect academics to future career goals, which in turn prompts improved academic performance and an increase in confidence within the academic setting (Hughes et al., 2013). In fact, by focusing on career goals and major exploration, a career-themed intervention can address the distorted view of academic intelligence as the primary driver and instead position effort as the key to achieving goals (Morrison, 1999). Therefore, I designed the career exploration course in this study to serve as a space for major and career exploration, as well as the opportunity to reflect on the correlation between academic and vocational goals.

Advances in Practice

Through the present study, I sought to give voice to the experiences of students on academic probation as they engaged in career exploration. The existing supports at the University do not currently provide such a space. It is my hope that the findings of this study will provide insight into the construction of additional career development experiences within other academic recovery programs, as well as enhance the work of the academic recovery program at Branchline University.

Summary

The present study is grounded in self-efficacy and career self-efficacy theories as described within this first chapter. The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to design,

implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation at Branchline University, as well to assess the value students assign to such a course and their experiences within it. This introductory chapter serves to frame the focus of practice and the efforts to bolster the support offered to students experiencing academic difficulty at Branchline. I have discussed the significance of this study with an emphasis on the intention of fulfilling a gap in the literature regarding career interventions specifically targeted to students experiencing academic difficulty as indicated by the academic probation standing. The chapter introduces the research questions that guide the study, as well as the definitions of key terms discussed herein. The chapter concluded with my intention of addressing an issue of social justice and equity, as well as the hope that this study will advance the practice of supporting students experiencing academic difficulty within the field of higher education.

The second chapter will provide an extensive review of existing literature, beginning first with a more detailed description of the theoretical framework. The chapter will then provide an in-depth examination of academic probation including causes, consequences, and existing efforts designed to support students experiencing academic difficulty. Next, I introduce career indecision, the major choice process, and the correlation between major and career goals and motivation overall.

Finally, the second chapter will conclude with a description of current career development interventions and their impact on academic success, as well as existing career and motivation assessment instruments and their validity. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth discussion of the tools and methods for collecting and analyzing data

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The academic recovery program at Branchline University supports a significant number of students on academic probation. However, the focus of that support is addressing academic deficiencies and connecting students to university resources. While both areas of focus are significant, this continued model of support misses the opportunity to engage students in career exploration activities. Such experiences allow students to conceptualize a direct link between the academic context and vocational goals. This gap is critical, as more than 30% of students eligible to participate in the Branchline academic recovery program as indicated by the academic probation indicator over the last four terms have been undeclared or undecided of college major. The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation at Branchline University, as well to assess the value students assign to such a course and their experiences within it.

Chapter 2 provides an extensive review of the literature on the broader context of career development and current findings, which correlate such experiences with academic success. The chapter begins with the theoretical framework of self-efficacy and career self-efficacy as the foundation of the present study. Following this section, I offer an examination of academic probation including the factors that contribute to academic difficulty, consequences, and existing academic recovery programs. I examine the construct of career indecision before shifting to a focus on major choice and the relationship between career goals and academic motivation. The chapter ends in a discussion of career development interventions and the tools used to collect and analyze data in the present study.

Theoretical Foundation

Of all career theories proposed, the concept of self-efficacy is one of the most significant factors to predict the discovery of purpose (DeWitz et al., 2009). Research directly links self-efficacy theory to success in the academic context (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Dinther et al., 2010; Martin & Martin, 1977; Multon et al., 1991). Furthermore, self-efficacy has been connected to satisfaction with college overall (DeWitz & Walsh, 2002). The present study explored the impact of a career exploration course for students experiencing academic difficulty as defined by the academic probation indicator at Branchline. As such, the course design is grounded in the self-efficacy and career self-efficacy theories.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy is individuals' confidence in their own ability to perform a specific behavior and to perform it well (Bandura, 1977). Bandura's theory of self-efficacy suggests that the self-belief that one can achieve a goal will significantly affect the achievement of that goal. Equally important, Bandura (1997) posits that self-efficacy is the greatest predictor of an individual's decision to pursue a task or to avoid it. This phenomenon is avoidant or approach behaviors (Bandura, 1977; 1997).

In his introduction to self-efficacy theory, Bandura (1977) initially offered his theory as an attempt to unify the existing behavioral theories. Today it has become one of the most widely studied and applied theories in psychology and continues to impact research (Betz & Hackett, 2006). The theory itself has influenced others, including Bandura's (1989) social cognitive theory, formerly known as social learning theory.

Furthermore, self-efficacy is prevalent in existing motivational theories, including the widely applied approach of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Self-efficacy is

linked to academic achievement measures as it has been proven to influence the defining of goals and motivation to achieve those goals in the academic context (Bouffard-Bouchard, 1990; Dinther et al., 2010; Schunk, 2003). This research demonstrates the power of self-efficacy on the achievement of students at all levels.

Self-efficacy theory describes an individual's sense of control in a specific context and the self-belief about the ability to perform in that context (Bandura, 1977; 1997). Bandura (1997) discusses the significance of self-efficacy and its relationship to outcome expectancies, or the anticipated results of a task. If an individual believes that their own actions influence an outcome, and they believe that they have the ability to achieve the desired outcome, they are far more likely to approach that task. By contrast, individuals who believe that their own actions will not influence an outcome are less likely to engage in the activity (Bandura, 1997).

Self-efficacy influences resilience when faced with a challenge. It influences the motivation to persist. High self-efficacy means an increase in the confidence to complete a task successfully, even amid difficulty (Schwarzer & Warner, 2013). This makes the focus on self-efficacy critical in interventions designed for students experiencing academic difficulty. Studies have shown that receiving low grades or demonstrating low academic performance will have a significant adverse impact on academic motivation (Kaplan et al., 1986; Kaplan et al., 1997). This research shows that students experiencing academic difficulty may internalize negative thoughts and attitudes about their academic experiences resulting in the engagement in defensive behaviors to protect against the feelings of inadequacy in the academic context. Interventions for this population would benefit from focusing on the increase of self-efficacy among student participants.

If an intervention seeks to affect the issue above, it is imperative to understand the components that inform an individual's level of self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) describes four modes of information that contributes to an individual's self-efficacy: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. The design of a treatment to address low self-efficacy must consider these modes of information and the varying ways they interact with one another.

Performance accomplishments describe an individual's experience of succeeding at a given task. Such successes inform self-efficacy as they increase outcome expectancies for the future. The reverse of this is also true. Bandura (1977) explains that failing at a task consistently will decrease self-efficacy in that context. As an example, a student on academic probation who struggles to grasp a concept in the academic context is likely to experience low self-efficacy in that context moving forward and may avoid it all together.

However, accomplishment is not the only example that contributes to self-efficacy. Vicarious experience is the experience of seeing another individual engage in a difficult task successfully (Bandura, 1977). This visual may become inspirational and serve to enforce the self-belief that the individual may also succeed. Yet, Bandura (1977) stresses this visual, as a social comparison, is a weaker source of self-efficacy. An example of this would be the student on academic probation internalizing the belief that he or she will succeed after witnessing a peer succeed. It may serve as inspirational, but Bandura's theory would suggest that self-accomplishment would prove far more impactful.

The simplest source to offer another is verbal persuasion, which manifests in the verbal comments by others. It involves one individual communicating outcome expectations of another (Bandura, 1977). A clear example of verbal persuasion is that of a coach working with a student

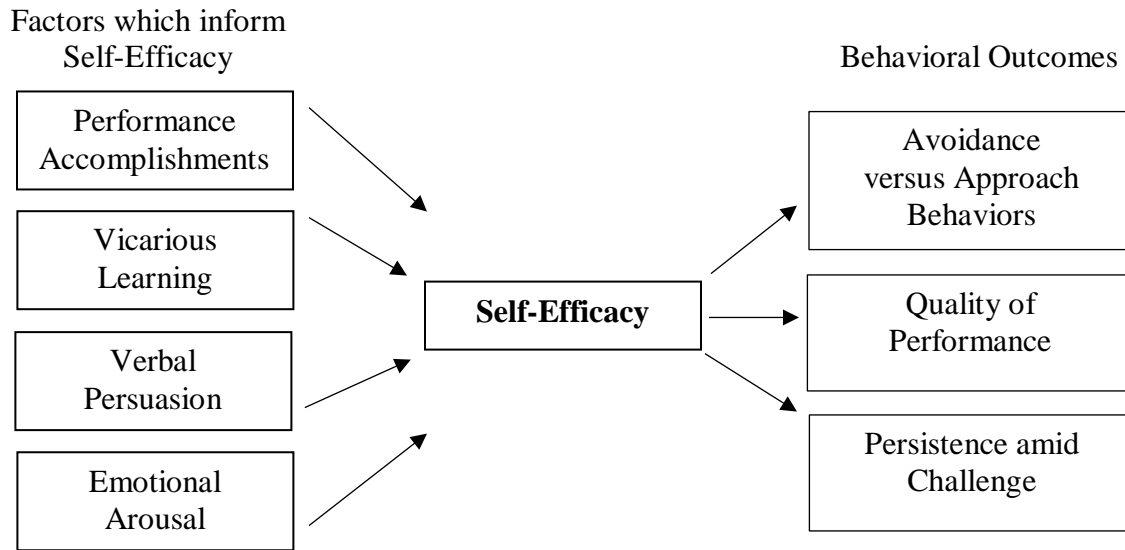
on academic probation to define expectations for academic progress and offer support as the student works to meet them. Lastly, emotional arousal is the fourth and final component that informs self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) describes this source as a difficult experience that elicits an emotional response. In situations where an individual may feel threatened, that individual may develop coping strategies and employ resiliency, which will affect self-efficacy.

While these four sources inform self-efficacy, Bandura (1977; 1997) explains that self-efficacy then produces three behavior outcomes. One of these outcomes is avoidant versus approach behavior, but self-efficacy also influences the quality of performance in a given task and the ability to persist amid challenging experiences. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this self-efficacy model.

The relationship between self-efficacy and behavior, in particular as it relates to persistence will be beneficial to supporting students through difficult experiences. Given the research, it will be useful in academic contexts to explore how educators can support students in the development of their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy has been consistently proven to positively influence academic performance (Al-Harthy & Was, 2013; Komarraju & Nadler, 2013; Li, 2012).

Career Self-Efficacy Theory

Influenced by self-efficacy theory, Hackett and Betz (1981) began to explore career development specifically for women. Their findings confirmed the research of other studies focusing on the socialization of women and the impact on the career decision-making process for theoretical approaches to the career development of women (Farmer, 1976; Fitzgerald & Crites, 1980). Hackett and Betz describe how the socialization of women is communicated through Bandura's (1977; 1997) four modes of information. Their study highlights the detrimental effect



Note. Bandura (1977).

Figure 1. Bandura's Self-Efficacy Expectancy Model.

of such socialization on self-efficacy, causing the women in the study to refrain from exploring male-dominated career pathways.

Hackett and Betz (1981) concluded their study with the recommendation for future investigations on how self-efficacy influences career behaviors. They then expanded their initial research into the development of the career self-efficacy theory (Betz & Hackett, 1981). Since that time, extensive research has shown that career exploration is meaningfully influenced by self-efficacy (Betz, 2000; Betz, 2004; Betz & Luzzo, 1996; Betz & Schifano, 2000; McWhirter et al., 2000; Niles & Sowa, 1992; Sullivan & Mahalik, 2000).

Career self-efficacy refers to individuals' perception of their own ability to perform in a specific vocation (Betz & Hackett, 1981). However, performance is but one consequence. Bandura's (1977; 1997) avoidant and approach behaviors are critical to the career decision-making process or major choice of college students. The theory suggests that if the student possesses low self-efficacy related to a specific vocation, this would affect the career decision-making process (Betz, 2004). An example, if a student believes they do not have the capacity to succeed in mathematics, a consequence of this low self-efficacy may be to engage in avoidant behaviors rather than explore a math-intensive career path or major. Overall, outcome expectancies play a significant role in the amount and types of careers considered with low self-efficacy ultimately limiting exploration and high self-efficacy producing the confidence to engage in exploration of many careers and majors (Betz & Hackett, 1981).

Career self-efficacy will foster either avoidant or approach behavior in career decision-making. Therefore, to assess this process Taylor and Betz (1983) created the career decision-making self-efficacy scale (CDM-SE) to measure the behaviors within the career decision-making process. This tool sought first to determine specific career decision behaviors and

employed the five capabilities of career choice proposed by Crites' (1961) career maturity theory: self-appraisal, occupational knowledge, goal setting, futuristic planning, and problem solving. A shorter form was created using five behaviors instead of 10, the Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Short Form (CDMSE-SF). Later, the scale changed in name to the Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale (CDSE and CDSE-SF) (Betz et al., 2005). Both the original scale and the short-form have been tested and found to be reliable in the effort of accurately measuring career self-efficacy (Betz et al., 2005; Betz et al., 1996; Betz & Vuyten, 1997).

Betz and Hackett (2006) recommend that before approaching an intervention where career self-efficacy will come into play, it is important to first define the specific behaviors for assessment. Self-efficacy is not a general concept. It is situational. A researcher who seeks to examine the self-efficacy in participants must first define the specific behavior. An example of this in career counseling might be choosing a major (Betz, 2004).

Academic Probation

In 2019, 66% of graduating high school seniors enrolled in higher education (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). The students who enroll in colleges and universities bring with them a host of expectations for the college experience. These expectations include the assumption that in college they will be training for their future professions and increasing their social capital (Dinz et al., 2016). Other expectations include timely progression to graduation and the assumption that their tuition dollars are directly translating into college credits that move them consistently forward to graduation (Rosenbaum et al., 2014).

Notably, studies assessing pre-college student expectations indicate that a combination of grade inflation and praise by educators at the secondary level often translates into the internalized belief that effort does not directly affect performance (Rosenbaum, 1998). Similar

findings indicate that this continues at the post-secondary level with the belief by undergraduate students that high academic achievement requires only minimal effort (Clayson, 2005; Landrum & Dillinger, 2000). Other studies have indicated that students are cognizant of an increase in workload and difficulty in their college courses compared to high school (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). While students expect the increase in rigor in college, higher education practitioners assume that no student anticipates academic failure when they enroll in colleges and universities. This makes the experience of academic difficulty and the resulting academic standing of probation or warning shocking insofar as it does not align with student expectations.

While language and terminology may differ by school, every higher education institution maintains explicit policies that define the parameters of “good academic standing” (Brawner et al., 2010). For those students who fall below these parameters, each institution mandates the impact and, if applicable, the intervention through academic recovery programs to increase academic standing success behaviors (Kelley, 1996; Wright, 2020). Institutions often use the qualifier of academic probation as a tool, which indicates to both college administrators and students that the student in question is at risk of academic suspension or expulsion (Hoover, 2014; Kelley, 1996).

Academic probation parameters vary by institution, but many explicitly name a cumulative GPA of below 2.0 as a defining factor (Cruise, 2002). Similarly, interventions designed to provide support to students on academic probation differ by institution, although there are common intervention designs including academic success courses (McGrath & Burd, 2012; Shea, 2018) and intrusive academic advising models (Sims, 2019). Yet, even with intervening support, probation policies are often criticized for their punitive approach in both language and consequences (Casey et al., 2018; Cruise, 2002; Rodriguez, 2019).

There are many factors, both academic and non-academic, which influence a student's ability to be successful. Scholars and practitioners assume that no student enrolls in higher education with the intention of being unsuccessful (Preuss & Switalski, 2008). However, the likelihood of persistence is lower for students placed on academic probation (Hoover, 2014). Therefore, the intervention for these students is critical. Effective intervention requires knowledge of potential mediating factors that lead to academic probation, as well as an understanding of existing academic recovery programs.

Academic Probation Causes and Consequences

As institutions seek to construct academic recovery systems to support the increasing number of students on academic probation, they must first understand the challenges that perpetuate academic difficulty (Lee, 2017). Research has explored underachievement in capable students citing the causes as boredom in learning (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003), concern for the opinion of peers (Natale, 1995), and performance or test anxiety (Harris & Coy, 2003). The majority of these findings focus primarily on the secondary level of education. However, there is a direct correlation between underachievement in high school and performance in college. The belief that minimal effort is necessary for high achievement in high school endures at the post-secondary level (Balduf, 2009; Grobman, 2006).

Unique to college student underachievement is the transition to more independent living and learning that influences performance. A consistent theme in existing research points to accounts of students who feel ill equipped to manage their time in college (Appleby, 2006; Balduf, 2009; Lee, 2017; Panek, 2013; Tinto, 1993). The abundance of free time is a stark contrast from the highly structured schedule of secondary education, and navigating the change is often difficult for college students (Panek, 2013). Additionally, college students report a lack

of preparedness to meet the increased rigor and expectations of the college curriculum (Appleby, 2006; Earl, 1988; Haycock & Huang, 2001). A lack of cognitive skills, including study strategies, is a common theme within those reported factors that lead to academic difficulty and probation (Coleman & Freedman, 1996; Thombs 1995; Tovar & Simon, 2007).

Beyond those cognitive skills not learned prior to college enrollment, students experiencing academic difficulty face external challenges including financial hardships (Lee, 2017; Tovar & Simon, 2007) and in some cases, substantial work commitments (Tovar & Simon, 2007). There is also an established correlation of lack of interest in college major and underachievement in college, in particular for women (Lee, 2017). Additionally, studies point to noncognitive factors as strong predictors of academic difficulty including diminished academic motivation (Mealey, 1990) weakened academic-self-efficacy (Hsieh et al., 2007; Robbins et al., 2004), and psychological distress (Al-Zoubi & Bani Younes, 2015).

While the range of contributing factors for academic difficulty varies, the consequences of academic probation policies are consistent across institutions. At a cognitive level, the academic probation label influences how students see themselves with demonstrated lower self-efficacy and weakened self-confidence in academic spaces (Kelley, 1996; Multon et al., 1991). Students on academic probation are more likely to stop-out or feel discouraged from returning to their institution (Fletcher & Tokmouline, 2017; Lindo et al., 2010).

Of additional significance are the financial repercussions of academic probation. In order to remain eligible for federal student aid, college students are required to meet the satisfactory academic progress (SAP) policy as mandated by the federal government. Individual institutions determine the specific SAP guidelines, but at minimum SAP looks at college GPA and the rate of progress as measured by the ratio of attempted credit hours to completed hours (Federal

Student Aid, n.d.). Failure to meet SAP will result in the loss of federal financial aid producing a barrier that may be difficult to overcome. In 2012, 20% of first-year students eligible for Pell Grant funds were at risk of losing their Pell eligibility due to SAP (Schudde & Scott-Clayton, 2014). Students on academic probation are at a high risk of SAP consequences with GPAs often below a 2.0. These consequences make the work of academic recovery programs critical as they seek to support students experiencing academic difficulty.

Academic Recovery Programs

Given the variation of mediating variables that lead to academic difficulty, students indicate a desire to receive intentional support from their institution (Tovar & Simon, 2007). Existing academic recovery programs differ in size and format, but the goal of helping students to navigate the academic expectations of college is consistent across institutions (McGrath & Burd, 2012). The debate on whether programs should be voluntary or mandatory is ongoing. Proponents of mandatory programs that require students on academic probation to participate indicate that these required support structures are more successful than those programs on a purely voluntary basis (Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001). Advocates for mandatory programs point to the belief that students experiencing academic difficulty are unlikely to seek out support on their own (Damashek, 2003; Hsieh et al., 2007; Vander Schee, 2007). Arguments against mandatory programs include the understanding that students may not invest in a program they did not have the option to choose for themselves (Hartman, 2014). An additional challenge is the act of enforcing participation and subsequent consequences if a student does not participate.

Academic recovery programs vary in method. The intrusive advising model offers intentional academic support for the individual student. Such individualized support addresses the challenge of student belonging amid academic difficulty (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Sims

2019; Vanacore & Dahan, 2019; Vander Schee, 2007). However, intrusive advising produces a significant advising caseload for college administrators. Given time constraints and workload, institutions also offer programs as group interventions. The group intervention structure often consists of non-credit academic workshops or focus groups facilitated by faculty and staff (Nance, 2007). However, one of the most common practices in academic recovery programs is the offering of a credit-bearing academic success course (Nordell, 2009). These courses often prove appealing to college students as a credit-bearing option, which can translate into a more serious investment in the experience by enrolled students (Hartman, 2014). Credit-bearing courses have demonstrated positive results with high program completion rates and a significant number of students recovering their academic standing (Kamphoff et al., 2007; McGrath, 2011; McGrath & Burd, 2012).

Regardless of format, the content for academic recovery programs is very similar across institutions. This content consists of the building of academic skills and behaviors, including time-management skills (Hensley et al., 2018), goal setting (Bowman et al., 2019), and learning strategies (Renzulli, 2015; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). Studies exploring the impact of academic recovery programs and interventions indicate that such assistance produces positive results (Kulik et al., 1983). Therefore, it is advantageous for institutions to offer some form of intervention for students experiencing academic difficulty. When colleges design academic recovery programs for undergraduate students on academic probation, it is important to consider that interventions should focus on time management skills, learning and study strategies, but also career exploration (Coleman & Freedman, 1996). In particular, career development and career goal-setting experiences can assist students to circumvent academic difficulty (Hwang et al., 2014).

Academic Difficulty and Career Development

Historically, remedial support for the students experiencing academic difficulty has focused primarily on academic skill building. Unlike their peers with demonstrated higher academic performance, college students experiencing academic difficulty do not receive the same level of support in career development. Instead, remediation focuses on addressing academic deficiencies (Jackson et al., 2011). Yet, research has revealed that students experiencing academic difficulty stand to benefit significantly from career development (Jackson & Healy, 1996; Loughead et al., 1995; Salleh et al., 2013).

The population of students experiencing academic difficulty faces psychological and emotional challenges in the career development process because of this label. Of growing concern is the perceived lack of peer equality when compared to high achieving peers. This assumption of inadequacy is likely to affect the career decision-making process and self-perception of ability to succeed (Schnorr & Ware, 2001). Other studies have echoed this stating that students experiencing academic difficulty assume they possess limited opportunities for careers in the future compared to their high achieving peers (Salleh et al., 2013). With structural barriers in place and remedial coursework delaying graduation, the students experiencing academic difficulty may experience a decline in the motivation to persist. Career development can combat this by providing reflective experiences focusing on futuristic goals (Hughes et al., 2013).

When working with students experiencing academic difficulty, career development interventions offer the ability to focus support on psychological concerns, including motivation and self-efficacy (Grier-Reed et al., 2009). If a remedial curriculum is required, it is critical to recognize the importance of an internal locus of control as this population of students may feel a

lack of control over their own academic path. As such, effective career development interventions will be more effective if the focus is on the growth and development of the learner rather than purely occupational information (Grimes & David, 1999).

Furthermore, to combat feelings of deficiency when compared to high-achieving peers, research has offered the recommendation that career development interventions for students experiencing academic difficulty should emphasize personal growth and strengths rather than group comparisons (Sapp, 2006; Schnorr & Ware, 2001). Others also suggest implementing a mix of exploration with practical working experiences to expose learners to vocational roles (Loughead et al., 1995).

Finally, career development interventions have proven successful in improving academic performance, self-efficacy, and career maturity in the K-12 educational setting (Jackson et al., 2011; Legum & Hoare, 2004). To date, there are limited studies that seek to explore the impact of a career exploration intervention for college students experiencing academic difficulty. The present study seeks to contribute to the conversation by focusing on students on academic probation following the first semester at the four-year institution.

Career Indecision

In the last several decades, a growing emphasis within student development has emerged with a focus on the experiences of students who demonstrate vocational indecision (Gordon, 1995). Existing literature has revealed characteristics of undecided students as well as potential factors, which contribute to indecision. Additionally, most interventions target indecisiveness seeking to prepare students to define major and career goals.

As researchers have sought to understand career indecision, it has become apparent that the undecided college student cannot be assumed a homogeneous group as unique circumstances

influence a student's vocational identity (Crites, 1969; Gordon, 1995; Guay et al., 2006). It is critical in the field of career counseling to understand the psychological conditions of career indecision and those factors that contribute to it.

Indecision vs. Indecisiveness

The terms career indecision and career indecisiveness are often used interchangeably, but the two are not synonymous. Indecision is a normal phase in the developmental process for all individuals as they engage in self-exploration (Germeijs et al., 2006). Career indecisiveness is a chronic concern beyond the scope of normal development (Gaffner & Hazler, 2002; Osipow, 1999). Indecisiveness speaks more to the profound questioning and a perceived difficulty in the career decision-making process and often presents itself prior to decision-making situations (Di Fabio et al., 2012; Gati et al., 1996).

An examination of career indecisiveness indicates a correlation to emotional stability. Research has examined personality traits to pinpoint their link to indecisiveness. Findings indicate that no consistent relationship exists between indecisiveness and the extraversion personality trait, but that there is a positive correlation between indecisiveness and neuroticism (Di Fabio et al., 2012).

Of considerable concern is the correlation between those students who experience chronic indecisiveness and lower levels of autonomy. Students who exhibit typical developmental indecision tend to experience an increase in self-efficacy over time as they are exposed to new information and undergo reflection. By contrast, those experiencing indecisiveness are unlikely to experience an increase in self-efficacy without intervention (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Guay et al., 2006).

Whether a student is undergoing normal indecision or the more severe indecisiveness, recognizing the catalyst of the experience is necessary for intervention. As such, recognizing the foundation of an individual's indecision is helpful when seeking to understand why certain individuals may be more prone to indecisiveness than others. When counseling undecided students, it is critical to understand the origin of the indecision itself (Brooks & Cochran, 2016; Bullock-Yowell et al., 2014; Germeijs et al., 2006; Kelly & Pulver, 2003; Slaney, 1980).

Origins of Career Indecision

Career indecision is linked to psychological traits (Hartman & Fuqua, 1983). Indecision is a complex process and derives from both internal challenges such as poor self-concept, as well as external challenges such as the desire to pursue more lucrative career pathways (Gaffner & Hazler, 2002).

Two of the larger factors consistently mentioned in the literature stem from the internal phenomena of self-efficacy and locus of control (Gaffner & Hazler, 2002). Students who demonstrate lower levels of self-efficacy are far more likely to experience career indecisiveness (Bandura, 1997; Taylor & Betz, 1983). Likewise, students who indicate an external locus of control are far more likely to experience indecision than those students who believe they have control over their own experiences (Hartman & Fuqua, 1983; Lucas & Epperson, 1990).

A final potential origin for indecision is career anxiety. Research indicates that the link between career indecision and career anxiety is cyclical: anxiety triggers indecision, which subsequently triggers anxiety (Daniels et al., 2011; Gaffner & Hazler, 2002; Germeijs et al., 2006; Pisarik et al., 2017; Starling & Miller, 2011). Similar to career indecision as a whole, even as an internal concept, external factors influence anxiety including the inability to predict future

economic climate, lack of career guidance in the formative years, and pressure to draw comparisons with peers related to ability and career trajectory (Pisarik et al., 2017).

Characteristics of Undecided Students

Historically, researchers have debated on the rationality of differentiating undecided students from their decided peers (Slaney, 1980; Walsh & Osipow, 1973). Given that the undecided college students cannot be assumed a homogenous group, there are conflicting ideas of whether or not a binary view of the career decision-making process is appropriate (Gordon, 1995). However, recent studies have chosen to focus on the experiences of undecided college students and on traits that are consistent with this population.

As such, the characteristics most often linked to undecided students include negative self-perception and negative thought patterns related to work and career goals (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2014; Gordon, 1995; Rojewski, 1997; Starling & Miller, 2011). These characteristics may have an adverse effect on student motivation to succeed and persist. Findings point to the concern that undecided students struggle to assess their strengths given fluctuating views of their identities (Holland et al., 1975). Others indicate that undecided students are likely to demonstrate lower self-esteem than their decided counterparts (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2014; Legum & Hoare, 2004; Resnick et al., 1970). Research has also suggested that low emotional intelligence is a characteristic associated with the undecided student population (Brown et al., 2003; Di Fabio et al., 2012; Emmerling & Cherniss, 2003).

However, scholars have been hesitant to define a clear line of difference between the two groups. While there are undecided students who demonstrate negative patterns of thought regarding self-perception, the same can be said for decided students. Additionally, research has revealed that undecided students are equally motivated to explore career-decision making

experiences (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2014). Consequently, rather than seek to distinguish between decided and undecided students, certain scholars have chosen to utilize a cluster analysis to understand career indecision.

Career Indecision Typologies

In an attempt to understand the career decision-making process, researchers have established various typologies and measurements seeking to define the stages and psychological traits at play within career indecision. While each typology is unique, four clusters of identification have emerged in all (see Figure 2).

The first cluster captures the traits of college students who have declared a major and career goal, as well as demonstrate confidence in their ability to succeed in their chosen field. These “decided-comfortable” (Jones & Chenery, 1980), “confident-decided” (Wanberg & Muchinsky, 1992), and “decided-decisive” (Van Matre & Cooper, 1984) students indicate high levels of self and vocational knowledge.

A second cluster of college students reveals a deficiency in self-awareness, but indicates emotional stability. This grouping captures students who have, in many cases, declared a major, but are lacking in vocational information related to that major. They have been identified as “concerned- decided” (Wanberg & Muchinsky, 1992), “undecided deferred choice” (Sampson et al., 2004), and “developmentally undecided” (Cohen et al., 1995). As a group, these students are engaged in normal developmental indecision and may benefit from career counseling and opportunities to engage in self-reflection.

Clusters				Description
1	Decided- Comfortable	Confident- Decided	Decided- Decisive	Have declared a major and/or career goal. Demonstrate confidence in their ability to succeed in the chosen field.
2	Concerned- Decided	Undecided Deferred Choice	Develop- mentally Undecided	Have declared a major, but lacking in vocational information related to that major and/or lacking in self-awareness.
3	Indifferent- Undecided	Undecided- Comfortable		Indifferent; equipped to engage in meaningful reflection, but choose not to make it a priority.
4	Chronically Undecided	Anxious- Undecided		Indicative of higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Challenges in decision-making overall.

Note. (Cohen et al., 1995; Jones & Chenery, 1980; Van Matre & Cooper, 1984; Wanberg & Muchinsky, 1992).

Figure 2. Career indecision typologies.

The third cluster speaks to indifference. Those students who fall within the third cluster are labeled as indifferent to self and vocational exploration. They are “indifferent-undecided” (Wanberg & Muchinsky, 1992) and “undecided-comfortable” (Jones & Chenery, 1980). This group is often equipped to engage in meaningful reflection, but choose not to make it a priority.

It is in the fourth cluster where indecisiveness exists. Cluster four indicates concerns beyond the normal development process. Students identifying with this group are “chronically undecided” (Cohen et al., 1995) and “anxious-undecided” (Wanberg & Muchinsky, 1992). The larger difference between clusters three and four are emotional stability, or lack thereof. The fourth cluster is indicative of higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Those in this cluster may also experience challenges not only in the career decision-making process, but also in decision-making overall (Savickas & Jarjoura, 1991). This group also indicates experiencing an external locus of control compared to those decided and confident students in cluster one who report an internal locus of control (Fuqua et al., 1987).

Major Choice

As early as the admission application process, college and universities ask students to declare a major. In some cases, an institution will allow students to enroll as undecided or undeclared, while other institutions require students to choose a major prior to enrollment. Others will make admission decisions based upon major choice (Bordon & Fu, 2015; Gordon, 1995). The major choice is a significant decision that determines the plan of study students will complete. As such, the impact of this decision is likely to influence the persistence and success of college students (McLean, 2016; St. John et al., 2004).

It is imperative to consider the factors that influence major choice, as well as the frequency of major change and the barriers that exist within the institution for major changers. A

final focus on interest-major congruence offers insight into the effect of mismatched major and career goals on academic performance and persistence.

Factors that Influence Major Choice

To explore major choice, understanding the factors that affect the decision itself is important. Given the significant advancements in technology, it is not surprising that college students have the ability to research typical income rates for various professions. The correlation between the monetary values attached to specific careers have been proven by scholars (Cunningham et al., 2004; Koch, 1972; Reed & Miller, 1970) as a common consideration in students' major choice.

Research has indicated that college students possess biased views regarding the compensation levels attached to specific major choices (Betts, 1996; Jensen, 2010; Wiswall & Zafar, 2015). These students may hold misconceptions about the potential salaries and those beliefs regarding future income have proven to be a significant influence in the major choice process (Wiswall & Zafar, 2015).

In this same vein, there are monetary advantages beyond salary associated with specific majors that can be influential to major choice. Students recognize the fringe benefits such as health insurance, the prospect of leave time, and the flexibility of working remotely as they are making their major decisions (Cebula & Lopes, 1982). Although proven minor in influence, the image of the ideal future in terms of family and household structure also influences major choice (Wiswall & Zafar, 2015). This means that students make decisions based upon the ability to sustain a specific lifestyle and/or obtain the flexibility associated with specific career pathways. By extension, these factors also contribute to the decision of college major. The outlook of a

specific career, or the perceived need for the career in the future labor market, has also been suggested to impact the major choice (Cebula & Lopes, 1982).

Many factors from within the academic context contribute to the selection of major also. The academic department within an institution may influence the decision to pursue or forego a specific major. The reputation of faculty and rigor within the campus community has the potential to motivate students to pursue or not pursue a major (Cebula & Lopes, 1982).

Additionally, costs play a part in the decision-making process for students. Certain majors may take additional time to complete with sequential plans of study or the added requirement of additional coursework to fulfill licensure requirements. This extra time to completion translates into additional tuition costs over time (Cebula & Lopes, 1982; Musoba et al., 2018; Wiswall & Zafar, 2015). This may deter students from pursuing specific majors. As student loan debt continues to rise, these costs will likely continue to influence the major choice.

For specific populations, unique factors may influence the major choice. Research has suggested that students within marginalized populations, such as low socioeconomic status and first-generation college students are more likely to choose a major based upon its direct correlation to a lucrative career path (Cebula & Lopes, 1982; Koch, 1972). Meanwhile, for transfer students there are added challenges if the major sought is a limited-access major and therefore not accessible (Gordon & Polson, 1985; Musoba et al., 2018). In these cases, students may experience confliction between the desire to pursue a specific major and the desire to complete a degree in a timely manner.

Lastly, traditional gender roles and their attachment to specific careers may also influence major choice (Dunlap & Barth, 2019; Gottfredson, 1981; Nosek & Smyth, 2011). In many cases, students will have subconsciously organized certain professions into categories based on gender

roles. These students, under the influence of societal stereotypes, may then choose a major based upon an ideal image of their future (Gottfredson, 1981). Female students are more likely to self-select majors with a clear alignment to the humanities and the social sciences when compared to their male peers (Johnson & Muse, 2017). Additionally, as historical views of women have labeled them as nurturing and natural caregivers, the helping professions in general, such as educators, social workers, and psychologists, have all become feminized (Dunlap & Barth, 2019). This socialization of female students begins far before college, but has significant influence in the choice of major at the point of enrollment (Olsson & Martiny, 2018).

All of these factors, while significant, are likely to be influenced over time by changing views and interests as students evolve through college. As students participate in new experiences and engage in self-reflection, it is likely that a change in major may occur.

Frequency of Major Change

Approximately 30% of all undergraduates enrolling in college for the first time will change their major within the first three years of enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Another study indicates that as many as 40% to 85% of college students will change their major at least once prior to graduation (Montag et al., 2012). It is important to distinguish that these statistics can only predict this figure based on those students who have actively changed their major within their institution. This data does not include the examination of those students who contemplate a major change, but do not officially declare the new major due to leaving the institution. As such, the impact of major changes and the factors that influence the decision to change are of significant concern in higher education.

There is some discrepancy in existing literature over the definition of major changers. Primarily the term has been used to describe students who enroll at an institution with one major,

but through self-reflection and exploration chooses to declare a different major (Steele & McDonald, 2000). It is also recommended that studies differentiate between those students who choose to pursue a different major on their own and those students who are required to choose a new major due to inability to gain admission to a limited-access major (McLean, 2016).

Major changes are the result of a number of dynamics at play. External influences can prompt a student to change majors, such as the swaying powers of opinion by family, friends, teachers, and advisors (Ware & Lee, 1988; Ware et al., 1985). In some cases, the motivation behind the major change is low academic performance and the desire to pursue a major perceived as easier, especially when a student begins to question their own abilities in an initial major (Astorne-Figari & Speer, 2019; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2014). While in some cases the major change is not as drastic with the new major somewhat similar to the previous major, in the cases of low grades students may choose to make a bigger change to an entirely new discipline (Astorne-Figari & Speer, 2019).

Similar to the initial major choice, traditional gender roles may influence the new major for major changers with female students more likely to transition to a major that has been feminized by society (Astorne-Figari & Speer, 2019). In addition, changes in the labor market may influence the decision to change to a major with a brighter outlook for the future (Astorne-Figari & Speer, 2019; Baker et al., 2018). Amid the major changing process, students are likely to meet obstacles. A student may face barriers in their new major that could prove detrimental to their success.

Barriers and Challenges to Major Change

As referenced above, a significant barrier to the major choice is the existence of limited-access majors, which require additional criteria for students to declare the major and ultimately

serve as an obstacle not every student will overcome (Musoba et al., 2018). For transfer students specifically, there may have been limited resources in place at the previous institution to support career development prior to the transfer to the four-year institution (Musoba et al., 2018). This may mean that when faced with the barrier of a limited-access major, a transfer student may not have received support in identifying alternative major options at their previous institutions. In general, transfer students face a unique obstacle with the awarding of transfer credits at the point of matriculation. If an institution articulates credits as elective options, rather than meaningful credits that fulfill graduation requirements, the student may choose to change to a major with few prerequisites due to the quicker time to completion (Musoba et al., 2018).

The major choice weighs heavily on the experience and success of college students. It has been demonstrated that when struggling in a specific major, male students are more likely to stop-out, whereas female students are more likely to change to a new major and still graduate (Astorne-Figari & Speer, 2018). At the point at which a student changes majors, it is possible that the result will be an increase in time to graduation, which in turn may result in the decreased likelihood of graduation (Allen & Robbins, 2008). Additional research has focused on the low levels of self-efficacy reported by major changers and the impact on the ability to succeed in academic contexts (Cunningham & Smothers, 2010).

The factors that influence major choice and the process of changing majors over time indicate the view of a linear correlation of major and career. In other words, students gravitate toward certain majors because of their clear connection to a specific career field rather than pursue a major of interest. As such, it becomes important to understand the impact on student success when a chosen major does not align with interest.

Interest-Major Congruence

Within organizational psychology and career counseling, the person-environment fit theory predicts an individual's job satisfaction. Its premise revolves around the assumption that individuals seek work environments that align with their values and excel within those roles when congruence between environment and individual values exists (Zunker, 2016). Interest-major congruence stems from this theory and speaks to the congruence between a person's interest and the major they have chosen to pursue (Tracey et al., 2011).

When evaluating interest-major congruence, Holland's (1997) six RIASEC interest types are often used to classify interest areas (Allen & Robbins, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2017; Tracey & Darcy, 2002; Tracey et al., 2011). These six types include realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. The types organize and describe the interests of individuals and consider how those interests may translate into both majors and occupations (Holland, 1997).

Recent findings reveal that when college students select a major that aligns with their interests and skills, they are far more likely to succeed and persist to graduation (Allen & Robbins, 2008; Astorine-Figari & Speer, 2018; Smart et al., 2000; Tracey et al., 2011). When there is demonstrated interest-major congruence, the student is more likely to enjoy course content, which translates into more time spent working on academic assignments. This focused time and deeper engagement may positively affect the GPA (Tracey & Robbins, 2006). Students are also more likely to persist in a major when a high interest-major congruence exists (Nguyen et al., 2017).

Relationship between Career Goals and Motivation

Research has shown that when students remain unclear of their major and career goals, they underperform their decided peers with lower GPAs and less credits completed toward

graduation (Chase & Keane, 1981). Without a clear understanding of career or major, the path to graduation may be uncertain, and consequently produce discomfort or anxiety in students. As such, career indecision can yield a detrimental effect on the academic motivation of college students, and ultimately may hinder their ability to persist (Ferguson, 2007).

Motivation in the academic context enhances the learning process and enhances academic success and persistence (Allen, 1999; Guay & Vallerand, 1997; Pintrich, 2003; Ratelle et al., 2007). Therefore, the understanding of what influences motivation and the connection to major and career decision making is necessary.

Self-Determination Theory

The leading theory of motivation, self-determination theory (SDT), posits that the quality of motivation, or more specifically the type of motivation, is far more predictive of success than the amount (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The theory elevates the significance of intrinsic motivation over extrinsic. Of particular interest within SDT is the differentiation of autonomous versus controlled motivation. Autonomous motivation exists when individuals recognize the value in participating in a particular experience and connects that experience to their own self-purpose. It is a meaningful behavior as it aligns with overall goals. By contrast, controlled motivation involves the pressure to participate by outside sources. It is not self-directed and therefore not as effective (Deci & Ryan, 2008, pp. 182-183).

Students who report higher levels of autonomy are more likely to engage positively in career behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Paixão & Gamboa, 2017). Additionally, students who demonstrate more autonomy in their learning experiences have been shown to engage more thoroughly in the career exploration process (Guay et al., 2003; Kiener, 2006). Those students who do not report autonomy in their learning and career exploration, by comparison, are far

more likely to be influenced by external effects, including the opinions of family and friends rather than intrinsic factors, such as a clear understanding of purpose and personal strengths (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jung, 2013).

SDT as a proven benefit in the classroom has been discussed in many research studies where students thrive in more autonomous academic contexts (Kusurkar et al., 2011; Nie & Lau, 2009; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Many of the studies have occurred outside of the United States and scholars have addressed the issue of the more assessment-driven education prioritized in America. To date, American schools have received criticism for their lack of autonomy in a culture that champions assessments over exploration and student-led activities (Ryan & Deci, 2009).

In order to foster motivation, teachers are encouraged to engage students in activities to explore their own identities. SDT posits that when students experience autonomy, recognize their own competence, and are able to relate their classroom experiences to their own interests and identities, intrinsic motivation is cultivated (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Findings have shown that by designing career development interventions as autonomous learning activities, educators can increase motivation, foster resilience, and encourage learners to become more proactive in their own identity exploration (Kerner et al., 2012).

Beyond SDT, research has continued to describe the complex relationship between autonomy and motivation (Habibian, 2012; Spratt et al., 2002). However, similar to autonomy, there is another factor at play within motivation: self-efficacy.

Autonomy and Self-Efficacy

While inherently different, autonomy and self-efficacy are intricately linked and influential to academic motivation. By providing autonomy in learning experiences, educators can cultivate self-efficacy and, by extension, motivation (Girelli et al., 2018).

The central idea of self-efficacy involves individuals maintaining a sense of control over their own experiences, but also the self-perception of ability to participate and be successful in those experiences (Bandura, 1997). For a college student, self-efficacy and autonomy are critical within the first year (DeWitz et al., 2009). If a student demonstrates low self-efficacy, that student may exhibit an external locus of control in their learning experiences. This proves problematic as those who demonstrate an internal locus of control in learning, or those who believe they possess a great deal of control over their own choices, are shown to set more ambitious goals and are more likely to achieve desired results (Ng et al., 2006; Yukl & Latham, 1978). When a student does not have autonomy over their own self-exploration and academic progress, their motivation to persist suffers.

Impact of Career Indecision on Motivation

Motivation and career exploration have a cyclical relationship in that motivation is necessary for effective engagement in career development. The motivation to explore careers is necessary for career development to be successful. Meanwhile, major and career goals affect the motivation to explore and persist. Research suggests that career indecision can hinder the academic success of college students whereas career exploration experiences have the potential to make a positive impact on performance (Olivera-Celdran, 2011).

When students understand the link between their academic and career goals, they are likely to recognize a greater purpose to their education (DeWitz et al., 2009). This purpose, then,

is likely to increase motivation and encourage persistence to graduation. Furthermore, career development interventions have the ability to engage students in futuristic thinking, which has proven to generate higher motivation levels (Scheel et al., 2009). In particular, this has proven true when working with students experiencing academic difficulty. Career interventions designed to engage students in self-exploration have the power to support students as they conceptualize their identities, which increases motivation and improves academic performance (Oyserman et al., 2006).

One of the most prevalent reasons provided by students who chose to stop-out prior to graduation is the inability to choose a major or career goal for the future. In fact, undecided college students are more likely to stop-out compared to their decided peers (Gordon, 1995; Morris & Mather, 2007). When students engage in career development interventions, they are likely to experience improved academic performance with higher GPAs and retain at the institution at higher rates than peers who did not participate in an intervention (Mushegyan, 2010).

Career Development Interventions

Career interventions are “any activity (treatment or effort) designed to enhance a person’s career development or to enable that person to make more effective career decisions” (Spokane, 1991). As a practice, there is no single right model for designing career interventions. Effective interventions should take into consideration the individual(s) and the specific context (Gordon, 1995; Habley, 1994). However, there are recommendations in the field for intervention design based on the audience.

Existing research speaks to the ability of a career development intervention to influence positively the academic success and career trajectory for participants. These studies have

indicated that when students undergo more than one career development experience over a two-year period, they are likely to outperform their peers who do not participate (Choi et al., 2015). Others have demonstrated that when focused on self-exploration and reflection of purpose, a career development intervention can foster futuristic goal setting (Dik et al., 2011).

The history of vocational support within higher education traces back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Its evolution over time has been the product of changing economic climates and technological advancements (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). As part of the evolution of career support and the implementation of the first career centers on the campuses of both two and four-year institutions, various interventions have emerged, from career assessments to workshops and credit-bearing courses (Zunker, 2016). Career development interventions, if effective, may provide a space for career conversations that have become crucial in the current culture of higher education (Whiston & Blustein, 2013).

Historical Role of Career Counseling in Higher Education

Frank Parsons is considered the father of vocational counseling (Zunker, 2016). In the early years of the twentieth century, Parsons created the Vocations Bureau in Boston to support immigrants as they sought employment opportunities in America (Vinson et al., 2011). From there, a surge in the population following World War I resulted in significant increases in school enrollment. This prompted the need for colleges and universities to produce more teachers, which led to the implementation of vocational support in postsecondary education (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014).

The growing need for career counseling in higher education only continued with the creation of the GI Bill and the implementation of career centers (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014; Pope, 2000). During this time, career services fulfilled the role of filling vocational needs in the

economy. Counselors were expected to produce college graduates who would go on to work in specialized fields based on economic need (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014).

Beginning in the 1970s, as the landscape of higher education transformed to a focus on student development, career counseling also shifted to mirror this effort (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014; Kretovicks et al., 1999). The role of the higher education career counselor changed again in the twenty-first century as technological advancements transformed the workforce (Dey & Real, 2010). Career counselors are now tasked with teaching students how to navigate social media, effectively brand themselves, and network with industry professionals while still enrolled in college (Astro, 2018; Osborn et al., 2014; Villar et al., 2000).

Over time as the economy has experienced peaks and valleys, career counseling in higher education has evolved with it. Under a strong economy, counseling historically has focused on the trait-and-factor approach of matching individual skills, interests, and needs with a specific occupation (Zunker, 2016). However, anytime an economic setback occurs, career counseling experiences its own transformation. An example of this, in the aftermath of the 2008 recession, career centers on college campuses all over experienced a shift in institutional significance. Students during this time chose to see career centers as possessing the key to landing professional opportunities (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). The role of career counselors in higher education continues to evolve, but remains a top priority to stakeholders who expect the ability of the career center, and interventions therein, to prepare all graduates for vocational success. At present, a tension exists in higher education over the role of career counseling. That tension surrounds the purpose of career development as either exploration or vocational training. In theory, elective and general education courses allow for exploration. However, prospective students consistently ask colleges and universities about their job placement rates and their return

on investment. It raises the question of what matters more. Should the institution provide a space to explore or should it serve as an assembly line transforming student into worker? The intervention within the present study is designed to offer both a space for exploration and a space for intentional career planning.

Intervention for Traditional College Students

Historic views have positioned the college degree in the role of equalizer with the belief that the degree ultimately levels the playing field for the career search following graduation (Michel, 2016). However, the traditional college-age student requires career development experiences far beyond vocational knowledge. Traditional students need opportunities for self-exploration, opportunities to learn autonomous behaviors, financial independence, and the space to identify work expectations (Galambos et al., 2006; Murphy et al., 2010). These needs and the opportunities to explore them provided by higher education, while exciting, may also prove daunting for this population (Kenny & Sirin, 2006; Michel, 2016; Mortimer et al., 2002).

Intervention for traditional college students should include space to engage in reflection and exploration of values (Murphy et al., 2010). Engaging students in a short workshop series has proven helpful for this population as shorter sessions may work well with student schedules (Halasz & Kempton, 2000). It is also effective to assign students to faculty and professional mentors when working with traditional college students (Hernandez et al., 2017).

Beyond recommended format, an intervention for traditional students should examine labor market trends and prepare students to transition between careers in the future (Greenleaf, 2014; Michel, 2016). Proactive career counseling is encouraged which instructs students on how to effectively network, utilize campus career resources, and to prepare them for a successful job interview (De Vos et al., 2009; Sturges et al., 2002). These skills will prepare future college

graduates to successfully navigate emerging career pathways as technological advancements continue to transform the labor market.

Interventions for Non-Traditional College Students

Non-traditional undergraduate students are entering higher education at increasingly high rates. In 2015, more than 70% of undergraduate students met at least one of the characteristics defined within the non-traditional student umbrella (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). For many of these students, the decision to attend college is career development (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012).

The nontraditional students enrolled in higher education institutions maintain multiple roles beyond that of a college student. These students are employed in both full and part-time positions (NCES, 2015), they are caring for children or elderly parents (Butt, 2012) they are veterans (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011), and many are experiencing significant transitions in personal and professional lives like career changes or retirement (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012; Butt, 2012; Scott & Lewis, 2012). Since professional development and career goals are a primary factor in the decision to return to college for these students, career interventions are essential. However, given the many roles nontraditional students fulfill, the same interventions designed specifically for traditional college students are ineffective. Career interventions for nontraditional students should take into consideration the diverse experiences of the students themselves (Barclay, 2016; Stephenson, 2012).

Supporting nontraditional students in career development requires opportunities to consider new career identities, in particular if a student is experiencing a life transition (Barclay, 2016). Rather than a focus on individual skills or workplace needs as a potential match as these earlier theories suggest, recommended interventions for nontraditional students encourage

reflection of both self and career identities (Barclay, 2015). An intervention should seek to conceptualize both identities as intertwined as the personal and professional experiences of a nontraditional student may make it difficult for a separation of the two (Barclay, 2015; 2016).

When supporting nontraditional students in career exploration, an intervention should be future-oriented. Students need the space to engage in “life design” (Savickas, 2012) where the goal is to design future opportunities separate from previous experiences. Reflection of those experiences is critical. Yet, career development interventions for this population are effective when the goal is to consider possible selves in the future, as well as larger purpose overall (Savickas, 2012). As such, the intersection of identity development and career development, while significant for all student populations, is critical for the career intervention designed to support nontraditional students.

Interventions for Specific Populations

The landscape of higher education continuously evolves as more diverse student populations enroll. The National Center for Education Statistics predicts that by 2026 postsecondary institutions can expect to see substantial increase in the number of students of color: 20% increase for Black students, 26% increase in Hispanic students, and 37% increase of students of two or more races. Enrollment has also shifted considerably in the number of students between the ages of 25-34 with a 35% increase between 2001 and 2015 (Hussar & Bailey, 2018). In 2018, approximately 17% of students enrolled in higher education (more than 180,000 students) across the country identified as LGBTQ+ (Postsecondary National Policy Institute [PNPI], 2020). As more diverse student populations enroll in higher education, interventions must also adapt to develop a multicultural approach to career counseling. In particular, practitioners leading career interventions are encouraged to be cognizant of their own cultural

values and biases in order to understand how these influence their approach to career counseling (Ivey et al., 2014).

A growing body of career exploration literature references the variation in how individuals choose to explore vocations or make decisions based upon cultural values. In the United States, there is a more individualistic approach to career decision-making and exploration. However, in cultures that value collectivism and prioritizing the needs of family or a group over the individual, career decision-making becomes more of a collaborative process (Brammer, 2012).

When offering career exploration support to historically marginalized populations, it is critical for practitioners to recognize how that marginalization has produced additional barriers. Career interventions should be developed with an understanding that a disfranchised group may have internalized negative assumptions, making it imperative that the emphasis be placed on individual strengths over perceived deficiencies (Paniagua, 2005). It is documented that in some cultural contexts, career exploration or career counseling remains largely underutilized based upon a negative perception of seeking help (Fong, 2003; Pederson et al., 2008; Ponterotto et al., 2010; Sue & Sue, 2003). Consequently, career interventions should offer clearly defined outcomes and serve to enhance the self-efficacy of participants (Fouad, 1997; Zunker, 2016).

It remains important for career interventions to recognize that meaningful career support focuses on the development of an individual (Zunker, 2016). No individual develops in a vacuum; rather they have done so amid both biological and societal influences (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2014). Career counselors and those who wish to offer career interventions should provide a space to explore the assumptions individuals make regarding their own career

development or any perceived limitations as a product of preconceptions related to gender identity, ethnic or racial identity, social class, or sexual orientation (Zunker, 2016).

Career Course Intervention

Institutions design career courses to address larger institutional concerns, including graduation and retention rates, withdraw rates, and the psychological welfare of the student body (Hansen et al., 2017). Both credit bearing and non-credit courses are currently in existence. In some cases, the academic major in question requires courses. In other cases, institutions assign elective credits for career courses (Folsom & Reardon, 2003).

Since the first career courses were offered in higher education, dating back to the early twentieth century, there have been numerous studies that sought to assess their effectiveness (Folsom & Reardon, 2003; Fouad et al., 2009; McDow & Zabucky, 2015). Overall, findings speak to the many benefits of such a course. Research has shown that a career development course may minimize career indecision (Lam & Santos, 2018). Career courses have the ability to increase the self-efficacy of participants, as well as career self-efficacy in particular (Reese & Miller, 2006). Such courses have also demonstrated improved decision-making capability in college students (Miller et al., 2018).

However, even amid the mostly positive results, career courses are not without challenges. As a career course, if grounded in self-exploration, requires open-mindedness and vulnerability, students may struggle to engage in the reflective activities or feel comfortable sharing with their peers or their instructor (Siu-Man & Gonzalez, 2013). Additionally, career counselors have reported the difficulty of getting students to engage in a course that they do not necessarily see value (Osborn & Dames, 2013). It is encouraged that instructors of the career development course consider the specific audience and the overarching goals for the course, as

well as commit to interactive instructional strategies to engage students in their own exploration (Oprea, 2015).

Career Assessments and Measuring Tools

Since the inception of the career development field in the early years of the twentieth century, career assessments have existed as a tool to assist individuals seeking guidance on occupational roles (Harrington & Long, 2013; McMahon & Watson, 2012). These tools vary from inventories designed to capture interests, values, and maturity level in regards to career decision-making to achievement and aptitude tests for assessing strengths and skills (Temple, 1995). However, while used extensively in the field, there is significant criticism from practitioners as such tools are not scientific and may impose limits on career thinking (Figler & Bolles, 2011).

Regardless, career inventories and assessments have the ability to identify themes and patterns to advance the career development conversation. There are more than 150 career assessments in existence, and each serves a unique purpose or population (Kapes & Mastie, 1988). The present study utilizes two assessment tools, the Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale and the Academic Motivation Scale modified for college students. However, it is important to clarify that neither assessment in the present study will match students to potential occupations nor will either assessment measure values or interests as they relate to career pathways. Rather, each assessment evaluates the effect of the career exploration course proposed herein.

History of Career Assessments

It is critical for counselors who wish to apply career assessment tools to their work with students to understanding the history of career assessments and instruments (Harrington & Long, 2013). The history dates back to Frank Parsons' self-reflection questionnaire designed to engage

clients in the self-exploration process in 1909 (McMahon & Watson, 2012). However, Jesse Davis (1914) did not introduce the first formal assessment until five years later. While those utilizing career assessments today are primarily trained counselors or professionals of the psychological sciences, Davis was a high school principal who designed The Student Vocational Self Analysis for high school sophomores in Detroit area schools (Harrington & Long, 2013).

Influenced by Davis' work, psychologist James Miner began to explore the influence of student interests and the impact of external factors, including the input of teachers, on career decision-making (Harrington & Long, 2013). Miner went on to compose questions designed to investigate interest and created the first vocational interest assessment in 1917 (Walsh & Savickas, 2005). This work kicked off the era of interest exploration and a variety of assessment tools followed, including the Carnegie Interest Inventory, which examined gender differences, and E. K. Strong's The Strong Vocational Interest Blank (SVIB) that was known for its assurance to clients of accurate occupational matching between careers and individual interests (Harrington & Long, 2013; Temple, 1995). Later, Strong (1933) created a revised version of SVIB to be used with female clients that was designed to take into consideration the differences in interests between men and women. The shortcomings of both SVIB and SVIB-W were addressed in 1973 in the creation of the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory that combined both scales and could be used with clients of either sex (Johnson, 1974).

The career assessment emergence only continued to surge due to American involvement in World War I and World War II. During the First World War, assessments were created in the effort of recruiting and training American men for military careers. By the Second World War, assessments were being utilized to prepare returning military men for career pathways in civilian settings (Temple, 1995).

The second half of the twentieth century saw the continued development of career assessments as the benefits associated with helping individuals explore vocational pathways were recognized by both industry officials and educators (Harrington & Long, 2013). During this time, the field experienced the first wave of commercially used assessments that individuals could take on their own, or companies could administer to their employees (Harrington & Long, 2013). Higher education practitioners have championed assessments. It is a popular option of university career centers to select assessments that students can administer themselves amid financial constraints and economic challenges (Luzzo & Taylor, 1995). Technological advancements have continued to impact career assessments with online scoring and quick test taking times (Temple, 1995).

Recent years in the counseling profession have seen a tense relationship between counseling and the application of assessments (McMahon & Watson, 2012; Temple, 1995). Criticism for assessments note their inability to predict future occupational trends, as well as the perceived consequence of enabling clients to become dependent on assessment results rather than engage in exploration on their own (Figler, 2011). As a result, assessments have evolved to include more qualitative measures such as narrative-based assessments (McMahon & Watson, 2012; 2015; McMahon et al., 2019; Whiston & Rahardja, 2005). Furthermore, career assessments have become more inclusive in the last several decades and now take into consideration the experiences of diverse populations (Gainor, 2001; Subich, 1996).

Significant studies have linked personality type with vocational interests and have positioned inventories that explore the relationship between the two as critical to career development (Darley & Hagenah, 1955; Hansen, 1984; Hogan & Blake, 1999; Holland, 1973). However, while the early years of career assessments were primarily dedicated to inventories

that explored interests and personality types, the influx of research on ability and the career decision-making process created a need in the field to evaluate the thinking and factors which motivate career pursuits (Harrington & Long, 2013). From this, tools such as Crites' (1973) Career Maturity Inventory and the Career Thoughts Inventory (Sampson et al., 1996) were created. Moreover, the field of vocational psychology has championed assessments that focus on self-efficacy and the significant role it will play in the future of career counseling (Fouad, 2001).

Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale (CDSE) (CDSE-SF)

Hackett and Betz (1981) introduced the career self-efficacy theory as an extension of their research on self-efficacy as it related to the career decision-making process for women. The theory focuses on Bandura's (1977) four modes of communication, which inform the self-efficacy of career-related tasks: performance, vicarious learning, emotional arousal, persuasion, and the manner these four sources influence career self-efficacy expectations. In particular, career self-efficacy explores the differences within these four informational modes by sex (Hackett & Betz, 1981).

Following this initial research, Taylor and Betz (1983) created the Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy scale, later renamed the Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale (CDSE). The CDSE included fifty behavior tasks related to the career decision-making process. Once created, the CDSE was given for the first time to a total of 346 student participants, the majority of those students (193) attending a large public institution, whereas the remaining 154 students were enrolled at a small liberal arts institution (Taylor & Betz, 1983).

The need for a tool like the CDSE came after scholars documented the rise of career anxiety and indecision (Osipow et al., 1976). The goal of the CDSE became to build a tool that would access the factors that contribute to career indecision given these perceived challenges.

The design of the CDSE needed to first define the behaviors it would assess. Taylor and Betz (1983) chose to use the five competencies defined by Crites' (1961; 1973) career maturity model: self-appraisal, gathering occupation information, goal selection, planning for the future, and problem solving. The initial scale then proceeded to offer 10 behavioral tasks for each of the five competencies for 50 items (Taylor & Betz, 1983).

Participants respond to each of the 50 items to assess their confidence level with the specific task. The responses were offered in a Likert-Scale from “(0) No Confidence” to “(9) Complete Confidence” (Taylor & Betz, 1983, p. 69). The results of the initial study indicated that the CDSE is a reliable tool to measure career self-efficacy expectations. No significant gender differences were evident overall and the tool accurately predicted career indecision in that participants who responded that they possessed lower confidence in the behaviors also reported major and career indecision. Taylor and Betz (1983) ended their study with recommendations for future research and CDSE trials to determine if the relationship between self-efficacy and career indecision remained as strong as the initial results.

In the 1990s researchers began shortening the CDSE from a 10 task scale to five (Betz et al., 2005). This trend was occurring throughout the field of self-efficacy research (Bandura et al., 1999; Betz et al., 1996). The results of the 5-task scale (CDSE-SF) showed that this version was just as reliable as the original 10-scale assessment (Betz et al., 2005; Betz & Vuyten, 1997).

Academic Motivation Scale (AMS)

In 1989, the Echelle de Motivation en Education (EME) was created to effectively measure academic motivation (Vallerand et al., 1989). The assessment was grounded in self-determination theory and sought to explore three scales of intrinsic motivation, three scales for extrinsic, and one scale for amotivation (Vallerand et al., 1992).

The purpose for such a tool stemmed from the research on the significance of intrinsic motivation within the classroom (Harter, 1981). Studies had indicated that human behavior is influenced by intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, or by amotivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Given the importance of intrinsic motivation on academic success, it became critical to understand types of intrinsic influences. These types were eventually defined as intrinsic motivation to know, to achieve accomplishments, and to experience stimulation (Vallerand et al., 1992).

Each of these constructs proves important when considering the academic context. The intrinsic motivation to learn speaks to an internal desire to learn and gather new information, hence its clear position in the classroom (Gottfried, 1985). Similarly, the intrinsic motivation to achieve accomplishments and to experience stimulation speaks to mastery and peak performance during engagement in an enjoyable task (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gottfried, 1985).

While not as critical, extrinsic motivation has also been studied for its ability to influence academic success (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Extrinsic motivation is broken down into three scales also. These include external regulation, introjection, and identification (Vallerand et al., 1992). All three types work on a continuum on the self-determination scale. For example external regulation, the lowest level of extrinsic motivation types, describes rewards and consequences. Over time, these behaviors may undergo introjection as an individual begins to understand the reason behind the specific behavior. This experience is slightly higher on the self-determination scale than external regulation, but still indicates a relationship to external forces. Identification, the highest of the three types of extrinsic motivation, occurs when an individual begins to assign personal value to a behavior (Vallerand et al., 1992).

Lastly, the EME measures a third motivation construct, amotivation, or the inability to connect actions to outcomes, rewards or consequences (Vallerand et al., 1992). Amotivation is

detrimental to academic success. If an individual experiences amotivation, he or she is likely to express feelings of inadequacy (Vallerand et al., 1992) and may choose to engage in what Bandura (1977) posits as avoidant behaviors in the academic setting.

The EME examines academic motivation by measuring the different types of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, in addition to amotivation as proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985). It focuses on the question of why an individual chooses to engage in certain academic behaviors, including attending learning experiences and studying. The EME then provides possible answers for participants to select and groups these by motivation type and subtype (Vallerand, et al., 1992).

Once tested for validity and found to be a reliable instrument, Vallerand et al. (1992) chose to produce a translation of the EME from French to English and proceeded to test its validity as well. The new assessment, the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS), and has proven a consistent measure of academic motivation (Guay et al., 2015; Vallerand et al., 1992).

A modified version of the AMS was created to be used specifically with college student populations (AMS-C) (Vallerand et al., 1993). This version includes modified language to capture the experiences of college students. Studies have been conducted since to test high school students and college students to examine potential differences in the motivation types by motivation level and have justified the need for the two instruments (Stover et al., 2012). To date, the AMS is one of the most widely used assessments to capture motivation in academic contexts (Lim & Chapman, 2015). Given the present study's focus on career self-efficacy and its impact on motivation to persist and academic success of students on academic probation, the AMS-C will prove useful moving forward.

Summary and Conclusions

A review of the literature surrounding career indecision indicates that a career exploration course may potentially produce a significant impact on the academic motivation and persistence of students on academic probation. Extensive research thus far has demonstrated a positive correlation between career development and academic success in the K-12 setting for academically struggling youth. However, research focused on the impact of such a career exploration on college students experiencing academic difficulty is scarce.

Furthermore, while existing studies speak to the benefits of career counseling for underachieving students (Hwang et al., 2014), to date there is no existing literature that explores the impact of a career exploration course on the career self-efficacy and academic motivation of college students on academic probation. This gap in the literature, as well as the findings presented herein, further strengthens the need for the present study, as well as additional research regarding career exploration experiences for students on academic probation.

As this review of relevant literature offers foundational information related to the present study, Chapter 3 will outline the methodology used to address the research questions as proposed in Chapter 1. I will provide a description of the participants engaged in the study, as well as a description of the instruments and methods used to collect and analyze data in the subsequent chapter.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY

The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students experiencing academic difficulty as defined by the academic probation indicator at Branchline University. The study seeks to enhance the support offered to academic recovery program students by providing a space for meaningful career exploration.

This chapter describes the research design used to address the four research questions guiding the study, including descriptions of study participants and the sampling methods used within. I provide extensive details related to the data collection and analysis procedures. The chapter concludes with a description of my own methodological assumptions and limitations.

FoP Guiding Question(s)

This study is guided by the following four questions:

- RQ1: How do students on academic probation at Branchline conceptualize the value of participating in a career exploration course as part of their own academic recovery?
- RQ2: To what extent does the career exploration course influence the career self-efficacy of those students on academic probation at Branchline?
- RQ3: To what extent does the career exploration course influence the academic motivation of those students on academic probation at Branchline?
- RQ4: What are the experiences of students on academic probation who participate in the career exploration course?

The first research question sought to determine how students on academic probation believed the career exploration course to be a valuable experience following a semester of academic difficulty as they attempted to recover their academic standing. Initial assessment data

of the last three years of the Branchline academic recovery program indicated that students attribute career indecision or a mismatch between major and interest as a factor that contributes to difficulty in the academic context. This research question was designed to explore whether or not the articulation of this phenomenon would translate into students' desire to participate in a career exploration course. My purpose in this study was to enhance the support currently offered to students on academic probation; however, the ability to support this population relies on their decision to participate in such an experience. As such, Phase I of the study consisted of the recruitment process in which I invited students on academic probation to enroll in the intervention as part of the Branchline academic recovery program. The career exploration course was offered as a subset of one program option, the credit-bearing UCOL 130 course. Students had the ability to self-select the career exploration course, or pursue a traditional Branchline academic recovery option that focused on academic remediation and connection to Branchline resources. The responses of invited student participants spoke to the value students assigned to a career development intervention. In addition, during Phase II within interviews with participants I inquired about the perceived value of the course as part of academic recovery efforts.

The second research question sought to examine the influence of the career development intervention on the career self-efficacy of students on academic probation. Peterson (1993) demonstrated a link between career self-efficacy and academic and social integration for students underprepared for college coursework and recommended career interventions to strengthen support to this population. The benefits of increasing career self-efficacy among students experiencing academic difficulty are established in the research (Allen & Robbins, 2008; Jackson et al., 2011; Tracey & Robbins, 2006). The implementation of a career exploration course in the study was meant to provide intentional support to increase the career self-efficacy

of students on academic probation at Branchline University, a significant number of which are currently undeclared of college major. As such, the second research question explored the impact of the intervention on the self-efficacy of this population using a pre-/ post-test assessment utilizing Betz's et al. (2005) Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale Short Form (CDSE-SF).

In a similar vein, career development interventions that assist students in understanding the link between their education and larger career goals promote the conceptualization of individual purpose (DeWitz et al., 2009), which in turn enhances academic motivation (Scheel et al., 2009). The initial assessment data for the last three years of the Branchline academic recovery program indicated that mismatch between student interests and academic major and a lack of motivation are two mediating factors that were consistently identified by students as contributors to academic difficulty. This is unsurprising given the demonstrated correlation between career indecision and a lack of motivation to persist to graduation (Gordon, 1995; Morris & Mather, 2007). Therefore, the third research question driving the present study examined the potential impact of the career development intervention on the academic motivation of Branchline students on academic probation. I measured the impact of the intervention on academic motivation by conducting a pre-/ post-test assessment using the Academic Motivation Scale modified for college students (AMS-C) (Vallerand et al., 1993). The second and third research questions are addressed in Phase II of the present study.

Finally, the fourth research question explored the experiences of students on academic probation at Branchline as they participated in the career exploration course. Understanding the student experience within the academic recovery program was critical to its effective operation, and understanding how students experience the career exploration course was necessary to the examination of the intervention's impact.

Such student stories may shed light on future intervention design and implementation for other existing academic recovery programs. I collected qualitative data to understand the student experience through semi-structured interviews and a collection of student artifacts as part of the course. The interviews and submitted work served to triangulate findings. From the data, I composed portraits of the student experience and shared each with the individual student participant to ensure my understanding accurately captured their experiences.

Inquiry Design and Rationale

The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students experiencing academic difficulty as defined by the academic probation indicator at Branchline University. I chose the mixed methods case study design for its ability to respond to complex questions using a wide collection of evidence (Creswell, 2015; Yin, 2018).

Research Question 1

To assess the value students assigned to a career exploration course as part of their own academic recovery, I examined the survey data collected as part of the initial assessment at the point of enrollment in the Branchline academic recovery program. The initial assessment is a survey that asks students to self-report their current needs and challenges related to their academic success. Specifically, I examined references to career or major indecision within initial assessment data. In addition to reviewing these student responses, I collected data through an initial semi-structured interview within the first few weeks of the semester to investigate the reasons students self-selected to enroll in the career exploration section of UCOL 130 as their Branchline academic recovery program option. Then in final semi-structured interviews within the last two weeks of the course, I examined the responses students provide to a reflection

question regarding the value and larger takeaways of the course at this point in their academic career. Participants also referenced the value they assigned the course in their student artifacts. This qualitative data provided an in-depth examination into what aspects of the course were valuable overall.

Research Question 2

In order to measure the impact of the career exploration course on the career self-efficacy of students on academic probation, I utilized the CDSE-SF (Taylor & Betz, 1983) to conduct pre-/ post-tests assessments. The CDSE-SF has been tested for validity and rigor and has proven a reliable tool for the measurement of career self-efficacy (Betz et al., 2005; Betz & Voyten, 1997). Students completed the CDSE-SF during class time within the first two class meetings to provide pre-test data. They then completed the post-test CDSE-SF during the final class meeting.

Research Question 3

To assess the impact of the career exploration course on the academic motivation of participants, I conducted a pre-/ post-test assessment utilizing the AMS-C (Vallerand et al., 1993). Guay et al. (2015) tested the AMS-C for validity and rigor and found it to be a reliable instrument. Students completed the AMS-C during class time within the first two class meetings to provide pre-test data. They then completed the post-test AMS-C during the final class meeting.

Research Question 4

I used collected qualitative data to address the fourth and final research question by exploring the experiences of Branchline students on academic probation as they participated in the career exploration course. I collected data through semi-structure interviews, as well as an

analysis of students' artifacts produced as part of the course. The mixed methods case study design provided a more holistic understanding of the integration of the complex qualitative and quantitative data sets (Guetterman & Fetters, 2018).

In addition to the integration of complex data, the mixed methods case study design is best suited for the present study given my intention of an in-depth examination of the proposed intervention within a specific setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guetterman & Fetters, 2018). As the study was contextually bound within the academic recovery program at Branchline University, the case study design allowed for a comprehensive analysis in a single real-world case (Yin, 2018).

Context of the Study

Branchline is a large public four-year institution. The University welcomes approximately 6,400 new first-year and transfer students each fall semester. Additionally, the University is the largest transfer institution in the state. In Fall 2019, 43% of new students entering the University were transfer students matriculating from both two- and four-year institutions (Institutional Research Analytics, 2020).

The urban setting of the institution attracts a diverse student population each year. The close proximity to a large workforce is an appealing factor in the decision to attend Branchline University. As of April 2020, enrolled Branchline students represented 47 of the 50 states and 105 countries. Additionally, 37% of enrolled students were first-generation, and 46% self-identified as an underrepresented population (Undergraduate Admissions Data, 2020).

The incoming class each year reflects this diversity. Therefore, it is unsurprising that students experiencing academic difficulty in their first year at Branchline as defined by the academic probation indicator vary in their gender, racial, ethnic and social class identities. Based

upon the historical probation data, an average 13% of the students who enroll at the University for the first time in a fall term will begin the spring semester on academic probation (Probation Data, 2020).

For those students experiencing academic difficulty following the first semester of enrollment, the University encourages participation in the Branchline academic recovery program. This program provides support in the form of academic remediation. The four existing program options seek to develop academic success skills and behaviors and foster a sense of student belonging by forging connections between students on academic probation and University resources, both personnel and services. However, the program design offers only minimal support in career development. To date, this support includes an overview of the Branchline Career Services provided to students within their academic recovery program option.

Branchline is committed to the academic and professional growth of students. The University's mission statement explicitly names the goals of equipping students with "intellectual and professional skills" and to providing "opportunities for experiential education to enhance students' personal and professional growth" (Branchline, University Leadership, 2014). Yet, when students are experiencing academic difficulty, the support offered focuses on improving academic performance and increasing student connection to the institution. Each of these outcomes is important, and warranted by the research that names them as critical to student success and persistence (Astin, 1993; Balduf, 2009; Coleman & Freedman, 1996; Earl, 1988; Olson, 1990; Thombs, 1995; Tinto, 1993). However, research also draws the correlation between career development experiences and improved self-efficacy (Reese & Miller, 2006), increased academic motivation (Scheel et al., 2009), and improvement in student performance within the academic context (Mushegyan, 2010; Olivera-Celdran, 2011; Oyserman et al., 2006).

While the characteristics and identities of students experiencing academic difficulty are diverse, major and career indecision is a consistent theme. The last two years of probation data indicated that more than 30% of students placed on academic probation within their first year at the University are undeclared of college major. Students who are undecided or undeclared have a demonstrated higher likelihood of attrition (Foote, 1980; Leppel, 2001; St. John et al., 2004). This risk is escalated when academic standing policies are taken into consideration as students on academic probation are one semester away from potential academic suspension. Therefore, the purpose of the present study to provide intentional career exploration experiences for students on academic probation addressed the need for more equitable supports. I designed the course curriculum to include assignments that focus on identifying and leveraging individual strengths, meaningful work, career planning, and goal setting. A maximum of 24 students were permitted to enroll in the course. I recruited participants during the academic recovery program workshops and through email correspondence based upon their responses to the initial assessment, which indicated career exploration as a specific need.

Inquiry Partners

The present study relied on the input of key inquiry partners at every stage: development, implementation, and analysis. Each of these professional staff members from within Branchline offered insight and guidance that proved invaluable to the study.

The Director of the Branchline Learning Center oversees all operations within the center. The Director has supported the academic recovery program for five years and has been instrumental in the expansion and delivery of program options. As such, the Director was involved in each phase of the present study. I sought her guidance regarding the development and position of the career development intervention with the program. As the Director leads the

annual reporting and formal evaluation of the Branchline academic recovery program, I solicited her support in the design of the initial assessment and final evaluation of the course. Throughout the study, I utilized the expertise of the Director in an analysis of my observations from the class, as well as on the qualitative data collected within Phase II as a form of member checking.

The Associate Director of Learning and Instruction oversees the course program options within the Branchline academic recovery program. The expertise of the Associate Director proved instrumental in the design of the interactive experiences within the intervention. During Phase II, I leveraged the expertise of this inquiry partner to create meaningful methods of content delivery to meet the diverse needs of students with varying learning preferences.

Finally, the Executive Director of Branchline Career Services and the Associate Director for Employer Relations offered critical support in the design of the career exploration curriculum to ensure that the course aligned with strengths-based career exploration practices. These Career Services inquiry partners and I collaborated on life design experiences for my course and future courses to create activities for meaningful exploration and career planning.

Throughout the phases of the present study, I kept inquiry partners informed of the study's evolution through regular meetings and email correspondence. These communication efforts served to keep stakeholders apprised of progress. At the conclusion of this study and with the permission of participants, I shared individual portraits with the Branchline academic recovery program instructors as part of the annual Instructor Institute. Institute serves as the primary training experience for all instructors teaching a Branchline academic recovery course. These portraits provided contextual details that offered an in-depth glance into the student experience during not only the career exploration course, but also while in academic recovery.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of the present study as it sought to offer support to a vulnerable student population, I remained committed to reflection of all ethical considerations at every phase (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hatch, 2002). This began first with the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before I accessed participants or collected data. Creswell and Poth (2018) indicates that IRB approval examines three critical concerns: “respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice” (p. 95). IRB approval required that I provide evidence that participants’ identities were kept confidential for the duration of the study and in all subsequent reporting. Furthermore, as part of the IRB approval process I composed language for participants to review that explicitly assured respect of confidentiality and the right of the participant to decline to participate in the present study at any time without consequence.

However, IRB approval was but one-step to ensure I maintained ethical standards throughout the study. In Phase I and the early stages of Phase II, I disclosed to all participants the purpose of the study and reiterated that choosing to participate was voluntary. In an effort to avoid coercive pressure, I assured all participants that the decision to participate or not would in no way affect their grade in the course. Furthermore, I assured all participants that they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequence and that no reasoning behind that decision would be necessary. I restated these points again before each individual interview.

To protect the confidentiality of participants, I assigned each participant an alias as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018). I continued to protect the identity of participants within the analysis process and all reporting. Finally, in the writing of all reports documenting the present study’s findings, I consulted the ethical consideration checklist adapted by Creswell

(2016) to ensure that the final report met the ethical standards regarding consent and researcher responsibilities.

A significant ethical concern in the present study is the role of I played as the instructor of record for the career exploration course. I recognized the threat of manipulation or unwarranted influence that arises by extending the invitation to participate to enrolled students from a position of authority. To mitigate threats, either real or perceived, from the perspective of student participants, I engaged in a series of steps to navigate the power dynamics at play within the classroom. This began with the recruitment process.

I extended the invitation to participate in the present study during the academic recovery program workshops by introducing it as one of the program options students could choose from for support, thus allowing students to make an informed decision at the point of enrollment in the Branchline academic recovery program. As a second recruitment strategy, I identified prospective participants who selected UCOL 130 as their program option and indicated career indecision on the initial assessment. For these students, I emailed an invitation to participate in the present study. This email clearly outlined the purpose of the course as part of a research study and the data collection procedures. The email invitation defined the efforts taken to protect participant confidentiality. In addition, this email outreach included the IRB-approved consent form as an attachment. Upon receiving this invitation either in the workshop or through the email outreach, those participants who elected to enroll in the career exploration course contacted me directly so that I could issue the appropriate registration permits.

However, choosing to enroll in the course did not confirm consent. I approached the voluntary consent process with an understanding of my own influence as the classroom authority figure. As such, I requested the assistance of an external administrator in the consent process.

This administrator was intentionally chosen as a third party professional who neither reports directly or indirectly to me nor holds any authority over the student participants. This external administrator attended the first day of the course to witness my description of the research study and the consent process in detail to all enrolled students. The role of this administrator was to judge whether I had explained clearly and appropriately to all students what participation in the present study would mean.

During the consent process with the external administrator present, I assured all students that the decision to participate or not participate in the present study would in no way influence their grade or completion in the course as part of the academic recovery program. I communicated that all students may participate in the intervention activities, regardless of individual decision to participate in the study and that there would be no penalty for choosing not to participate including any unfair advantages given to participants in the form of extra credit. These assurances were explicitly stated to prospective participants by me, but they were also documented in writing as part of the both the consent form, the course syllabus, and in a PowerPoint during the first class session.

To ensure the consent process was voluntary, I logged out of the virtual class session to allow the external administrator to reiterate the nature of the consent process and all efforts to protect confidentiality of participants. This third party administrator directed prospective participants to the consent form that provided a description of data collection procedures, the estimated time commitment of participants beyond class time, and the voluntary participation statement.

I refrained from conducting the pre-test assessments or collecting student work as part of the study until the class period following that initial session. This meant that no data collection

occurred until after the external administrator shared the consent form and corroborated that students understood the voluntary consent process. Additionally, the consent process occurred within the University's withdraw period to ensure that any participant who chose not to participate and wished to withdraw from the course all together would have time to do so without financial or grade implications.

Finally, as I collected data through the interviews and participant artifacts as part of the course, individual participants were invited to review and offer comment on my analysis of their experience. I presented preliminary findings from early coursework and first interviews to participants during our second interviews and requested that the individual participant provide feedback. I triangulated all data collected to compose portraits of the individual student experience within the course. At the completion of the data analysis, I presented individual portraits to participants for their review prior to any reporting of research findings. All participants were invited to comment or point out discrepancies between their experience and my analysis. This process was to confirm that I accurately interpreted and captured the student experience.

Inquiry Procedures

I conducted this mixed-methods case study in a three-phase approach. The initial phase served as preparation for the proposed career intervention. This included a review of the literature and pilot study findings to design the career exploration curriculum, recruitment strategies for the present study, and securing permission to utilize the pre-existing assessment tools. Finally, in this initial phase, I acquired approval from IRB in order to gain access to participants and began the recruitment process.

In Phase II, I collected pre-test assessment data using the CDSE-SF and the AMS-C instruments and began the course with a series of career exploration activities and reflective experiences. Qualitative data collection occurred in this phase, as did the administered post-test assessments. Phase III largely consisted of data analysis and reporting by myself to key inquiry partners. The subsequent sections outline the instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis within each phase.

Phase I

Phase I begin in Fall 2020, leading to the Spring 2021 semester when the career exploration course took place. I identified participants in January following the reporting of final term grades and began the recruitment process. Recruitment largely occurred during the academic recovery workshops where students first learned about the program and selected their option. I continued recruitment throughout the add/drop period of the Spring 2021 semester using the data collected on the initial assessment to identify individuals who had expressed career or major indecision. Once I identified individuals, I contacted students by email to offer more information on the career exploration course as part of the academic recovery program. Additionally, in this first phase, I completed all mandatory administrative functions including securing permission to utilize the existing assessments and seeking approval from the IRB in order to gain access to participants.

Description of Participants and Recruitment Strategies

The participants in the present study had all experienced academic difficulty in Fall 2020. In most cases, academic difficulty was defined by the academic probation indicator at Branchline due to a cumulative GPA below 2.0. In Spring 2021, 557 students were targeted for the academic

recovery program. Of these, 372 students, or 67%, registered for classes and therefore were eligible to enroll in the academic recovery program.

In response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the University implemented revised academic policies. Consequently, not all students in the academic recovery target population remained on academic probation. Students were given the option to submit academic petitions through early January to utilize Pass/No Credit grade elections or retroactively withdraw from Fall 2020 courses. Utilization of these policies often positively influenced GPAs. However, program committee members from all eight undergraduate colleges unanimously agreed to encourage those students no longer on academic probation to participate in the academic recovery program as all had demonstrated recent academic difficulty. Four participants in the study elected to enroll in the career exploration course and participate in the study while technically in good academic standing due to these policies.

Recruitment for this study occurred during and following the Branchline academic recovery program workshops where eligible students first learned about the various program options. The University invited all students on academic probation after their first semester of enrollment to attend a Branchline academic recovery workshop. It is during these workshops where students determined which program option was the best fit for their specific scheduling and support needs. During the workshop, I introduced the career exploration course as one of the program options and as a larger research study. To enroll in the career exploration course, students contacted me directly during or after the workshop to request a permit to register for the course. All students were asked to complete the initial assessment survey as the final step for enrollment regardless of which academic recovery program option they selected.

Following the workshop, I reviewed the initial assessment data for those students who elected the UCOL 130 option to identify potential participants who are either undecided of college major or indicated career indecision as part of the survey. This purposive sampling strategy was designed to identify students who may benefit from a career exploration curriculum as part of their academic recovery. This deliberately homogenous sample provided “information-rich cases” (Etikan et al., 2016) for an in-depth examination of the course’s impact.

Once potential participants were identified, I conducted outreach to invite participation in the study. This communication involved an email to the students’ University email address and included a description of the research study and the career exploration curriculum. I also attached to this email correspondence the IRB-approved consent form. On the first day of the course, I discussed the consent form to demonstrate how I would collect data, the efforts taken to ensure confidentiality of participants, and the potential benefits of participation. As the students self-selected to enroll in the course, the activities within the study involved all students regardless of whether or not they chose to participate in the study. I collected consent forms following the first class period for any student who elected to participate in the study by email. While the course reached maximum capacity with 24 students, 15 of these elected to participate in the study and submitted a signed consent form.

This initial phase directly correlated with my first research question. As a subset of one academic recovery program option, students were given the choice to enroll in the career exploration course, or choose to enroll in a traditional UCOL 130 option. The response to the recruitment process spoke to the initial research question regarding the value students assigned to career exploration experiences as part of their academic recovery.

Instrumentation

I used four instruments to collect data in the present study. An initial assessment developed in collaboration with the Director of the Branchline University and myself to gather information about student concerns, expectations, and desired support prior to the start of their enrollment in the academic recovery program. The final evaluation, also developed by the Director and myself, was used to glean student experience and perceived growth following enrollment. The Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale Short Form (CDSE-SF) (Betz et al., 2005) assessed career self-efficacy as a pre-/ post-test assessment. The Academic Motivation Scale modified for college students (AMS-C) developed by Vallerand et al. (1993), was used to measure academic motivation, also as a pre-/ post-test assessment.

Academic recovery participants completed the initial assessment survey prior to beginning the Spring 2021 semester. The assessment collected data regarding academic support needs as perceived by the students. The initial assessment consisted of 28 questions, six of which were open-ended. Questions invited students to consider the challenges they experienced in the previous semester that affected academic performance, student perception of academic probation, as well as to identify individual strengths. Of significance, students are asked on the initial assessment to rate their confidence in their academic major. I used this data to identify potential participants for recruitment in the present study.

The final evaluation gathered information related to student experience as part of the Branchline academic recovery program. The assessment consisted of 28 questions, the majority of which were closed questions with Likert scale options. Five questions of the assessment were open-ended. All questions were meant to assess the effectiveness of the course from the student

perspective. I cross-referenced initial assessment and final evaluation data to assess the effectiveness of the program experience.

The Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale Short Form (CDSE-SF) was developed by Betz et al. (2005) as a modified version of the Career Decision Self-Efficacy form first created by Taylor and Betz (1983). The original CDSE included fifty behavior tasks related to the career decision-making process. These behavior tasks aligned with Crites' (1973) career maturity model: self-appraisal, gathering occupation information, goal selection, planning for the future, and problem solving. The CDSE-SF shortened the CDSE from a 10 task scale to five (Betz et al., 2005). The revised version has been tested for validity with findings indicating that the results of the 5-task scale (CDSE-SF) are as reliable as the original 10-scale assessment (Betz et al., 2005; Betz & Voyten, 1997). In Phase I, I purchased the CDSE-SF directly from the developers as instructed. I administered the CDSE-SF as a pre-/ post-test assessment to participants in Phase II to determine the impact of the career exploration course on career self-efficacy.

The Academic Motivation Scale for college students (AMS-C) is grounded in self-determination theory and evaluates a student's intrinsic motivation, extrinsic, and amotivation in the college context (Vallerand et al., 1993). The intrinsic motivation to learn speaks to an internal desire to learn and gather new information, hence its clear position in the classroom (Gottfried, 1985). Similarly, the intrinsic motivation to achieve accomplishments and to experience stimulation speaks to mastery and peak performance during engagement in an enjoyable task (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gottfried, 1985). The assessment consists of 28 questions evaluated on a seven-point scale (Vallerand et al., 1993). Guay et al. (2015) and Vallerand et al. (1992) tested the initial English iteration of the assessment for validity and found the AMS to be reliable instrument for the measure of academic motivation. Following these tests, Vallerand et al. (1993)

produced the AMS-C with modified language to capture the experiences of college students. In Phase I, I requested permission from the developer to administer the AMS-C as a pre-/ post-test assessment to participants within the second phase to determine the impact of the career exploration course on academic motivation.

To address the fourth research question, I conducted semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol. I engaged participants in two individual interviews. The first occurred within three weeks of the start of the course to assess expectations and confidence in larger career goals. The second interview occurred within the final two weeks of the course to assess how the student experienced the career exploration curriculum. I developed the interview protocol to include open-ended questions to a wide range of responses. Additionally, with the consent of the participants, I collected student artifacts as produced within the career exploration course to triangulate multiple forms of data. Student participants were given the opportunity to review the analysis to ensure validity.

Pilot Study/Baseline Data Collection

In Spring 2020, I conducted a pilot study to explore the potential impact of a meaningful work career workshop on the motivation and persistence of students deemed “high-risk” by the University based upon a decline in recent academic performance. Participants were dual-enrolled at Branchline and a local community college as part of a transfer bridge program seeking to establish a strong GPA to receive full admission to the University. I designed the pilot to inform the design and implementation of the present study. The research questions guiding the pilot explored how students experienced a meaningful work career workshop and the potential of the experience to influence motivation. As the present study seeks to explore the impact of a career development curriculum for students on academic probation at Branchline, the pilot study

explored the impact of a single career exploration workshop for five student participants who had experienced recent academic difficulty. I facilitated the workshop and conducted semi-structured interviews to assess the experiences and perceptions of workshop participants.

The pilot occurred amid the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, I chose to offer the workshop virtually and conducted all interviews in accordance with the social distancing recommendations at the national and state levels. I invited participants to engage in an interview by phone or through virtual tools endorsed by the University. All interviews were audio or video recorded with permission granted by individual participants. I transcribed the interviews verbatim for coding and analysis. From the transcriptions, I synthesized seven larger themes of the student experiences and perceived impact.

The pilot provided evidence that students who had experienced recent academic difficulty valued the meaningful work career workshop citing that the experience allowed them to engage in goal setting and planning related to their future career pathways. Participants were able to connect their work as part of the workshops to their college major decision-process. From the pilot, I concluded that the reflective components of the workshop contributed to what Ryan and Deci (2017) refer to as autonomous motivation. As such, I found a positive relationship between the meaningful work career workshop and the motivation to persist for pre-transfer students with recent decline in academic performance. Furthermore, participants within the pilot study described an increase in confidence in both the academic and professional context. All five participants reported increased awareness of their individual strengths and their perceived ability to leverage strengths to be successful in the academic context.

Following the pilot study in Spring 2020, I shared the findings with key inquiry partners within the bridge program as empirical evidence of the potential benefit of participating in a

career development intervention for students experiencing academic difficulty. The findings from the pilot influenced the design of the larger intervention within the present study as students shared in individual interviews the aspects of the workshop they perceived the most valuable: a focus on strengths and reflection of larger purpose and its connection to undergraduate education. The interview protocol used during the pilot is helpful in that it gauged student experiences and the fulfillment of the three psychological needs for motivation as defined Ryan and Deci (2017) in the context of the single career workshop experience. For the present study, I have modified the protocol questions to address the experience of the full career intervention.

Data Analysis

The pilot study provided qualitative evidence to support the potential benefit of a career exploration workshop for students experiencing academic difficulty. However, in the present study I collected multiple sources of data to address the complex research questions proposed herein. To address the first research question, I analyzed the quantitative success of recruitment to investigate whether students on academic probation saw value in a career exploration as part of their academic recovery by choosing to enroll in the intervention. Additionally, I collected qualitative data in the semi-structured interviews with participants to understand how students conceptualized the value of such an experience. Quantitative data collected using pre-/ post-test assessments with the CDSE-SF and AMS-C address the second and third research questions. These questions explored the impact of the career exploration course on the career self-efficacy and academic motivation of students on academic probation.

I addressed the fourth research question through qualitative data collection and analysis. As part of the case study research design, I interviewed participants individually to understand the student experience as part of the course while on academic probation or within their own

academic recovery. I also collected samples of students' artifacts produced as part of the course for data analysis. For the purposes of triangulation, I used these forms of data, as well as the initial assessment and final evaluation results, to compose individual portraits of the student experiences.

To construct the portraits, I conducted a constant comparative coding method to allow themes to emerge from the data itself. I compared all forms of data collected within the present study to synthesize larger themes. The constant comparative coding method worked well in the present study as it allowed me to develop initial codes from early data analysis and compare data collected over the course of the larger intervention to further strengthen code validity or identify new codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While commonly used in the grounded theory design, the constant comparative coding process offers a tool for the organization and triangulation of data in all research designs (Fram, 2013). I conducted the constant comparative coding using the NVivo software for deeper analysis of the data.

To verify that my interpretation accurately described the reality of the experience as perceived by the participants, I engaged in the techniques recommended by Merriam (1988) to ensure internal validity. These strategies involve the triangulation of multiple sources of data and participant feedback. In the case of the present study, I cross-referenced multiple sources of data including transcriptions of the participant interviews and various student artifacts. I composed individual student portraits using the triangulation of these multiple data sources. As a form of member checking, I then shared the composed portraits with individual student participants and invited their feedback. The goal of this process was to confirm that the portrait accurately depicted the student experience, and in the process ensured validity.

Finally, throughout all three phases of the present study, I maintained rigorous field notes documenting larger ideas and concepts, as well as my own experiences as the researcher. These notes included reminders, critiques, and my own observations as the study unfolded. This reflective memo served as additional qualitative data as it provided a comprehensive lens of each stage of the study including the design and implementation of the course, data collection, and analysis.

Summary of Phase I

Phase I largely consisted of preliminary data collection to inform the present study. Data collected in the pilot study provided empirical evidence of the potential benefit of a career exploration experience for students experiencing academic difficulty. These findings influenced the design of the course proposed herein, as well as provided data to key inquiry partners.

The first phase continued into Fall 2020. I secured permission to utilize the CDSE-SF and the AMS-C instruments and developed the other assessments including the initial assessment and final evaluation and all interview protocols. A final step in the first phase involved seeking IRB approval to conduct the present study at Branchline and to gain access to prospective participants. Once IRB approval was secured, I began the recruitment process in January 2021 to identify eligible participants. The recruitment process provided data and insight to address the first research question driving the study. Finally, the planning and preparation in Phase I established the foundation from which Phase II, delivery of the course, built upon.

Phase II

The second phase began in Spring 2021 with the consent process and the implementation of the career exploration course. Having shared the purpose of the research study during recruitment, I utilized the first meeting of the UCOL 130 course to outline the correlation

between the purpose of the present study and outcomes of the course itself. A third party administrator accompanied me to oversee the consent process as previously described. Once consenting participants were identified, I collected pre-test assessment data using the CDSE-SF and the AMS-C instruments and began the course with a series of career exploration activities and reflective experiences. In this phase, I collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews and the student artifacts produced within the course. Phase II concluded with the administered post-test assessments and final interviews with participants.

Inquiry Approach/Intervention

The design of the career exploration course within the present study was informed by existing literature demonstrating that a focus on self-exploration, reflection of individual purpose, and reflection of personal values can foster futuristic goal setting (Dik et al., 2011; Murphy et al., 2010). Savickas (2012) posits that all career interventions should be oriented toward future selves and should allow participants to engage in activities where they may design their future career identities.

Exploration and reflection are named consistently in career intervention literature as important factors. Additionally, student participants in the pilot study identified the reflective activities as the most beneficial aspect of the workshop, and the biggest contributor to motivation as they perceived it. As such, I designed the course utilizing existing career reflection activities introduced in the literature. I followed the model set forth by Grier-Reed and Skaar (2010) with three larger themes guiding the intervention: reflection of past and present experiences, designing goals for the future, and the intentional planning and construction of action items toward achieving future goals. Prior to this study, I had previously taught a career development course using this model. I constructed this course in collaboration with the Branchline Career

Services and delivered to student leaders at the University. For the present study, the career exploration course was modified to include career development experiences as part of the academic success seminar with topics of academic skill building intertwined with the emphasis of career development and exploration. Like Grier-Reed and Skaar's model, I approached the course from a strength-based philosophy with assignments designed to emphasize talents and strengths in the career decision-making process. Table 2 presents the weekly topics and activities within weeks two through nine of the intervention. Week one included the consent process and an overview of the study and course overall. I reserved week ten for post-test assessments and course evaluations. Week four was reserved for the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory as a core component of all academic recovery program course options. For a description of larger assignments, see Appendix F.

I also embedded common academic recovery program elements of time management, study strategies, and goal setting into the curriculum of the career exploration course. The activities in the course are designed to bridge academic and professional goals. As such, reflective activities asked students to apply course content to both contexts. In week three of the course, students examined their strengths as they related to both professional and academic environments. In another example, students examined their current priorities to decipher where their time is currently spent. Students then constructed an outline defining where and how they may dedicate time to their successful efforts in both contexts. A final example is the Workview, Lifeview, and Collegeview activities, which I modified from the Lifeview activity designed by Burnett and Evans (2018). Students reflected on personal, professional, and academic goals. Reflection required students to consider where these goals fit into their current lifestyle and assess strategies to prioritize based on larger goals.

Table 2

Weekly Topics and Assignments within the Career Development Intervention

Theme	Week	Topic	Activities
Past & Present	2	Exploring our past/present; What do you value?	Values activity (Dik et al., 2011; Johnson, 2017); Career genograms (Storlie et al., 2019)
Past & Present	3	Exploring strengths; Exploring priorities	Strengths-based resume & narrative (Toporek & Cohen, 2016); Protect your time assignment Pre-Assessments (CDSE-SF; AMS-C)
Study Strategies	4	Academic thoughts, behaviors, attitudes, and strategies	LASSI assessment; interpretation of inventory results; Major mapping (Brooks, 2010)
Designing the Future	5	Life design thinking	Lifeview, Workview and Collegeview (Burnett & Evans, 2018)
Designing the Future	6	Meaningful work;	Meaningful work statements (Johnson, 2017); Meaningful education statements
Designing the Future	7	Personal charter and personal responsibility	Life action planning (Johnson, 2017); personal responsibility manifestos
Career Planning	8	Planning for the future	Calling Connection; Odyssey Plans (Burnett & Evans, 2018)
Career Planning	9	Anticipating the obstacles	Mental contrasting with W.O.O.P. (Oettingen, 2015)

Data collection occurred in Phase II. I collected data in the form of the pre-/ post-test CDSE-SF and AMS-C assessments, the submitted written work of participants produced within the intervention, and semi-structured interviews with participants. The CDSE-SF and the AMS-C address the second and third research questions and the intervention's potential influence on career self-efficacy and academic motivation.

During the first three weeks of the course, I interviewed each participant to collect initial data related to current career goals and decision-making prior to the intervention. All interviews were semi-structured utilizing an interview protocol (see Appendix D) grounded in Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory and career self-efficacy theory (Hackett & Betz, 1981; Taylor & Betz, 1983).

I conducted second interviews in the last two weeks of the course utilizing a modified version of the initial interview protocol (see Appendix E) to assess student experience within the intervention. Follow-up correspondence occurred in Phase III following the completion of the course and into Fall 2021. In this emailed outreach and in-person meetings, I shared the portraits composed of student written work with individual participants to confirm my analysis accurately depicted their experiences as part of the course. Additionally, the communication efforts into Fall 2021 served as a check in with individual participants as they began a new term at Branchline. I invited participants in these conversations to share their experiences as they returned to campus following the career exploration course.

Summary of Phase II

Phase II is the crux of the study. It is in this second phase that I put into practice the preparation from Phase I with the implementation of the career exploration course. Of significance, Phase II addressed the second and third research questions as student participants

completed the pre-/ post-test assessments to indicate the impact of the course on career self-efficacy and academic motivation. This phase also marked the process of securing the consent of participants and data collection in the form of semi-structured interviews and submitted written work. All data collected informed the data analysis that largely took place in the third and final phase of the study.

Phase III

In Phase III, I analyzed all qualitative data collected in the second phase to compose portraits of the student experience. Individual participants were invited to review the portraits during follow-up interviews and through email correspondence to ensure that I accurately depicted their experiences as part of the course as a form of member checking for the purposes of internal validity. This continued into Fall 2021. In this final phase, I shared individual portraits with the Branchline academic recovery program instructors as part of the annual Instructor Institute. These portraits provided contextual details that offered an in-depth glance into the student experience during not only the career exploration course, but also while in academic recovery.

Analysis of Approach

To address the second research question regarding the potential influence of the intervention on the career self-efficacy of participants, I collected a pre-/ post-test assessment utilizing Betz et al.'s (2005) CDSE-SF. I measured the change in assessment scores in the five subscales of the CDSE-SF by individual participant. I also compared the difference in mean scores of the participants overall in the five subscales between the pre-/ post-test assessments. The five subscales include self-appraisal, occupational knowledge, goal setting, futuristic

planning, and problem solving. The pre-test CDSE-SF was administered on the second day of the course and the post-test was administered on the final day of the class.

I utilized a pre-/ post-test assessment using the AMS-C (Vallerand et al., 1993) to determine if the career development intervention influenced the academic motivation of participants and to address the third research question. To measure this, I compared pre-/post-test scores in the seven subscales of the AMS-C by individual participant. I also compared the difference in mean scores of the participants overall in the seven subscales between the pre-/ post-test assessments. The seven subscales represent the three different types of intrinsic motivation, the three different types of extrinsic motivation, and amotivation as defined by Deci and Ryan (1985). The pre-test AMS-C was administered on the second day of the course and the post-test was administered on the final day of the class.

Qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and submitted written work by participants addressed the fourth research question regarding student experience within the intervention while on academic probation. I composed individual portraits of the student experience from both forms of data as a form of triangulation (Fram, 2013; Yin, 2018). To confirm the validity and avoid any bias in interpretation, I corresponded through email or met with individual student participants to share the respective portrait and invited feedback to ensure my analysis accurately depicted the student experience.

I chose a case study design as the present study is bound within a single case (Yin, 2018) of students on academic probation at Branchline enrolled in the academic recovery program. To analyze the complex data as part of the study, I engaged in a constant comparative coding technique. This method is generally used in grounded theory research. However, the technique allows for comparison of complex data between individual cases making it beneficial in a case

study design when comparing multiple datasets (Harding, 2015). In the case of the present study, I sought to explore through interviews and student artifacts the value students assigned to the career exploration course, as well as their experiences within it. I explored the results of the pre-/post-test assessments to decipher whether or not the career exploration course produced a statistically significant impact on academic motivation and career self-efficacy. Additionally, I compared academic outcomes including performance metrics such as student GPA, both term and cumulative, retention, and academic standing as compared to Branchline academic recovery program students overall.

The mixed methods case study design was appropriate for the present study in that it offered an in-depth analysis on the potential benefits of a career exploration course as defined by and through the experiences of students on academic probation. The collection of both quantitative and qualitative data offered a comprehensive analysis of the case (Stake, 1995). It was my hope that by participating in the career exploration course as part of the academic recovery program, participants would demonstrate increased confidence in their ability to perform within the academic context and enhanced motivation to persist, even amid difficulty. I offer recommendations for future studies and other programming to better support the holistic needs of students on academic probation at Branchline in Chapter 5.

Summary of Phase III

In this final phase of the present study, I engaged in the analysis process of all data collected. The fourth question was addressed by way of the qualitative data collected through coding and analysis of interview data and student artifacts. In this final phase, I analyzed the verbatim transcriptions of participant interviews in addition to student artifacts to synthesize larger themes. Data analysis was shared with critical inquiry partner, the Director of the

Branchline Learning Center, to ensure internal validity. Additionally, from the data I composed individual portraits of the student experience. Each portrait was shared with the individual participant to ensure that I accurately depicted the student experience.

The third phase culminated with the sharing of individual portraits during the annual Instructor Institute. These portraits provided contextual details that offered an in-depth glance into the student experience during not only the career exploration course, but also while in academic recovery as part of the instructor training experience.

Inquiry Design Rigor

As described herein, I have taken steps to ensure the rigor of present study throughout data collection and analysis. These steps included member checking during the analysis process in Phase III by engaging inquiry partners and individual student participants in a review of my analysis. I engaged in triangulation of data using multiple sources to compose student portraits to safeguard the internal validity of the study against the threat of researcher's interpretation and bias.

Participants involved in the present study were all Branchline students on academic probation following their first semester at the University or students at risk of academic probation prior to utilization of revised academic policies in the wake of COVID-19. In the present study, I sought to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation at Branchline University, as well to assess the value students assign to such a course and their experiences within it. As such, the results of the study may not be generalizable across other institutions with varying sizes or more or less diverse student populations. Additionally, the participants selected to enroll in the academic recovery program with the specific intention of returning to good academic standing in order to remain at

Branchline. The impact of this may translate into the inability to generalize findings to all four-year institutions.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

The present study is bound within the context of Branchline University, a large public four-year institution. The study sought to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation at Branchline University, as well to assess the value students assign to such a course and their experiences within it. It was my intention to utilize the findings of the study to modify existing practices and support for students on academic probation. As such, the course is reactive in nature seeking to assist students after a semester of academic difficulty. While the study examines the potential benefits of a career exploration experience for students on academic probation, it does not investigate whether such an experience is advantageous to students prior to academic difficulty. Future studies may explore whether or not a proactive career exploration course early in a student's career at an institution may circumvent academic difficulty.

Furthermore, given the contextually bound nature of the present study the results may not be generalizable to other institutions of larger or smaller size, or with more or less diversity amid the student body. It is important to note that all participants have willingly selected to enroll in the academic recovery program with the specific intention of improving their academic standing in order to remain at Branchline. Consequently, the results may not be generalizable to two-year institutions or other four-year institutions.

The lack of generalizability within a bound context is a regular criticism of the case study design. However, I agree with the insights of Flyvberg (2006) that establishing universal truths in regards to the human experience is not possible. Just as the challenges that produce academic

difficulty are unique to the individual, the experiences of participating in both a career exploration course and an academic recovery program will not be the same for all. The complexity of the student experience makes the context-specific findings of a case study design valuable in their own right. Additionally, case study design has been criticized for its lack of rigor due to researcher bias in the analysis phase (Siggelkow, 2007). I recognize the legitimacy of this concern. Thus, in this present study I engaged in triangulation and member checking to ensure internal validity throughout (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2018).

Prior to Phase II, I operated under the assumption that the very role I played as both the researcher and the instructor of the course may influence the responses of student participants during the qualitative interviews. It was possible that participants may have felt uncomfortable expressing negative views of the intervention in front of their instructor. To mitigate this concern, I explicitly defined the purpose of this research study as an opportunity to improve practices within the Branchline academic recovery program. Additionally, I assured all participants that the decision to participate would in no way influence their grade in the course or ability to complete the academic recovery program. The member checking process of sharing composed portraits with individual participants was designed to establish a rapport between the participants and myself as the researcher. At each stage, I offered transparency regarding data collection, analysis and final reporting.

Role of the Scholarly Practitioner

As I have been a practitioner on the Branchline campus for eleven years, I have come to the present study organically. For the last nine years, I have supported students experiencing academic difficulty both as current Branchline students and pre-transfer students seeking to gain admission to the University. Through these experiences, I have had opportunity to examine

existing practices for assisting students. I have also had the privilege of consistent access to students who have experienced recent academic difficulty. My roles have allowed me to collect both anecdotal and empirical data.

From 2016 to 2019, I collected performance metrics data of pre-transfer students enrolled in the University's largest transfer bridge program. These students were enrolled at a local community college and had expressed their intent of transferring to Branchline. Additionally, all students enrolled in the bridge program had demonstrated academic difficulty with declining GPAs and/or low scores on standardized college admission assessments (SAT/ACT). I collected data to examine patterns amid students who despite recent challenge in the academic context were able to successfully transfer compared to their peers who did not meet the transfer admission criteria and were ultimately unsuccessful in the transfer. These findings revealed no notable correlation between specific performance metrics like high school GPA or prior performance in specific high school courses and the ability to eventually transfer to Branchline from the two-year institution. However, the data did demonstrate a recurring theme in the group that was unsuccessful in their transfer. Over a three-year period with three different bridge cohorts, over 40% of the students who were unsuccessful in the transfer demonstrated career indecision. Career indecision in this case was defined as being undeclared of college major or those students that declared a new major at least once while enrolled in the bridge program.

I found these results intriguing, as did key inquiry partners invested in the success of students enrolled in the bridge program. During this same time, I was implementing a learning community for new transfer students. In the design process for the learning community curriculum, our team had conducted interviews and focus groups with current transfer students to gauge their curricular interests. From these conversations, it was clear that intentional career

development was a valuable experience sought by Branchline transfer students. Therefore, at the same time the bridge program data indicated a pattern of career indecision among those pre-transfer students experiencing academic difficulty, I was partnering with the Branchline Career Services to design a career development course. I taught this course successfully for two years before assuming my current role as an Associate Director in the Learning Center and leading the Branchline academic recovery program.

In Spring 2020, I implemented the pilot study described herein to assess the impact of a single career exploration workshop experience on the academic motivation of pre-transfer students in the bridge program. The participants of the pilot student had experienced recent academic difficulty, and all sought to transfer to Branchline. As previously described, in qualitative interviews all participants could identify aspects of the workshop that met the three basic psychological needs for motivation as defined within self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Additionally, all participants indicated an increase in confidence within the academic context. As of this writing, all five participants have gained admission to the University and remain enrolled in their degree path at Branchline.

In June 2020, I assumed my new role at the University, one that would allow me to continue the work of supporting students experiencing academic difficulty, this time as defined by the academic probation indicator. Data collected that summer indicated that career indecision continued to be a consistent theme. Within the last two years, more than 30% of students eligible for the Branchline academic recovery program due to their own academic probation standing were undecided or undeclared of college major. The present study is born from those years of collecting data within the context of Branchline University. The course designed as part of the

study sought to enhance the curricular support by providing career exploration experiences to students on academic probation within the umbrella of the academic recovery program.

As a practitioner providing oversight to the Branchline academic recovery program at large, I designed and implemented the career exploration course based upon existing career exploration literature, pilot study data, and the input of the Branchline Career Services. I completed data collection, while analysis served as a joint effort between myself, inquiry partners within the Learning Center, and the individual participants themselves. This collaboration seeks to circumvent researcher bias in both the analysis and in the final reporting.

A critical concern in the present study is my own role as the instructor of record for the career exploration course, as well as the practitioner overseeing all Branchline academic recovery program options. The position of authority introduces the threat of manipulation or unwarranted influence. In an effort to minimize these threats, I designed the steps outlined in this chapter to navigate the power dynamics at play within the academic context. These steps, which began with recruitment and continued through the collection, analysis, and reporting processes, sought to address these valid concerns.

Summary

The focus of this study is to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students experiencing academic difficulty as defined by the academic probation indicator at Branchline University. I conducted the study over the course of three phases. The first phase involved planning and preparation for the course, including securing IRB approval and permission to utilize the CDSE-SF and the AMS-C assessments. Additionally the first phase began to address the initial research question of the value students assign to career exploration as part of their academic recovery through the recruitment of study participants.

In Phase II, I conducted pre-/ post-test assessments to address the second and third research questions regarding the intervention's impact on career self-efficacy (CDSE-SF) and academic motivation (AMS-C). Qualitative data as part of the intervention was collected in the second phase through semi-structured interviews and student artifacts. In the final phase, I engaged in data analysis and reporting. The analysis in Phase III addressed the final research question of the study experience. This chapter defined the instrumentation and analysis procedures. It also discussed the assumptions, delimitations, and limitations and the steps I have taken to mitigate threats to internal validity and rigor.

Finally, this chapter defined the role of the scholarly practitioner on the campus of Branchline with a description of how the present study came to be. Ethical considerations were explored as a result of the complexity of my role within the bounded context of the study. As described herein, the results of the present study may produce opportunities for curricular changes and enhanced practices when supporting students on academic probation at the University. In Chapter 4, I chronicle the results of the study following the implementation of the career exploration course.

CHAPTER 4: QUALITATIVE AND QUANTATIVE RESULTS

The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation at Branchline University, as well to assess the value students assign to such a course and their experiences within it. Due to the complexity of the present study, I have used the mixed methods design to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. To assess the impact of the career exploration course on the career self-efficacy of students on academic probation, I administered the CDSE-SF (Betz et al., 2005) instrument as a pre-/ post-test. I then utilized the AMS-C (Vallerand et al., 1993) as a pre-/ post-test assessment to measure the impact of the course on academic motivation. The quantitative data collected and presented within this chapter addresses the second and third research questions.

Two additional research questions drove this study, the question of value assigned to the experience of enrolling in a career exploration course as part of academic recovery and the question of the student experience while enrolled in the course. Through the case study design, I conducted semi-structured interviews to understand the student experience as part of the course while on academic probation and the students' perception of its value. In addition to interview data, I collected samples of students' artifacts produced as part of the course. Both forms of data were utilized to compose individual portraits of the student experience, which once composed, were emailed to individual participants for their review. Participants were invited to comment on the content of the portrait to ensure that I accurately interpreted and represented their experiences as part of the course and study. The content from those portraits are presented throughout this chapter. Full portraits are presented in Appendix G.

Research Questions

This fourth chapter presents the findings revealed through the analysis of all data collected within the study in the order of the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do students on academic probation at Branchline conceptualize the value of participating in a career exploration course as part of their own academic recovery?
- RQ2: To what extent does the career exploration course influence the career self-efficacy of those students on academic probation at Branchline?
- RQ3: To what extent does the career exploration course influence the academic motivation of those students on academic probation at Branchline?
- RQ4: What are the experiences of students on academic probation who participate in the career exploration course?

Demographics of the Study

The fifteen participants who both enrolled in the career exploration course and consented to participate in the present study were enrolled at Branchline as undergraduate students working toward the completion of the bachelor's degree. All elected to enroll in the career exploration section of the UCOL 130: Academic Success Seminar course as part of the Branchline academic recovery program in Spring 2021. Of the 15 participants, 11 were on academic probation at the point of enrollment in the course and study. The four participants who were not on academic probation were in good academic standing due to the utilization of revised academic policies in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that allowed Pass or No Credit grade elections or retroactive withdrawal of Fall 2020 courses. Without the implementation of these policies, the four participants would have been placed on academic probation. As such, all 15 participants had experienced recent academic difficulty in the Fall 2020 term.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 27. Four participants were coded as “First-Year” students meaning they enrolled at Branchline following high school graduation or that Branchline was the first post-secondary institution they had attended. The remaining 11 participants had transferred to Branchline from another two- or four-year institution. Table 3 captures these demographics as well as self-reported gender, racial, and ethnic identities. All 15 participants were asked to complete the initial assessment to provide insight on their experiences in the semester in which they experienced academic difficulty (Fall 2020). Of these, 11 completed the assessment. Among the 11, 27% self-identified as a first-generation college student. The survey assessment explicitly defined first-generation as “Neither parent/guardian has earned an Associate’s or Bachelor’s degree prior to [the participant] applying at [Branchline].” The majority, 64%, indicated that they were employed off-campus in either part-time or full-time positions.

In addition to enrolling in the 2-credit hour UCOL 130: Academic Success Seminar, all but one participant were enrolled in other Branchline courses during the time they participated in the study. The majority of participants were enrolled full-time, meaning they elected to enroll in a minimum of 12 credit hours during the semester they participated in the study. Three participants enrolled at a rate of three-quarter time, or 9-11 credit hours. One participant was enrolled halftime between 6-8 credit hours, and one participant was enrolled below half-time, meaning they were enrolled in less than five credit hours. Table 4 captures work and school commitments as well as the first-generation indicator for those participants who chose to disclose this information.

Table 3

Age, Student Type, Gender Identity, Race or Ethnicity

Alias	Age	Student Type	Gender/Pronouns	Race or Ethnicity
Ash	19	First-Year	Male (he/him)	White
Baki	19	First-Year	Male (he/him)	Black
Bertha	27	Transfer	Female (she/her)	White
Bri	18	First-Year	Female (she/her)	White
C.C.	18	First-Year	Male (he/him)	White
Charlie	19	Transfer	Female (she/her)	White
Fiona	20	Transfer	Female (she/her)	White
Jim	24	Transfer	Male (he/him)	White
Jonah	26	Transfer	Male (he/him)	White
Khloe	21	Transfer	Female (she/her)	Hispanic
Marigold	21	Transfer	Female (she/her)	Asian
Pablo	22	Transfer	Male (he/him)	Hispanic
Sofia	21	Transfer	Female (she/her)	Hispanic
Tina	24	Transfer	Female (she/her)	White
Trev	19	Transfer	Male (he/him)	Black

Table 4

Work Commitments, First-Generation, Course Load, Career/Major Challenges

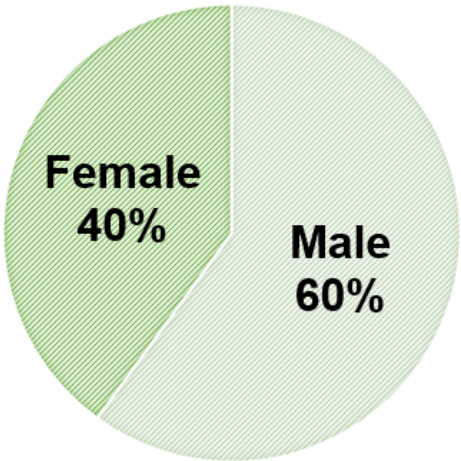
	Frequency	Percent
Work Commitments Per Week		
No employment	4	37%
1-9 total hours	0	0%
10-19 total hours	3	27%
20-29 total hours	1	9%
30-39 total hours	2	18%
40+ total hours	1	9%
Total	11	100%
Self-Reported Designation		
First Generation student	3	27%
Latest Generation student	8	73%
Total	11	100%
Course Load in Spring 2021		
Full-time (12+ credit hours)	10	66%
Three-quarter time (9-11 credit hours)	3	20%
Half-time (6-8 credit hours)	1	7%
Below half-time (1-5 credit hours)	1	7%
Total	15	100%
Self-Reported Career and Major Challenges in Fall 2020		
Uncertain about current major	3	17%
Changed major one or more times	4	24%
Unsure what jobs are associated with major	2	12%
No clear career goals	5	29%
Not sure why I'm in school	1	6%
Branchline may not be the place for me	0	0%
None of the above	2	12%
Total	17	100%

Note. The initial assessment instructed students to select all that applied concerning the major and career challenges that affected their performance in Fall 2020.

The participants in the study self-selected to enroll in the specific section of UCOL 130 dedicated to career exploration. I provided eligible academic recovery students details on the purpose of the course and study during the recruitment process. The course capacity allowed for 24 students to enroll in Spring 2021. All 24 of these seats were filled by a student who had experienced academic difficulty in Fall 2020, and 15 of these students elected to participate in the full study. The majority of the participants who completed an initial assessment indicated that major and career challenges affected their performance in Fall 2020 (see Table 4). Two participants indicated on their initial assessment prior to enrolling in the course that they did not experience any major or career challenges. However, both elected to enroll in the UCOL 130 section that focused on career exploration. This, in and of itself, may indicate either career or major indecision or at minimum, the desire to engage in reflection of career goals.

In Spring 2021, within the total target population for the academic recovery program (N= 557), 40% identified as female, whereas female individuals made up 53% of participants in the present study. Within the larger target population for the academic recovery program, 48% self-reported their race or ethnicity as White or Caucasian. This is mirrored in the study demographics with 53% identifying as White. Within the study, 20% of participants identified as Black whereas 22% of the larger target academic recovery population in the same term self-reported racial or ethnic identities of African-American or Black. One participant (7%) of the 15 in the study identified as Asian, equal to the 7% of the full target population who identified as Asian. Finally, 20% of student participants identified as Hispanic, mirroring the 18% of the total academic recovery program population who identified as Hispanic. While not exact, the overall demographics of participants within the study is a reasonable representation for the larger Branchline academic recovery program population (see Figures 3 and 4).

**ACADEMIC RECOVERY
TARGET POPULATION**



**PRESENT STUDY
PARTICIPANTS**

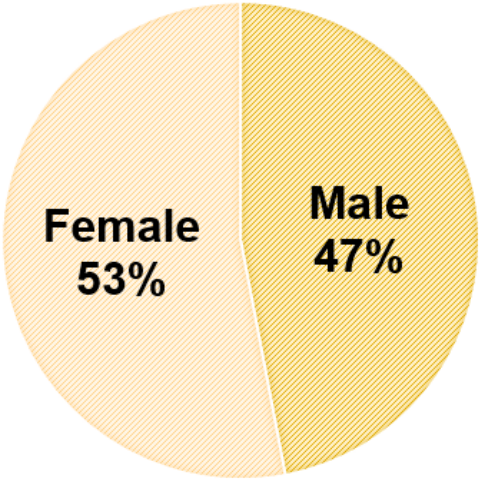
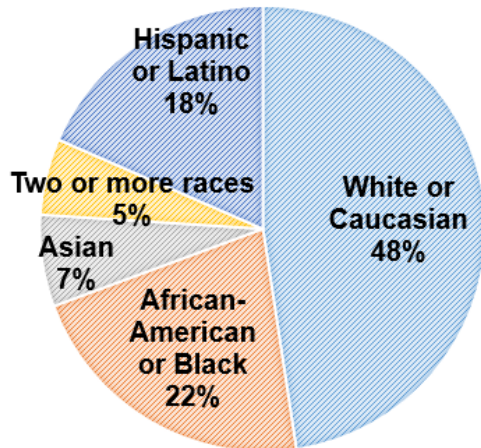


Figure 3. Gender representation of participants.

ACADEMIC RECOVERY TARGET POPULATION



PRESENT STUDY PARTICIPANTS

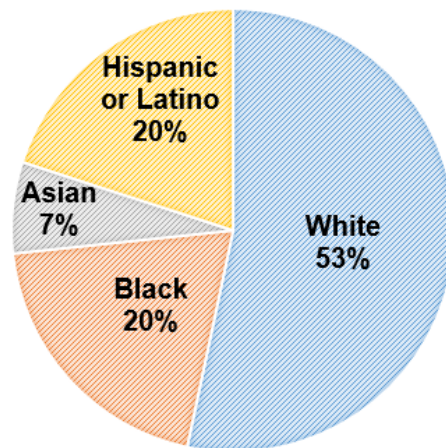


Figure 4. Race and ethnicity representation of participants.

Data Collection

On December 22, 2020, I received IRB approval to begin the study and access participants. By early January 2021, I identified the target population based upon the academic standing report following Fall 2020. I then began the recruitment process through the Branchline academic recovery program workshops. In each workshop, I described the academic recovery options available to students for academic support. Here I introduced the career exploration course as a subset of the UCOL 130 course and introduced the study and its purpose.

For those students who did not attend a workshop but elected to enroll in the Branchline academic recovery program by completing the initial assessment, I filtered those who both selected UCOL 130 as their program option for support and indicated major or career challenges that affected their performance the previous semester. For this population I followed up with email correspondence to outline the purpose of the course as part of a research study and the data collection procedures. The email invitation defined the efforts taken to protect participant confidentiality. In addition, this email outreach included the IRB-approved consent form as an attachment. Upon receiving this invitation either in the workshop or through email outreach, those participants who elected to enroll in the career exploration course contacted me directly so that I could issue the appropriate registration permit.

The 24 students enrolled in the career exploration course met once per week. The group was divided in half with 12 students attending class on Tuesday afternoons from 2:30 – 3:45 PM and the other participants attending on Thursday afternoons at the same time. Both class sessions met virtually through the University-endorsed Zoom platform as recommended during the COVID-19 pandemic. The impacts of the global pandemic produced severe challenges for the present study. I designed the career exploration course to be taught in-person with largely

interactive curricular experiences. The pivot online as the pandemic persisted in Spring 2021 forced a revision of each classroom activity. For the most part, I was able to replicate these activities in the online space. However, the barriers of remote instruction manufactured new challenges to the forming of connections among learners and the instructor. In addition, participants frequently referenced their desire to return to in-person instruction and expressed feelings of isolation born from the persistent physical separation from their peers and University professionals. These challenges were significant in the context of the present study as the participants represented an academically vulnerable population of students in the midst of academic recovery.

On January 26 and January 28, 2021, an external administrator joined me during the first class session to witness my description of the research study and the consent process in detail to all enrolled students. The role of this administrator was to judge whether I had explained clearly and appropriately to all students what participation in the present study would mean.

During the consent process with the external administrator present, I assured all students that the decision to participate or not participate in the present study would in no way influence their grade or completion of the course as part of the academic recovery program. I communicated that all students may participate in the intervention activities, regardless of individual decision to participate in the study, and that there would be no penalty for choosing not to participate including any unfair advantages given to participants. These assurances were explicitly stated to prospective participants by me, and they were also documented in writing as part of the both the consent form, the course syllabus, and in a PowerPoint during the first class session (see Appendix C for the IRB-approved consent form).

Upon collection of signed consent forms from the 15 participants who elected to participate in the study, I conducted the pre-test assessments using the CDSE-SF and AMS-C during the second session on February 2 and 4, 2021. The post-tests for both assessments occurred in the final class meeting on April 6 or 8, 2021. The initial interviews began February 1, 2021 and continued throughout the first three weeks of the course. The final interviews began on March 23, 2021 and continued through the end of the course. Throughout the course's 10-week duration, I collected artifacts produced by each individual participant.

Data Analysis of Research Questions

Research Question 1

How do students on academic probation at Branchline conceptualize the value of participating in a career exploration course as part of their own academic recovery? Response to this first research question began in the recruitment process. In theory, the ability to fill the 24 seats of the career exploration course indicates some perception of value. At the conclusion of the Branchline academic recovery workshops, the course had reached capacity with 24 students electing to enroll in the specific section of UCOL 130 dedicated to career exploration. It was one of only two sections that filled following a decline in the number of students on academic probation due to COVID-19 grade election policies. From my own analytical memo during this first phase, the questions generated from prospective students were geared toward specific course outcomes. Students asked if the course would focus on connecting them to internships and jobs. Upon explaining the focus on career exploration and reflection, not all students chose to pursue this option indicating they placed value on the tangible rewards of securing professional experiences as opposed to the reflection of career goals.

As choosing to enroll in the course did not adequately capture the perception of value, but rather the interest of those in the target population, I collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. A question in both interview protocols focused on the value students placed on such a course. In the initial interview, students were asked: “Do you think a career-focused seminar course is a worthwhile experience at this point in your college career?” and invited to explain. In final interviews, students were asked: “Do you think that a career-focused course was a valuable experience as part of your academic recovery?” and invited to elaborate on how. In early interviews, participants named different reasons they were drawn to the course. In the final interviews, participants connected value to their own perceived outcomes.

I kept track of action steps the participants shared in our conversations or in their written work to see how many were taking steps toward their career goals as a result of the reflection they had done in the course. Several were beginning to focus on internship searches and professional experiences. Two secured new jobs while enrolled in the course. Three participants made the decision to declare a new major once they returned to good academic standing, one of those out of necessity due to the competitive requirements of the first major. Another participant chose to add a second major. The majority of participants, however, reported no change in their major or career path. Instead they reported an increased confidence in their chosen path. I wondered if the lack of any significant change would equate to a perceived lack of value by the end of the course; however, this was not the case.

I analyzed all qualitative data related to perception of value collected through recorded interviews and student artifacts. I uploaded interview transcriptions, recordings, and artifacts into the NVivo software for coding purposes. The NVivo software allowed me to point data to individual cases and visualize specific codes by case during the first phase of analysis. I engaged

in a constant comparative method to compare data using the steps outlined by both Creswell and Poth (2018) and Corbin and Strauss (2008). While the constant comparative method is generally used in grounded theory research, the process by which coding occurs allowed for an in-depth analysis of data among the 15 participants in this case study design.

In the first step, I reviewed all forms of qualitative data by a single participant using an open-coding method of breaking down the data into smaller parts. I assigned codes to individual sections of data. By doing so, I was able to identify specific codes of data that spoke to the perception of value for the individual participants. Following the open-coding process, I engaged in axial coding to compare the smaller codes labeled in open-coding to identify categories linking participants within the larger group. Axial coding allowed me to analyze all categories by making comparisons and identifying connections among individual participants. In some cases, review of codes in this stage resulted in the merging of codes or creation of new codes not previously recognized when coding individual participant data.

In the selective coding stage, I examined the codes produced within axial coding to identify patterns or larger themes. This iterative process allowed for a form of member checking. In both the axial and selective coding stages, I identified codes that were not descriptive enough which required a deeper dive into the data for clarity. From this constant comparative coding method, three larger themes or patterns emerged. These themes included: the opportunity to engage in reflection is both meaningful and necessary, an increase in clarity and/or validation of larger career goals is valuable during academic recovery, and cultivating a sense of community produces a profound impact for students following academic setback.

The excerpts I present here were collected from all forms of qualitative data in the present study: semi-structured interviews, students' artifacts, and initial assessment responses. I

have engaged in minimal editing of qualitative data to remove verbal fillers and correct minor grammatical errors for the ease of readers. This light editorial touch was not meant to jeopardize the students' messages. In any case when such editing would modify the meaning offered by the participant, the language was left intact.

Themes

Theme 1: The Opportunity to Engage in Reflection is Both Meaningful and Necessary.

A recurring conversation topic in interviews and in the class was the benefit of reflecting on larger career goals and purpose. The course was highly reflective with assignments designed to engage students in a series of questions regarding their strengths, their priorities, the reasons they decided to enroll at the University, and their ideal versions of their future selves. One student, Tina, had taken a course at another institution focused on career exploration. Several others had taken a transfer or first-year seminar course that touched on career exploration. However, this course, with its life design and strengths-based focus, asked students to look at career goals and purpose from a new perspective. For Tina, this course was different from her earlier career course because it focused less on concrete professions and more on individual strengths. This shifted her mindset: "It gave me a different perspective on how to look at myself. With naming my strengths, it allowed me to look at myself in a better, and more positive way."

Rather than a course dedicated to career exploration in the past, Pablo had taken a transfer success seminar at his community college. Like Tina's experience, this course focused on specific professions and majors, but our course was meant to examine the future from a broader perspective. As he explained it: "This class has helped a ton. The assignments and activities gave me the room to do more of a deep dive and think a bit further about my future and that experience in and of itself is valuable."

Other students, like Khloe, had never taken a course like this before. For Khloe, the value of the course was largely the new perspective she found through the reflective experiences. She felt that it would be beneficial for all students, not only those experiencing academic difficulty:

Coming in a lot of students choose a major based on what they make or what their parents want them to do. Having a course that puts things into perspective, I think that would really help students with coming to what they truly love to do and not being undeclared sophomore year.

While many of the participants reported that this kind of deep reflection was a new experience, Marigold had long been committed to frequently taking pause to reflect on her progress:

It's always good to evaluate where you are in life, just evaluating where you are, what you're doing, and if you're still happy doing it. You never want to get caught in that fallacy where you've given so much that it's too late to back out. Having this class has made me evaluate myself again but from a different perspective.

Several participants made reference to not having a space to engage in meaningful reflection prior to enrolling in the course. As Fiona explained: "This class was very helpful, because not a lot of people get to sit down and really break down your career and your abilities like I got to do." Others echoed this sentiment, like Baki who was transitioning from one career plan to one he was passionate about:

I feel like it is [valuable] because some students when they get to college they really don't know what they want to do and even when they do decide a major, I feel like they're rushed or pushed into that major.

Baki wasn't alone on this point of feeling "rushed" to make a decision. After transferring to multiple schools and changing between a few different majors, Jonah was focused on his graduation date and finishing college. From the time he enrolled as a declared civil engineering major, though, that focus on getting through the coursework and to graduation as quickly as possible produced a different challenge:

It's that I haven't stopped to take the time to stop and think about [career goals].

Everything just seems so fast paced. It's go-go-go. And that was one of the things I enjoyed about the class, just taking the time to stop and think about the why.

For Ash, the career course was timed perfectly in his first year because of the opportunity it offered to reflect on career goals early in his college career. When asked about the value of the course in the final reflection activity, he answered: "I firmly believe that the career development course is extremely valuable. So many people go into college not knowing what they want to do or they have reservations about their decided major."

Fiona agreed that a career exploration course was valuable as not everyone took the time to reflect on larger goals prior to choosing their career path. When asked the question of value in her post-career assessment reflection, she answered:

I think a lot of kids don't know what they really want to do, and they go into a career thinking they want it but never really sat themselves down to realize they don't. I learned so much about not only my career, but myself and what I bring to the table.

In a class discussion, participants debated whether this course would have been more beneficial before experiencing academic difficulty. For Sofia, the timing of the course may have been more beneficial at an earlier point:

I wish I had this class at the beginning of my college career. That would have been really nice because maybe I would have had time to look at other options. I like how it focuses more on you and helps you determine what you want to do in real life.

By contrast, Ash believed taking the course after a semester of difficulty proved helpful. He talked openly in the class about the pressure to choose a major and define your career goals at a young age. He elaborated on this idea in our initial interview:

For a lot of people, when they go on probation really genuinely don't know what they want to do. If you're struggling that much in school, usually you don't know what you want to do. When I was applying in high school, counselors and teachers were asking 'oh, what are you going to major in, what are you doing to do with your life?' I just turned 18. I shouldn't have that figured out now.

Marigold echoed this idea in our initial interview when she shared the benefit she perceived from the career course and the value she assigned to guidance in the decision-making process:

It's nice to have that guidance into deciding because everybody asks you what you want to do. Taking a career course is nice because instead of [answering] 'what do you want to do?' It's more like 'what do you think about this?'

While the course clearly focused on the career exploration theme, this topic did lend itself to conversations of academic performance as a means to achieving those career goals.

Participants spoke of the benefit of reflecting on academic behaviors and applying strategies from the career course to their other courses and assignments. It was challenging to tease apart the line of where the reflection of benefit was tied to career exploration versus the promotion of academic success as the participants themselves often combined the two in our conversations and

in their artifacts. Jim spoke regularly of the growth he was seeing in himself, both an increase in confidence in his career goals and in improved academic behaviors:

I think the class is very useful for people who just transferred or a freshman because it helps on choosing the right career path for the individual. It also helps in the areas that you struggle with such as time management, self-care and self-reflection.

Trev had recently transferred to Branchline and, like Jim, felt his growth extended into both career and academic progress. In the final interview he shared:

My initial goal was just to do better with managing the course load at the four-year and I've been taking it week by week. I've been taking the W.O.O.P. [course activity] and some of the stuff we practiced in class to study habits. That seems to work. And I feel even better with taking tests. I'm more prepared.

The W.O.O.P. activity Trev spoke about was a goal-setting activity created by Oettingen (2015). The activity asks individuals to identify goals, reflect on why the goal is important, name potential obstacles that will thwart goal completion, and finally, create a plan to circumvent those obstacles as they appear. In class, participants completed the activity creating both career and academic goals. After that class period, Trev and I met to discuss a recent conversation he had with his advisor. The meeting with his advisor proved disappointing. Trev had learned that due to his performance in his final attempt in an accounting course, he was no longer eligible to declare his intended business analytics major. This news, although Trev had anticipated it, was difficult to hear. I asked Trev about his next steps and he told me that he had applied the W.O.O.P. activity to this very challenge. His goal was to complete a degree that would allow him to excel and be taken seriously as an entrepreneur. The “why” was easy to decipher. The news that Trev would not advance to the business analytics major became the obstacle.

To move forward, Trev had defined a series of steps. He had a conversation with his economics professor, a person he had learned a great deal from already, about other majors to consider. Earlier in the semester a conversation in his economics class about cryptocurrency piqued his interest and ever since he had been reading everything he could find about the digital currency. He also reached out to his advisor at his former community college to discuss technical and business associate degrees to keep his options open.

Trev wasn't the only participant to reference the benefit of specific assignments. The career genogram assignment, in particular, resonated. This assignment asked students to trace their family histories looking specifically at the professions relatives had pursued. Reflection questions associated with this assignment were meant to capture early conceptualizations of work. Like all assignments I gave to my class, I produced my own to show as one example. My genogram captured the jobs of my family members, but also the education level each reached. I let participants know that education credentials were not a required component, but many chose to chart this also. This single component produced reflection in participants.

For Jim, he knew that his parents had not attended college, but he had not spent much time thinking about it. In the initial interview following the genogram assignment, he said:

The big reason I liked the career genograms was because I didn't realize, I knew it, but I didn't pay attention, in the past 50 or 60 years there's only been one person from my family that's graduated college. It was my grandfather. To see the life that he lived was, well, a little more comfortable, whereas my parents had to like struggle.

Bertha also reflected on this in our final interview. She referenced the genogram as a favorite assignment in the course because of the reflection it stirred:

I know that a lot of my family didn't go to school, so that puts more into perspective.

Why I'm doing it. That's not the only reason, but it's one of the reasons because [I] want a better life than what others have planned for [me].

In some cases, activities and the reflection they generated impacted motivation. For Sofia, the character strengths activity where participants identified their own strengths was helpful. This activity asked participants to identify their top character strengths and then articulate how they applied to career and academic goals. Sofia commented:

I learned a lot of qualities I never even considered having. People usually focus on their weaknesses. This was eye opening for me. This has made me more motivated and dedicated because I know I have what it takes to finish this career and obtain a job that I want. I will carry these strengths and try to expand them.

Others also appreciated the opportunity to focus on strengths. Such as Jonah, who self-reported that the letter to self assignment provided an opportunity to do something few among us made time to do: "Some of the writing to yourself or making yourself think about your own strengths is interesting. A lot of people choose to not look at themselves as much as possible. So I think encouraging that is good."

Others commented on the benefit of specific activities for how they encouraged prioritization of important values, like Charlie, who was choosing to focus on the things that made her happy after a difficult time the previous semester: "It helps me to focus on what I know I need to do in order to be happy one day and that helps me out a lot to prioritize what I should be doing."

These moments of reflection were also highlighted for the personal improvement they prompted. C.C. credited the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) we took as a class for his renewed self-awareness:

I think that taking my LASSI assignment was an important step in starting to address my problems. It gave me insight as to what I was good at, and what I really needed help with. I got very low MOT, TMT, and UAR scores. This means that I have low motivation, poor time management and struggle to use academic resources. Knowing that this was what I needed to improve on was a great initial step in beginning to succeed.

For Ash, the time management activities participants did outside of class proved useful. These activities were designed to empower participants to take control of their time starting first with an honest reflection of where they were choosing to spend their time and the steps they could take to design the hours they had each week to ensure they were giving their time to priorities that were meaningful. This was particularly enlightening for Ash:

The activity, "Where does your time go," was very eye opening in terms of how I genuinely spend my time every week. Seeing it in proportion to all my other daily and weekly activities have shown me that I need to significantly reduce my social media, self-care, and TV time. Weekly I spend around 50 combined hours on those categories, time that could go to benefit other more important areas of my life.

The time management activities were also helpful to Pablo, who spoke often about his own growth. Pablo produced high quality work, but often worried that his work wasn't "good enough." He was often his harshest critic and put work off to avoid feelings of self-doubt when he did produce. In our final interview, Pablo told me:

Time is the one resource that's needed to get assignments done and make sure I've done everything I can to make them the best I can. I've always known this was important, but thinking about my future and having all these questions thrown at me by you and through the assignments, it's had me think more about what I could do better to reach my goals.

Moments of growth were born from the reflection of the participants, which heightened the value they placed on the course and activities. Pablo felt he had grown by answering critical questions in a space where he felt he could think "freely". In his personal charter, he shared that his feelings had "become stronger, for the better. Unlike any other class, this one has taken the time to create a space for me to think freely, and without much pressure, about my future and has allowed me to confront those [feelings]." Ash echoed this when he told me in his post-career assessment reflection that he thought it was "because [of] the open concept structure of the course, [it] lifted a lot of stress which allowed more exploration and time to put in to producing quality work."

Of significance, as participants referenced the benefit of reflection in our course, they spoke from a place of hope and optimism, a theme I will explore further in response to Research Question 4. Their comments showed renewed confidence and a sense of pride as they progressed to the end of the course. Like Sofia, who shared a change from her previous semester to the point when we met for her final interview:

Sometimes if you're doing bad on a course it's because you're not motivated to do the work or if you know that you're failing, you might as well fail, which is what happened to me last semester with org chem. I was already doing so badly in that course that I just gave up. But now, taking this course, I know what I can do to be better. I know what times I'm more productive throughout the day.

Later in response to a question of value on her post-career assessment reflection, Sofia elaborated to share her increased confidence and the change she saw as she completed the CDSE-SF a second time:

With my recent results I noticed that I'm more confident. I'm not as insecure as when I started this semester. By doing all the activities these past few months from learning more about myself to utilizing campus resources, I know that I have the necessary tools to be a better person.

Some, like C.C., still felt frustrated that they had landed in a position to need an academic success course. Yet even these participants could describe their own growth. In his personal charter, C.C. said:

The fact that I needed to take any kind of academic success course is personally upsetting to me. However, the academic success class that I did take will probably be one of the most important experiences that I will have. I look forward to getting better at college even after I leave this class, and, of course, graduating and getting a job with my major.

The participants demonstrated how they were applying those lessons, like Baki, who had used his study halls with the football team to stay ahead. He told me: "I learned that I can't keep being lazy. I stopped being lazy and became a better student by getting ahead and doing more work ahead time and on time." Like Baki, Trev was also using his time wisely, or as he put it on his personal charter: "Realizing I am a morning person and scheduling more of my classes in the morning. It helps because I am up and fresh and I can get it out of the way."

They made big changes in their lives, like declaring new majors (Khloe, Trev, and Bri) and applying for new jobs (Tina and C.C.) while enrolled in the course. They made smaller changes like Marigold who told me she was making a small daily change that proved powerful:

I cleaned my room. I have found that the state of my room is a direct representation of how my life is going. If my room is a mess, I feel like a mess. In general, this is what I start with when I need to gain more control of my life.

Sofia was also practicing a small daily change that produced a profound impact. She was working on saying the word “no” more often to family and friends in an effort of protecting her time. This was challenging. As she told me, “many times just to please someone I've said yes because they're friends or family and you feel like you owe it to them.” Sofia was making the effort to prioritize her time for actions that aligned with her academic and career goals.

Bri shared in personal charter the reflective opportunities she was taking on her own outside of our class. She said: “I had retaken the 16 personalities test when making the resume to see if anything changed about myself. I had learned something about me that I never really took into consideration. I learned that I can be spontaneous but rational and practical at the same time.”

I never did get a chance to follow up with Bri on which “16 personalities test” she had taken, but it was not an activity we did in our class. Bri had taken it upon herself to engage in the activity to learn more about herself. The benefit of reflection was referenced frequently by participants. All fifteen participants made reference or alluded to the understanding that the opportunity to engage in reflection was both meaningful and necessary. From that reflection emerged a second theme related to value. Participants self-reported that they chose to enroll in the career exploration course for different reasons. Most had declared majors, some were open to considering alternatives or were in transition between programs, and others were truly undecided. Their comments over the semester through interviews and artifacts indicated that

many did experience a progression toward clarity, or at least confirmation that they were moving in the right direction.

Theme 2: An Increase in Clarity and/or Validation of Larger Career Goals is Valuable During Academic Recovery.

Research confirms that career indecision is a normal experience for college students (Germeijs & Verschueren; 2007; Osipow, 1999). In the present study, even those who indicated more confidence in their chosen major and career path in the beginning were open to considering alternative paths. In some cases, that indecision, to varying degrees, influenced the decision to enroll in the career exploration course. It did for Jim, who understood that uncertainty was a common experience: “I think most students come from high school or community college and think they know what they want to do. This class is pretty helpful for actually deciding on what you want to do.”

Some participants, like Charlie, had an idea of what they wanted to do, but were seeking more clarity on the direction they could take. As she explained it:

I’ve thought about social work and psychology as well. I think my purpose in life is to help people. This is the reason I am excited about this course. I will be able to get a better grasp on how I will be able to help people.

The concept of purpose was a recurring discussion point in our class. Participants discussed both with each other during class time and in their written reflection outside of class the importance of affirming that they had selected a career path that aligned with their strengths and values. Most participants, but not all, arrived at that validation. Baki, for instance, described his reaffirmed goals in his post-career assessment reflection:

I trust myself to become an unstoppable force and no one can stop me. I'm going to do what I love to do when I graduate. I feel more confident in being a teacher. I'm way more confident based off my research.

Marigold also confirmed that her goal of becoming a PA was the right fit. She told me, "I am confident in my current life plans, and I know what the next 5 years of my life are going to look like." I reminded Marigold in our final interview that she had already been doing her own research prior to enrolling in our course. She admitted this was true, but insisted that the activities had proven valuable for the renewed sense of confidence she gained as we ended the course:

I really want to do the PA thing. I know I'll be pretty happy if and when I become one. It has helped because you start questioning maybe I should do this other thing and there is that slight hesitancy, but [the odyssey plan] reaffirmed that I'm going down the path that I want to.

As she continued to describe her experience in the class, Marigold elaborated on the increased confidence from the pre-/ to post-CDSE-SF as further proof of what she had gained: "Looking back on my initial assessment, I can tell that I've become more confident in my abilities. My first assessment had a lot of 3 & 4's, now I have more 5's comparatively." She wasn't alone in this. Several participants referenced the increased confidence they felt by the end of the course.

Jim described the self-doubt he had been feeling as we started the semester. He had begun questioning whether he wanted to continue at Branchline. He wrote in his post-career assessment reflection "At the beginning of the semester I was honestly done with school and was ready to drop but thankfully I stuck it out and want to continue to finish out my degree." He also

shared these doubts in our initial interview, telling me: “I’ve been in a lot of conflict with myself over if I want to be at [Branchline], if I actually wanted to go to college.” In our final interview I asked him how he was feeling about continuing his degree, and he echoed his comments in the post-reflection, saying:

I know this class helped me in quite a few ways. It helped me focus on if civil engineering was actually the right thing. It also made me realize why I wanted to be here in the first place. It made me realize why I’m here.

Jim talked about the growth he saw in himself. In his personal charter, Jim said “I think from the start of the class till now I have grown as a person and really have tried to figure out what is most important to me, so pretty much get my priorities straight.”

Other participants referenced the increased clarity they felt as the class ended. Bri started the course as an environmental science major. She had considered two other majors since enrolling in college in Fall 2020. By the end of our course, Bri had transitioned to a new major. While this was the fourth major she had explored in her first year of college, it was one she had put significant thought into and felt confident about moving forward. In her post-career assessment reflection, she said:

I am more confident in my career goals. For the past year, I've been very wishy-washy on what I want to do mainly because of people wanting to control what I want to do. Once I started thinking about myself and not listening to others, I have explored and grown a lot within the last few weeks. I kind of feel like I've got more of a path. I feel like I've got a little more clarity.

Fiona also saw her confidence grow in the course. She started as a communications major, and by April in our final interview she had narrowed her focus and had begun exploring

specific industries where she aspired to work in public relations. In response to the question of whether she saw a change in her mindset as part of the post-assessment reflection, she wrote:

What changed was my confidence. I had little confidence about my career coming into this class. I felt bad because I didn't know what fit me well, and what I would be good at. Now that I went through the steps, I am confident now that this will fit me, and I will be good at doing it.

Trev had hit a substantial setback during the course when he learned he would not advance into his chosen major. Despite that obstacle, by the end of the class he reported increased confidence and enthusiasm for new opportunities:

I am more confident and excited. I think I was focused on others being on track with their careers than myself. I am seeing the effects of not passing a class and the cost it holds on my goals and being honest with my self makes all the difference.

For C.C., the recent academic difficulty had been a substantial setback. He had done well in high school and was surprised to find himself in a situation where he needed additional support. While his major and career goals did not change, C.C. reported in his post-career assessment reflection increased confidence:

I felt I had a lot more confidence with doing academics in general. When I took my first assessment, I did not feel very confident with my ability to navigate advising and requesting help. Now I think I feel more comfortable doing so and reaching out for help.

For some, the increase in confidence produced a more positive outlook. Hope and optimism was prevalent in the early stages of the course. I wondered if it would diminish over time as the semester progressed and workloads increased, but from participant comments, it was clear that the optimism had been sustained. Ash, who was one of the most vocal during class

discussions about the emotional burden of the academic probation label, wrote about his positive outlook in the post-career assessment:

What surprised me about my most recent results [on the] career assessment survey was that I had a lot more fives (complete confidence). I saw a lot of positive change in my responses the second time. Almost all of my answers had improve. By exploring other career options and our class discussions I have a better idea for my future. I have a more positive outlook. I have discovered I am more firm in my plans and future goals.

Pablo had hoped to finish our course with confirmation that he had chosen his exercise science major wisely over the more enjoyable artistic endeavors, but he did not reach that conclusion. However, in our final interview, Pablo told me he was not ready to give up on exercise science. While he was not enjoying the pre-kinesiology courses required to declare the major officially, when we looked at the course descriptions for the major courses he hoped to gain access to in the future, he was more excited. In his post-career assessment reflection, Pablo wrote:

I am happy to see that I saw some changes, and I certainly feel more confident in the career path I am headed for. I hope my assessment results reflect that but regardless I do feel as though my feelings on my path are now mostly positive and optimistic.

Fiona had started the semester feeling frustrated about her recent academic difficulty. As her confidence in her chosen major and career path grew, her outlook grew more hopeful overall. In the personal charter, Fiona wrote:

I used to beat myself down because I didn't know where I fit in this world, but I learned that I am strong and that this field is right up my alley. I am a very social person, and

being in communications literally means to communicate with others. I learned that I do not need to be so hard on myself because it WILL work out.

Despite increases in confidence, some participants expressed both enthusiasm for their futures and some anxiety about achieving their goals. As Jonah put it:

I'm more confident in my goals. I feel that through having to define them I've cemented them to myself. But it's made me more nervous. I feel that now that I know it's something I definitely want I have something to lose.

Others, like Khloe, echoed this sentiment. Khloe wrote in her personal charter: "The activities we did in and out of class have made realize what I want to do. I'm nervous, but I'm ready for whatever comes." A statement that likely would have resonated with Sofia who despite feeling nervous for the future, had already seen positive outcomes in her academic career. In her personal charter, she wrote:

I am excited and nervous because now I know what I want to work toward. My lack of motivation due to bad grades is now starting to go because I see the results of all the work I'm putting into [it].

For Tina, the reflective activities helped to confirm she was moving in the right direction. She reported increased confidence in her career plans. Of significance, Tina took action while enrolled in the course and successfully secured a position in her chosen field. In our final interview, she told me:

It gave me the confidence to know I can do things the way I want to do. Honestly, I applied to my job this semester in this course, so there are things that really do help motivate. A lot of those assignments make you think in a different way. And that's where motivation comes from.

The job was a Certified Behavior Technician, which Tina described as a “stepping stone to [her] goal.” She began training for this new role toward the end of the class. It was a substantial time commitment as training required many hours of observations and meeting with clients, but it was work that Tina was excited to do, which made the time well worth it.

Not every participant indicated an increase in clarity or validation. Midway through the semester, Charlie faced the traumatic experience of losing a close friend. It was sudden and devastating, and understandably Charlie took some time away from our course. I learned of the event following outreach to Charlie after her second consecutive absence. She responded to let me know, and we developed a plan for her to catch back up on assignments, which she did for the most part. She missed a total of three classes, or 30% of the course but managed to produce the majority of work completed outside of the class. We did attempt to schedule a final interview, and discussed multiple dates to schedule it, but ultimately I was unable to connect with Charlie for her final interview. In her post-career assessment reflection, she wrote:

I am hopeful I will make it to the profession I want to be a part of. I feel more confident about my career results. I am scared for the road that is in front of me, because it will be long and very difficult. I am nervous that I will mess up, or even change my career path. Hopefully if I make errors, it won't be catastrophic. I am worried about what my family will think about me.

She expressed appreciation for the course. In her personal charter, she elaborated on what she was focusing on and what she had learned:

I have learned that I am capable of doing whatever makes me the happiest. I learned that I can be who I want to be, and not let anyone else change this. I feel good about connecting to myself on this personal level.

Bertha also completed the course without defining clear goals for her future. She attended nearly every class and engaged fully in the activities, often contributing to the conversation in productive ways. In the end, while she didn't reach the point of clarity, she self-reported being comfortable with lack of clarity for now. In her post-career assessment reflection, Bertha shared:

My most recent assessment I was definitely more confident than the first time. I am comfortable with not knowing exactly where I want to go with my college/career path and that is okay.

In the same reflection, Bertha responded to the question of what she learned about herself in the course with more detail. She wrote:

To smile even when times may make you want to break down. It is okay to cry sometimes we need it, but if I smile it is automatically stimulating my mind to think I'm happy. Which I am most of the time, I just mean when I have those days of wanting to give up.

This indicates that there may have been experiences external to the course that produced additional pressure for Bertha. In the final interview, she referenced the heavy work schedule she was facing in the pandemic and difficulty in a class she had been excited about at the start of the semester called "Why God Lies" that had turned out not to be what she had expected. She shared no additional details with me, but promised to stay in touch to continue the career conversation after the class ended.

For 12 of the 15 participants, an increase in clarity and/or validation of larger career goals proved valuable during academic recovery. This theme appeared frequently in the class discussions, leading to the final theme, which emerged in regards to course value that I had not anticipated, a sense of community among the participants in the study and inside the course.

***Theme 3: Cultivating a Sense of Community Produces a Profound Impact for Students
Following Academic Setback.***

In our third class meeting, Ash unmuted and asked if he could raise a question to the group. I gave him the floor. In my analytic memo from that day (dated February 16, 2021), I wrote that his question was phrased as “Has anyone else not told their parents they’re on academic probation?” The response, initially, was a series of head nods as cameras in our virtual class began turning on. In a typical class period before this one, an average of six of the 12 students in each smaller section turned their cameras on during class. The rest often used the chat function to engage. After Ash asked this question, all but two students turned on their cameras. He elaborated, sharing that he did not want to disappoint his parents and explained that each of his siblings had finished college with various levels of academic recognition. One by one, students began responding. In my memo, I wrote: “This is the first time the class has seen Khloe. I’ve seen Khloe in our interview, but her camera is almost always off in class. Now it is on and she’s speaking. A lot.”

Khloe told the group that she was embarrassed by her grades from the previous semester. She had avoided showing them to her family. Tina shared her frustration that being on probation might delay her graduation. Jonah and another student nodded along in understanding. At this point, I asked the class how they felt as they were starting the semester. This prompted a series of responses, both vocally and in the chat function of Zoom. The quote I captured in the memo was from Khloe: “Nobody understands what it feels like to be one mistake away from getting kicked out of school.” Head nods all around. Khloe was not actually at risk of suspension having returned to good standing by way of the COVID-19 grading policies, but she had narrowly

missed academic probation, and it had made an impact. I asked the class for their permission to describe their conversation here, and they agreed.

Ash's comment, and the discussion it prompted, shifted the dynamic of our course in a positive way. Each class after, we carved out a few minutes at the start or end of class to check in. The students shared their successes, their frustrations, and their fears. These were some of the most candid conversations with students in my career. Unsurprisingly, the third theme that emerged in the data indicated that, in part, the value of the course came from the sense of community among classmates.

For Tina, it was helpful to be enrolled in a class focused on career exploration because, as she assumed, it meant she was spending time with other students who were also unsure of their larger career goals. In our final interview, she elaborated:

My brothers, they've known since day one what they wanted to do. They went to college for that. My oldest brother is doing exactly what he went to school for and he's always known. I love that. I'm not jealous, I'm proud of him, but there are people who know and then there are people who don't. It's nice to be surrounded by more people who feel that same way or just want to test a bunch of different things.

Ash had talked in our initial interview about the pressure placed on college students to know what they wanted to do in the first year. He continued that discussion in our final interview, but noted the benefit of being in the career exploration course with others:

A lot of people don't understand that when you're a college student you really don't know what you want to do. It seems like everybody is on track except for you. That's why I liked taking this course with other people who are in the same boat as me because they could relate and I could talk about it openly without embarrassing myself. I think

that when you're truly at such a low point, being around other people who are in the same situation is awesome because you encourage each other.

I asked Ash to elaborate and clarify if the benefit of being in the course was tied to being around others who were also attempting to define their career goals or was it more about being around others who were also experiencing academic difficulty. He responded:

I talked a lot more in this class than I did in any of my other classes. And that contribution, seeing how I, well everybody, contributed in our class. Everyone genuinely liked to talk in our class. Everybody knows about academic probation and the experience. It's nice to be in the situation with at least other people.

This theme continued in conversations with other participants and in their written work. Sofia referenced the benefit of learning "certain tricks from our classmates that helped them study and you know, just be better." Bri wrote in her personal charter that while in the course she "didn't feel as alone going into this." Khloe had expressed similar sentiments in class, but she elaborated in her final interview:

You have these discussions in class, a lot of people feel more comfortable coming and talking because I think sometimes it can be a little bit intimidating going to an advisor.

This class has helped me with realizing I'm not the only one going through this and there are students that are also struggling and it's ok to talk to someone about it.

For Jonah, the class was helpful even if he felt that its placement belonged prior to experiencing academic difficulty. He noted the benefit of having other people to share the experience with in our final interview:

I think that this class still has a lot value after the fact also, just to have a safe space to vent and have other people relate and know I'm not alone going through struggles and being able to just talk openly about the stuff that bothers you.

That term "safe space" was mentioned again, this time by C.C. He wrote in his personal charter: "I think just having a safe space and group of people to inspire me to do more was what encouraged me to work harder." In our final interview, when I asked C.C. about his thoughts on the value of a career course as part of academic recovery, he named the group support as the most beneficial: "I think the best thing was just having the group because campus is dead and it's kind of hard to find that group. And that was a major component of it. And then just discussing difficulties in school."

The reference to campus spoke to the impact of COVID-19. Nearly all classes in Spring 2021 remained online, meaning most, but not all, students in the career exploration course were home. C.C. had hoped to spend his first-year on campus and had requested housing in a residential hall before enrolling in the fall. When the decision to move classes online was made, he and his family decided he would stay home to save money. C.C. was disappointed that his first year of college wouldn't be a traditional one. He wrote about this in his life design assessment. The participants could choose to focus on specific areas of life to design. C.C. chose college. He wrote:

As a student studying during the COVID-19 pandemic, I am not nearly living anything like what I thought the "4-Year College Experience" would be like. I feel like there is a lack of progress being made, especially in terms of getting to know people. I feel that I am missing out on important interactions with teachers, staff and even students who could have guided or helped me in the future.

It is impossible to know at this point whether the sense of community would have been as profound in a more traditional semester. As it stood, the students were enrolled in my course one year after the pandemic unraveled their college experience with the abrupt transition of classes and day-to-day events from in-person to online. Frequently the class discussion focused on the difficulty of online learning. More often than not, the theme of those conversations was the isolation of taking classes online. The students talked freely about their challenges of getting to know their classmates and forming study groups, difficulty connecting with faculty, and the feeling of missing the social nature of being in college. It is possible that these feelings played a significant part in the community building that happened in the career exploration course. The conversations were the most open and honest of any class I have taught. I cannot say with certainty whether this stemmed from the impact of the pandemic. Did our virtual classroom become a “safe space” to build community where there was a lack of it elsewhere? Or as Tina put it when describing the benefit of our synchronous class sessions: “It gives you more people to see and meet and talk to outside of the people in your household.”

Is it possible that the nature of the course with its focus on career goals encouraged community building through highly reflective questions? Perhaps, but again, it is impossible to know for certain as our career exploration course did not occur in a vacuum. A future study may explore the sense of community in small groups of students experiencing academic difficulty in more traditional term. For the present study, cultivating a sense of community produced a profound impact for students following academic setback.

That is not to say there was no critical feedback of the career exploration course. In his post-career assessment reflection, Jonah suggested future career courses focus on specific disciplines and build off work done in secondary education. He said:

I believe that a career development course would be very valuable but it needs to build off of work done in high school. You could have a more general one in high school and then more focused career development courses in college (stem, lit, arts, etc.).

For Tina, the course was valuable, but still it added an additional course to her busy schedule, and it was an extra class that would not meet a graduation requirement. In the final interview she elaborated when she told me:

Everything we're learning in here is valuable. I just think the class should count toward the actual major. At the end of the day I'm still putting in the work. I know I ended up in this class because I didn't do well last semester. However, I'm still working really hard to turn that around. I'm in this class to rebuild my GPA, but I feel like students should get credit toward their actual major.

Then there are the other students, Charlie, Bertha, and Pablo, who indicated that the course was valuable, but the outcome did not meet their expectations as they were no closer to determining their career goals. Upon registering for the career exploration course, Charlie had called her mom to enthusiastically tell her about our course and her hope that she would be more certain by the end of it. In the end, she had not found clarity in her goal and was concerned for what her family would think of her. Not one of these three indicated that the outcome negated any perceived value, but it does demonstrate that the experiences were not the same for all. I will explore those experiences in the discussion of Research Question 4.

Research Question 2

To what extent does the career exploration course influence the career self-efficacy of those students on academic probation at Branchline? To determine the impact of the course on the career self-efficacy of students, I administered the CDSE-SF as a pre-test during the second

meeting of the course. In the final class period, I conducted the post-assessment CDSE-SF to assess the change in career self-efficacy.

I used a paired t-test calculation to compare the significance of difference in mean scores between the pre-/ and post-tests in the effort of eliminating researcher bias. The CDSE-SF measures the five competencies defined by Crites' (1961; 1973) career maturity model: occupation information, goal selection, planning, problem solving, and self-appraisal. As such, I conducted a t-test calculation to compare the scores of the pre- and post-tests for each of the five career competencies.

Occupational information refers to an individual's knowledge or capability to acquire information about specific vocations (Crites, 1961). The mean for pre-test scores for participants was 3.84 ($M = 3.84$; $SD = 0.61$). Comparatively, the post-test score mean was 4.10 ($M = 4.10$; $SD = 0.60$). The data indicates a statistically significant change from the pre-/ to post-test in this competency ($t(14) = -1.90$, $p < .10$). Therefore, these results indicated an increase in the occupational information as part of the career self-efficacy for the participants in the study.

Goal selection refers to an individual's ability to define career goals and ultimately choose a vocation (Crites, 1961). In this competency, the mean for pre-test scores for participants was 3.50 ($M = 3.50$; $SD = 0.79$). The post-test score mean was 3.90 ($M = 3.90$; $SD = 0.67$). The data indicates a statistically significant change from the pre-/ to post-test ($t(14) = -1.84$, $p < .10$). Therefore, these results indicated an increase in the goal selection competency as part of career self-efficacy for the participants in the study.

The planning competency refers to an individual's ability to make long-term plans regarding their own career development (Crites, 1961). The mean for pre-test scores for participants was 3.45 ($M = 3.45$; $SD = 0.75$). The post-test score mean was 3.89 ($M = 3.89$, $SD =$

0.64). This data is an indication of a statistically significant change from the pre-/ to post-test ($t(14) = -2.48, p < .05$). Therefore, these results indicated a significant increase in the planning competency as part of career self-efficacy for the participants in the study.

The problem solving competency refers to an individual's ability to articulate clear steps to circumventing challenges and taking action toward career goals (Crites, 1961). In this competency, the mean for pre-test scores for participants was 3.25 ($M = 3.25; SD = 0.80$). The post-test score mean was 3.68 ($M = 3.68; SD = 0.71$). The data indicates a statistically significant change from the pre-/ to post-test ($t(14) = -2.04, p = .05$). Therefore, these results indicated a significant increase in the problem solving competency as part of career self-efficacy for the participants in the study.

The final competency in Crites (1961) career maturity theory and measure on the CDSE-SE is self-appraisal. Self-appraisal refers to an individual's self-awareness, specifically as it relates to career decision-making. The mean for pre-test scores for participants was 3.70 ($M = 3.70; SD = 0.51$). The post-test score mean was 4.20 ($M = 4.20, SD = 0.40$). This data is an indication of a statistically significant change from the pre-/ to post-test ($t(14) = -4.40, p < .01$). Therefore, these results indicated a significant increase in the planning competency as part of career self-efficacy for the participants in the study.

The results indicated that participants experienced an increase in all five competencies of career self-efficacy at the conclusion of the course. However, there was a significant increase in the competencies of planning ($p = .02$), problem-solving ($p = .05$) and self-appraisal ($p = .0005$). Table 5 captures the pre-/ post-test CDSE-SF assessment data by competency.

Table 5

Pre-/Post CDSE-SF Assessment Data

Competency	Assessment	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P</i>
Occupational information	Pre	3.84	0.61	14	-1.90	0.07
	Post	4.10	0.60			
Goal selection	Pre	3.50	0.79	14	-1.84	0.08
	Post	3.90	0.67			
Planning	Pre	3.45	0.75	14	-2.48	0.02
	Post	3.89	0.64			
Problem-solving	Pre	3.25	0.80	14	-2.04	0.05
	Post	3.68	0.71			
Self-appraisal	Pre	3.70	0.51	14	-4.40	0.0005
	Post	4.2	0.40			

Note. Career Decision Self-Efficacy Short Form (CDSE-SF) (Betz et al., 2005).

Research Question 3

To what extent does the career exploration course influence the academic motivation of those students on academic probation at Branchline? The act of measuring the academic motivation of this population proved difficult. In order to track the change in motivation, I administered the AMS-C as a pre-test during the second meeting of the course. Then in the final class period, I conducted the post-assessment AMS-C to assess the change in academic motivation. However, the timing of the assessments introduced a new challenge.

The students in the career course self-reported strong motivation in the early class periods. Additionally, the themes of hope and optimism were prevalent in artifacts produced early in the course. Similar to Smith's (2004) findings, the students in the present study entered the course with defined learning goals and high expectations for their performance. These expectations were captured in the strong pre-test AMS-C results. However, as others (Brahm et al., 2017; Corpus et al., 2020, Liu et al, 2021) have demonstrated, the academic motivation of college students tends to diminish throughout the first year of enrollment. The results of the present study are consistent with those findings with AMS-C scores trending downward in the post-test results.

The inflated expectations at the beginning of an academic term that produces strong motivation in the early weeks of course work but ultimately results in the decline of academic motivation as the term progresses are documented in expectancy-value theory research (Kosovich et al., 2017; Perez et al., 2014). Anecdotal feedback with participants in the career course indicated that the students in the present study experienced a decline in motivation as the semester progressed due to the natural increase in rigor and workload. In some cases, students shared that early setbacks or low grades in the early weeks of the semester decreased their

motivation. Given that the post-test assessment was completed in the final class period for our 10-week course on either April 6th or 8th, 2021, participants completed the post-test at a time in the term in which they self-reported increases in their stress levels and workload. In each smaller section of the course, students indicated that with less than a month to go in their other courses, they were experiencing significant pressure to complete remaining assignments, prepare for final exams, and in some cases, catch up on missing work. The participants commiserated these feelings of being overwhelmed just before they completed the post-test AMS-C. Their disclosed motivational decline is represented in the post-test scores.

These self-reported responses align with the findings of Liu et al. (2021) of contingent self-worth (CSW) in college students, or the experience of assigning self-worth based on perceived successes or failures. There are many predictive factors, CSW being one of them, which can influence motivation, factors that I do not attempt to explore here. This study sought to explore the impact of the career exploration course on academic motivation rather than attempt to understand the causality of factors to diminished motivation. Although, this is a topic worthy of exploration in future studies.

In the present study, I conducted the pre-/ post-test AMS-C assessments and used a paired t-test to compare the significance of difference in mean scores in the effort of eliminating researcher bias. The AMS-C measures seven different types of academic motivation, three constructs of intrinsic motivation (toward accomplishment, to experience stimulation, and to know), three constructs of extrinsic motivation (external regulation, introjected, and identified) and amotivation using a seven-point scale (Deci & Ryan, 2000). I conducted a t-test calculation to compare the scores of the pre-/ and post-tests for each of the seven motivational constructs.

While there is a change in mean scores, the t-test results indicate that the change is not statistically significant overall.

Extrinsic motivation, external regulation is the least autonomous of all the extrinsic motivation constructs. It represents motivation based upon external rewards and/or avoidance of negative consequences (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The mean for pre-test scores for participants was 5.78 ($M = 5.78$; $SD = 1.02$). By contrast, the post-test score mean was 5.41 ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.10$). The data indicates that there is not a statistically significant difference from the pre-/ to post-test in this motivational construct ($t(14) = 1.11$, $p > .10$). These results indicated a decrease in the extrinsic motivation, external regulation construct as part of academic motivation based on mean scores, although the t-test confirms that the findings were not statistically significant ($p = 0.28$).

Extrinsic motivation, introjected represents motivation that is tied to self-worth. This form of extrinsic motivation results in individuals taking action due to the pressure to improve or repair self-esteem. Despite the focus on self-esteem and self-worth, this construct is both internal and external in that the perception of others is a factor. As such, it is a slightly more autonomous form of extrinsic motivation compared to external regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The mean for pre-test scores for participants was 5.53 ($M = 5.53$; $SD = 1.09$). The post-test score mean was 5.18 ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.12$). The data indicates that there is not a statistically significant difference from the pre-/ to post-test in this motivational construct ($t(14) = 1.06$, $p > .10$). These results indicated a decrease in the extrinsic motivation, introjected construct as part of academic motivation based upon mean scores, although the t-test confirms that the findings were not statistically significant ($p = 0.30$).

Finally, extrinsic motivation, identified is born from an individual identification of a specific behavior as important or valuable to their own goals. This is the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The mean for pre-test scores for participants was 6.10 ($M = 6.10$; $SD = 0.61$). The post-test score mean was 5.48 ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 0.80$). The data indicates that there is a statistically significant difference from the pre/- to post-test in this motivational construct ($t(14) = 2.34$, $p < .05$). These results indicated a decrease in the extrinsic motivation, identified construct as part of academic motivation based upon mean scores. The t-test indicated that these results are statistically significant ($p = 0.03$).

Transitioning to intrinsic motivation, the pre-test scores for the three constructs were considerably lower than those pre-test scores for extrinsic motivation. The first construct, intrinsic motivation, toward accomplishment, speaks to the engagement in an activity for the enjoyment of attempting to excel or accomplish a goal (Barkoukis et al., 2008). The mean for pre-test scores for participants was 4.53 ($M = 4.53$; $SD = 1.20$). The post-test score mean was 4.21 ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.07$). The data indicates that there is not a statistical difference from the pre-/ to post-test in the this motivational construct ($t(14) = 0.88$, $p > .10$). These results indicated a decrease in the intrinsic motivation, toward accomplishment construct as part of academic motivation based upon mean scores, although the t-test confirms that the findings are not statistically significant ($p = 0.39$).

Further up on the autonomous motivation scale is intrinsic motivation, to experience stimulation. This construct refers to an individual's engagement in a specific action for the exciting or fun experience it offers (Vallerand et al. 1992). The mean for pre-test scores for participants was 3.51 ($M = 3.51$; $SD = 1.47$). The post-test score mean was slightly higher at 3.60 ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.38$). The data indicates that there is not a statistically significant difference

from the pre-/ to post-test in this motivational construct ($t(14) = -0.24, p > .10$). These results indicated an increase in the intrinsic motivation, experiencing stimulation construct as part of academic motivation based upon mean scores, although the t-test confirms that the findings were not statistically significant ($p = 0.81$).

The final intrinsic motivation construct is the most autonomous on the scale. This is the intrinsic motivation, to know. This construct refers an individual's decision to take action for the satisfaction of knowledge, learning, and intellectual growth (Vallerand et al., 1992, 1993). The mean for pre-test scores for participants was 4.98 ($M = 4.98; SD = 1.02$). The post-test score mean was 4.95 ($M = 4.95; SD = 0.73$). The data indicates that there is not a statistically significant difference from the pre-/ to post-test in this motivational construct ($t(14) = 0.15, p > .10$). These results indicated a decrease in the intrinsic motivation, to know, construct as part of academic motivation based upon mean scores, although the t-test confirms that the findings were not statistically significant ($p = 0.88$).

The seventh construct measured by the AMS-C is amotivation, or the lack of motivation to engage in an activity due to a lack of value or perceived competence or the assumption that engaging in the activity will not result in the desired effect (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The mean for pre-test scores for participants was 1.88 ($M = 1.88; SD = 0.85$). The post-test score mean was slightly higher at 2.21 ($M = 2.21, SD = 1.00$). The data indicates that there is not a statistically significant difference from the pre-/ to post-test in this motivational construct ($t(14) = -1.46, p > .10$). These results indicated an increase in the amotivation construct as part of academic motivation based upon mean scores, although the t-test confirms that the findings were not statistically significant ($p = 0.16$).

The results indicated that participants experienced a decrease in five constructs of academic motivation (extrinsic motivation: external regulation, identified, and introjected; intrinsic motivation: toward accomplishment, and to know) based upon mean scores alone. The mean scores do indicate a slight increase in the intrinsic motivation, to experience stimulation. Yet, the mean scores also indicate an increase in amotivation. However, the paired t-test calculation confirms that these findings are not statistically significant overall. Only the decrease in external motivation, identified proved to be statistically significant per the t-test calculation. Table 6 captures the pre-/ post-test AMS-C assessment data by construct for all 15 participants.

Upon closer examination, class attendance may have contributed to the change in the academic motivation of participants in the study. Of the 15, seven students missed no more than a single class period (10% or less of the course). These seven students showed increases in the mean scores of both extrinsic motivation (external regulation and introjected) and intrinsic motivation (to know and experience stimulation). By contrast, the remaining eight students who missed 2-3 class periods (20% - 30% of the course) demonstrated decline in all six intrinsic and extrinsic motivation constructs based upon mean scores alone. These students who missed 2-3 class periods saw an increase in the mean scores in their amotivation only.

I conducted a paired t-test isolating participants based upon their attendance to determine if the change in mean scores from the pre-/ and post-test AMS-C assessments were statistically significant. The results of these t-tests indicate that they were not. The improved mean scores of those students who missed less than 10% of the career exploration course may be the result of a number of mediating factors. For one, this group may have demonstrated similar attendance behaviors in their other courses. Extensive research (Credé, et al., 2010; Karnik et al., 2020; Kwak et al., 2019; Schmulian & Coetzee, 2011) marks attending class as a strong indicator of

Table 6

Pre-/Post AMS-C Assessment Data

Construct	Test	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P</i>
Extrinsic, external regulation	Pre	5.78	1.02	14	1.11	0.28
	Post	5.41	1.10			
Extrinsic, introjected	Pre	5.53	1.09	14	1.06	0.30
	Post	5.18	1.12			
Extrinsic, identified	Pre	6.10	0.61	14	2.34	0.03
	Post	5.48	0.80			
Intrinsic, toward accomplishment	Pre	4.53	1.20	14	0.88	0.39
	Post	4.21	1.07			
Intrinsic, experience stimulation	Pre	3.51	1.47	14	-0.24	0.81
	Post	3.60	1.38			
Intrinsic, to know	Pre	4.98	1.02	14	0.15	0.88
	Post	4.95	0.73			
Amotivation	Pre	1.88	0.85	14	-1.46	0.16
	Post	2.21	1.00			

Note. Academic Motivation Scale for College Students (AMS-C) (Vallerand et al., 1993).

student success. As such, attendance behaviors could be tested for causality to stronger academic motivation in a future study. In this study, the t-tests confirm that the increase in mean scores based on attendance in the career exploration course are not statistically significant (see Figure 5).

Research Question 4

What are the experiences of students on academic probation who participate in the career exploration course? The career exploration course lasted 10 weeks. Participants in the study produced artifacts in each of these 10 weeks. In order to track the progression of student reflections and experiences, I divided the collected artifacts into two clusters based upon the timing of submission. One cluster examined those artifacts submitted within the first five weeks of the term. The second examined artifacts submitted in the final five weeks. I analyzed the initial interview data within the first five-week cluster and the final interview in the second cluster.

Similar to my analysis of value in Research Question 1, I engaged in an iterative coding process. I examined individual participant experience using an open-coding method of breaking down data into smaller parts in both the early and second clusters of collected data. I then compared codes across participants in each cluster (axial coding) to identify categories across participants. This stage included a return to codes defined in open-coding for clarifying or modifying for descriptive purposes. Afterward, I examined larger patterns or themes (selective-coding) by cluster and examined those patterns in each cluster to understand the progression of participant experiences. Once I had determined those larger patterns, I returned to open-coding to re-examine the codes by theme to measure their frequency. This process revealed the three larger themes overall by examining the number of unique references within each theme.

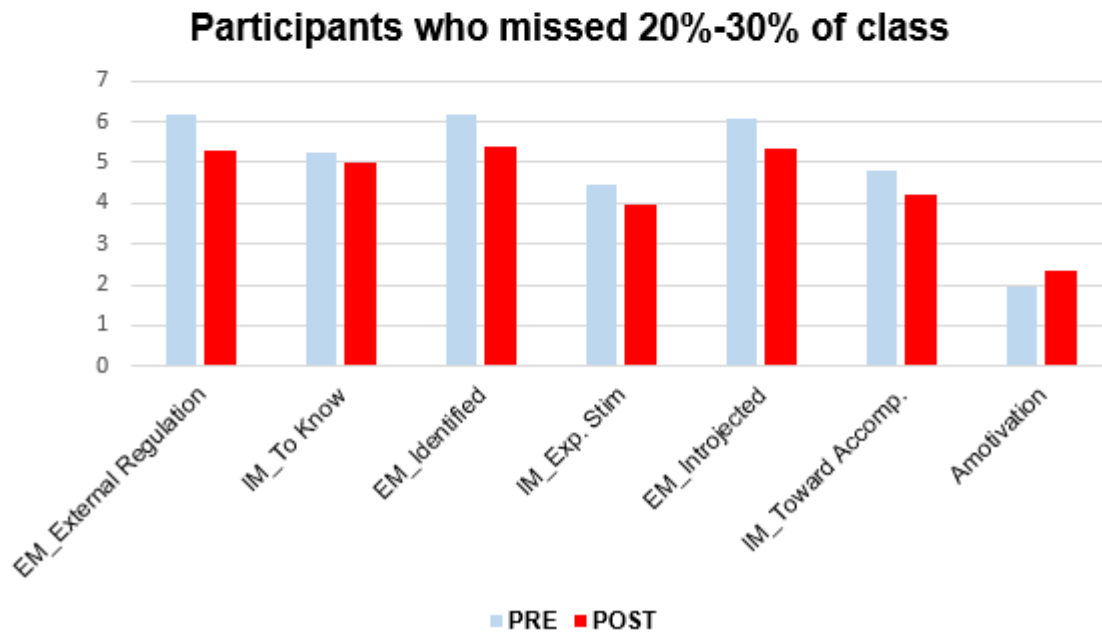
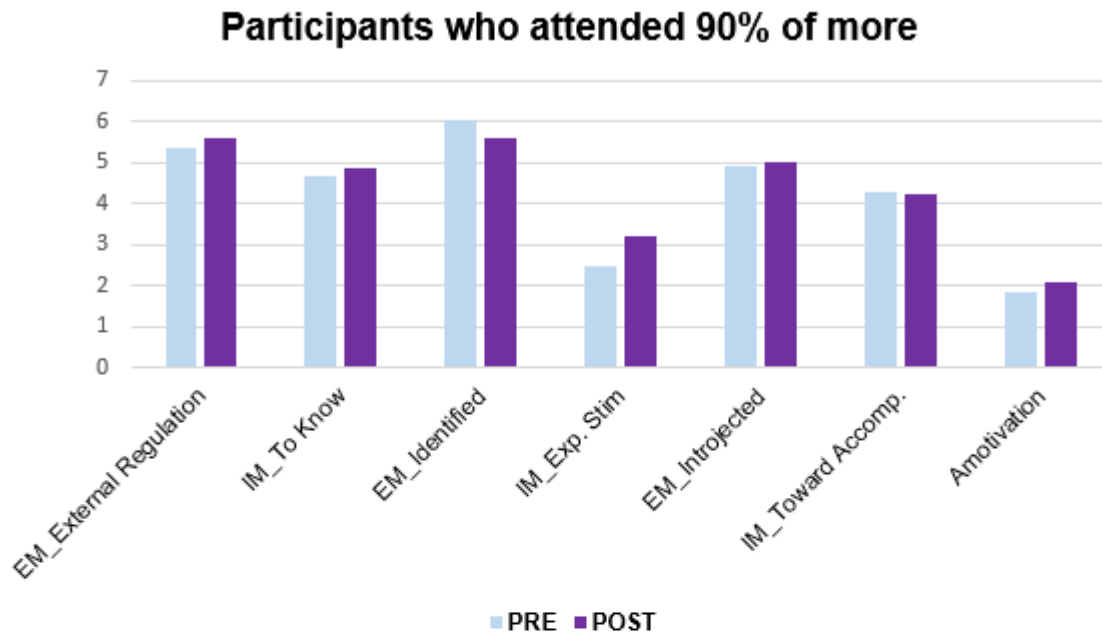


Figure 5. Pre- and post-test data for AMS-C by attendance rate.

The quantitative data demonstrated changes in both the academic motivation and career self-efficacy of students from pre- to post-test. My goal was to understand how the experiences of participants had also evolved from the initial class meeting to the final. Using NVivo, I synthesized larger themes in the first cluster to understand the experiences in the first half of the course. The most prevalent theme in this cluster was hope and optimism for the semester and future. This was surprising as my own analysis of Branchline academic recovery initial assessment data from the last several semesters indicated that the majority of students who enrolled in the program following recent academic difficulty either viewed academic probation through a punitive lens, a punishment issued by the University, or equated their difficulty with a personal deficit. However, in the present study, I coded a substantial 80 unique references under the theme of hope and optimism in the early weeks of the course. In my own analytical memo at the time, (dated July 21, 2021) I made note of this with the question: “The students consistently make reference to their goals and their plans from a place of hope in these early weeks. The question becomes: Does it persist to the end of the course?”

A second larger theme synthesized in these early weeks was professed competence as reported by the participant, with participants frequently referring to their skillsets or ability to perform specific behaviors. An important distinction to make is that these references of personal skills were coded as professed competence rather than another code that emerged in the data, albeit not as often, of justifiable pride. Justifiable pride spoke to the examples of the skills participants shared in which they could provide concrete evidence. For example, Ash’s description of his strong writing abilities with documented evidence of the essay contests he had won and writing awards while in high school. To juxtapose professed competence with justifiable pride in the early weeks of the term, professed competence was far more common (60

references compared to 33). I wondered how this would evolve into the second half of the term. I also wondered whether the perception of failure in the academic context influenced the lack of offered evidence of their skills and abilities, or as I wrote in a memo (dated July 23, 2021): “Is it possible that students feel recent failure so deeply that they cannot see their previous successes?” Jonah spoke to this point in his initial interview when he told me: “Your weaknesses kind of glare at you a little more. They stand out to you a little more. Then your strengths, it’s hard especially when you’re here and things haven’t been going great.”

The final larger theme that emerged in the analysis of this early cluster was future uncertainty in the face of academic setback. Participants described self-doubt and questioning following a semester of difficulty. In the face of academic probation, participants described feeling anxious about the uncertainty of what lie ahead. In some cases, like Sofia, they correlated uncertainty with perceived deficiencies. Sofia talked openly about no longer considering medical school as an option because of the competitive nature of the admission process and her current academic standing. Others spoke of redefining their goals as they weighed the challenge of their limited-access majors (Gordon & Polson, 1985). In conversations with students in the early weeks, I noticed that many of the participants were hard on themselves. The code negative self-talk, while not the most frequently referenced, was prevalent in the early weeks of the term. Even as the participants celebrated their strengths, they followed up with a statement that minimized that strength. When he described his art, Pablo made a point of saying “I don’t think about it as creativity as much cause a lot of the art that I do is usually representational,” effectively downplaying his own skills. I wondered about the progression of this negative self-talk as participants advanced in the course. Amid so much future uncertainty, I gleaned from conversations with participants that many were attempting to redefine or conceptualize their

identities following a setback in the academic context. The reflective artifacts and final interviews in the second cluster of data provided evidence of the shifting of participant priorities and their mindset.

Following my analysis of the data in the second cluster, there was significant shift in themes. The most prevalent theme of hope and optimism persisted from the beginning of the course to the end. The other themes, however, strong in the early weeks, proved less prevalent in the second half of the course. Two new themes, while both documented in cluster one, did rise to the top overall. The three themes that spoke to the participant experience in the career exploration course included: hope and optimism that is sustained, even amid difficulty, positively influences the persistence of students on academic probation, a focus on career exploration yields powerful positive self-talk following setback in the academic context, and a renewed commitment to caring for others is produced through career exploration reflection.

Themes

Theme 1: Hope and Optimism that is Sustained, even Amid Difficulty, Positively Influences the Persistence of Students on Academic Probation.

As the semester progressed, participants described the increase in rigor and workload of their classes. As demonstrated in Research Question 3, this intensification affected their academic motivation. Listening to these concerns in the classroom, I suspected that the hope and optimism so prevalent in the early weeks of the course would diminish over time. However, the student artifacts and final interviews indicated that this hope and optimism was sustained throughout the course.

Early references to hope and optimism appear in the initial assessment, which participants completed prior to beginning the course. While this does not speak to their

experiences as part of the course, their responses to specific open-ended questions was indicative of the participant perspective at the start of the term. When asked to define academic probation, Jim referred to it as a “second chance.” He wrote:

To me academic probation is a way to let students know that they have been given a second chance to make their grades right in the following semester. Remember this is a second chance to get grades up and be a successful student.

Other participants demonstrated hope and optimism by responding to the question of what advice they would offer to other students on academic probation. Their responses were fascinating, given that all had recently learned they were placed on academic probation themselves. While negative self-talk was prevalent in the early weeks, the participants offered words of encouragement to a hypothetical peer in the same situation. Ash responded that he would offer: “Just breathe, you will freak out at first but you can work through it.” Likewise, Bertha recommended that this peer “Not get overwhelmed that [they] have time to improve.”

Sofia’s suggestion mirrored the others, with the encouragement of seeking support: “[do] not panic, it’s just a heads up warning for you to push yourself and ask for help.” Marigold echoed this idea in her response, encouraging connections with resources on campus. She wrote:

First, realize that you do need help and that it's okay if you're struggling. Then, reach out to any advisors or teachers that you feel comfortable talking to. Attend the [Branchline] academic recovery program seminar. Follow-up with who you can. [Branchline] does want to help, but you have to show that you want the help.

These five offered hopeful advice or optimistic views of academic probation, but the remaining 10 participants were less hopeful in their initial assessments. This was concerning when you consider that hope is a critical component for student success. Seirup and Rose (2011)

demonstrated that students on academic probation who reported higher levels of hope were more likely to engage in action steps and positive academic behaviors. Students in Seirup and Rose study also showed greater increases in GPA compared to their peers who reported less hope.

In the present study, while pre-course conceptualizations of academic probation were, for the most part, less than hopeful, the early artifacts generated many instances of hope and optimism. In the intriguing questions assignment, one of the first artifacts collected in week one of the course, C.C. described his purpose in life as: “To succeed academically in order to set myself up for internships, scholarship opportunities, and even networking opportunities with big companies.” Like C.C., Fiona was also thinking about the academic success she hoped to achieve when she wrote in this assignment: “This semester I am going to try to finish every assignment when it is given to us. This way I can stay on track and not forget about any of my assignments!”

More often than not, as participants described their hopes, they were describing their academic goals. They shared the actions they were going to take to ensure they accomplished them. In his protect your time action plan, Jonah wrote:

I'm going to limit my free time and assign myself designated HW/study hours each night before I can go fully into my free time. I also want to start setting aside time on the weekends to be more active which will help with my mental health and sleep.

Baki had defined the action steps that he was going to take to ensure that he met his goals. In his action plan, he noted: “I will be better prepared and will be lazy. [I will] just do my work ahead of time to have a better understanding what I need to actually get done.” Participants submitted the action plan artifact in week three of the course, meaning these action items were defined early in the term. Later, at the end of week five, participants completed an online assignment called “I am” statements. In this assignment, participants composed 10 individual

statements that spoke to purpose. I gave them no guidance as to length or specific content. However, I did encourage participants to deviate from the “I am” template and to create alternative statement starters with the examples of “I will” or “I notice.” This assignment marked the transition from the first five weeks of the term to the second half. Overwhelmingly, their responses indicated positive behaviors and action steps.

Bri acknowledged the inevitability of challenges with a commitment to her academic goals: “I imagine that life will cause some chaos and will have bumps in the road, but will get better eventually. I will take my studies more seriously. I will have at least a 2.0 by May.”

Some participants remained hopeful that they would improve in specific areas like Bertha, who was balancing work and school responsibilities: “I will learn how to manage time for school and work.” Or Ash, who remained committed to returning to good academic standing: “I will get off academic probation. I will learn better time management tactics.”

Time management was a concern nearly every participant reported in their initial assessment as a factor that contributed to their difficulty in the previous semester. Like her classmates, Sofia was determined to improve her time management. She wrote: “I will spend less time on social media and more time on my studies.” Others were focused on academic goals, but also on maintaining a productive mindset. As Khloe demonstrated in her statements: “I will get A's and B's. I will study for my tests. I will stay positive this semester.”

Trev described his success in his first-year at a local community college often. He had done exceptionally well there and felt justifiably proud of his progress. Since arriving at the four-year his motivation had declined. However, he referenced a change when he wrote: “I plan to find solutions to daily problems starting with the [study] environment. I am motivated and feel back in my rhythm from freshman year.”

By focusing on action items toward positive outcomes, participants were sustaining the hope and optimism I saw in early artifacts. In some cases, participants described hope as they thought ahead to their future career goals. While Charlie reached the end of the term without clarity of her major and career path, she remained optimistic: “I will learn what exactly I want to do with my education and career for my future. I will be happy. I will be strong. I will be present. I will be okay.”

Sofia submitted one of the early assignments in the course later than planned, completing it in early March. This assignment, the letter to self, asked participants to write themselves a letter to document their goals in the term. In addition to their goals, I asked participants to describe things they already did well. Responses indicated self-compassion overall. However, Sofia’s later submission of this assignment demonstrated a hopeful mindset midway through the course. She wrote to herself: “You have so many opportunities out there, you just have to go and explore them.”

This idea of possibilities was a recurring theme. Fiona described a change in her conceptualization of work after her career genogram reflection and her life design project where she focused on workview. She wrote: “I believe the perception of work has changed to something positive in my life now. I love making money, and being motivated. I used to think work was so boring, but there are so many possibilities for me.”

As demonstrated in Research Question 1, participants reported increased confidence in career goals as evidence that the course was a valuable experience. Their artifacts often spoke to a sense of hope for their future careers, even if they had not narrowed down the specific career path yet. As Ash described in his post-career assessment reflection:

By exploring other career options and our class discussions I have a better idea for my future. I also have a more positive outlook. I am excited for the future and I believe that I will be okay.

A clear depiction of sustained hope and optimism exists in the analysis of individual participants from early artifacts and initial interviews to our final conversations and comments. In our initial interview, Jonah talked about how the uncertainty of his future made him anxious, uncertainty that academic probation exacerbated. He did not like to think of the future often for this reason. It made him reflect on his current challenges that might impact that future. At the same time, he was excited to think about building a life after college and achieving personal and career goals once he had closed the book on academic ones. When asked how often he thought about those other goals, he answered that it depended on the day. I asked how he felt on the day of the initial interview. He told me “Good. More optimistic today.”

Jonah’s optimism came through at different points in the semester, particularly when he described a future with his girlfriend. In the final interview, Jonah was working to complete work missed in another class following a traumatic experience. When asked of his confidence level at that point in the semester, he said:

A 5. It’s only cause of one class that I fell behind in and struggled to catch back up on. But it’s just the one class. The other four are going well. It’s definitely not the pit of despair I was in last spring, so I think the upward trend is there, which is encouraging.

One week later, Jonah submitted his post-career assessment reflection where he referenced what he had learned about himself. His responses indicated growth and hope:

I learned to put value on the attributes and characteristics I've gained from my struggles and whether or not I'm happy with how I gained them I need to see their value. I also think that I've proven to myself my desire to be here.

Baki felt that his performance in the previous semester was due to “laziness,” and he was determined to change this. In his letter to self, Baki wrote:

It's the spring of your freshman year. You started off shaky, but you can recover. I didn't take it seriously and became lazy not doing my work. Now you have turned it around and made change. It's not too late.

Baki engaged in positive behavior changes that significantly improved his academic performance. He kept me abreast of progress in his artifacts and in a check-in meeting in the middle of the term. By the time we connected for a final interview, Baki reported the changes he had seen in himself: “All my assignments and grades have improved a lot. I think I just feel more comfortable with my classes.”

Baki wasn't the only student to feel hopeful as a result of academic successes that semester. Marigold, who had struggled to balance school work the previous semester while caring for a family member, started the term optimistic. In the early weeks of the career exploration course, she wrote to herself “Dear MARIGOLD, It is 2021. You are working towards your B.S. in biology. You have faced a lot of struggles the past year but a new chapter in your life is about to begin.” Marigold implemented several behavior changes and maintained steady progress in her classes by staying ahead of assignments and seeking help often. The successes she scored early in the semester kept her motivated to continue these positive behaviors. After the final class period, she noted her increased confidence and enthusiasm for the future in her post-career assessment reflection: “I am definitely more confident than beforehand.

I am looking forward to my future career and am now more aware of [Branchline's] resources for me.”

Like Marigold, Fiona rode the momentum of early successes, racking up even more wins as the semester progressed. She began the semester hopeful that the Spring 2021 term would be better than the previous term. In her letter to self assignment, Fiona documented these hopes:

You are on the path to redemption. I know it has been a super challenging year for you, last semester did not go as planned. Although you were struggling, I know that you will redeem yourself this semester and come back with 4.0 grades.

In a mid-semester meeting, Fiona walked me through each class to share her current grades and the projects she was working on. Fiona had worked hard and her efforts continued to pay off with strong grades and also positive reinforcement from her faculty members. In her personal charter, she noted how the career exploration course had affected her:

I got to learn more about myself, and what I wanted for my future. I believe that it only made me more confident when it comes to academic progress. I am a strong, independent young woman I have so much to look forward to. I am glad this assignment helped me realize how exciting life will be, and why I am here today.

In some cases, the optimism participants described referenced more of a mindset change, like Ash who was concerned about academic suspension and the fear of disappointing his family if this were to be the outcome of his Spring 2021 term. His letter to self at the start of the course was both hopeful and clear. He wrote:

I know you think that your life is over, that you cannot come back from this, that you are a disappointment and a failure. Remember you still have a shot! You can flip the script. This is all only one barrier, a hurdle you can jump if you work hard. Just focus on staying

in college and doing your best to prove to the University that one bad semester does not define you as a student and does not determine your future success.

I met with Ash at multiple points in the semester to check in. He was the only participant living on campus and experienced several required quarantine periods as others in the building reported exposure to COVID-19. As a highly-social individual with close connection to his family, these periods of forced isolation were mentally and emotionally draining. Ash often felt cut off from the world. He chose not to always share with his family when he was in quarantine because he knew they would worry and ask him to come home. Ash wanted to stay on-campus and attempt to have what he considered a traditional first-year experience. He felt that the stress of isolation hindered his academic motivation. Knowing this was a constant challenge for Ash, in our final interview, I asked about his confidence in his ability to successfully finish the term. He told me:

I want to get back in good standing but I'm OK if that doesn't happen this semester. I understand that I could be a longer process which is totally fine as long as it's, as long as you get there.

Tina also defined clear goals for turning things around in Spring 2021. In her protect your time action plan, she said: "I am determined to set weekly and daily goals for myself. This will help me have a clearer picture of what needs to be done."

By the end of the course, despite a significant setback, she reported a positive outlook and hope when she wrote in her post-career assessment reflection:

I'm happy that I've had the things that have happened to me, happen. I've grown as a person, I've learned many new things, my boyfriend and I have grown closer, and I've realized who my real friends are. I'm genuinely happy.

Participants often referenced looking ahead. At the start of the term, overwhelmingly they described future uncertainty and anxious feelings that uncertainty generated. Yet many were still optimistic, like Sofia who referenced the many possibilities she could pursue in her letter to self. She sustained that optimism, reporting in her personal charter: “This [class] helped me do a lot of digging into my major. I am excited to see where this degree will take me because I am 100% passionate about this career and I know I can do it.”

Jim also was excited to look ahead. His initial assessment demonstrated hope, and his final reflection of the odyssey plan assignment toward the end of the class confirmed that this hope had endured: “The thing that excites me the most is that I am executing my first odyssey plan and I know that the 5 year plan will change but initially it will be the same goals.”

Charlie had been focused on her happiness and mental health even before she enrolled in the course, and this continued throughout the course. Her “I am” statements at the midpoint of the course demonstrated this commitment:

I will be better at tracking my assignments and putting forth more effort towards my classes. I will get the help I need mentally to be able to succeed as best as I possibly can. I will learn what exactly I want to do with my education and career for my future. I will be happy. I will be strong. I will be present. I will be okay.

Of all the assignments, the strengths-based resume, which asked participants to create a document that listed their positive traits in addition to the ones they wished to work on, was the one Charlie found to be the most helpful. In her personal charter, she described why:

Learning about all of my strengths has impacted my academic career by allowing me to see where I thrive. I will carry this throughout the next phase in my life, because I have gained insight on my values and strengths.

That hope generated by articulating strengths proved helpful to many participants. Bertha entered the career exploration course following a semester of juggling her full-time student status with her full-time work schedule. She showed self-compassion in her letter to self in the early weeks of the term when she wrote: “You are beginning to feel mentally drained because you wear yourself too thin between school and work. It is okay to fail as long as you continue to try no matter what is placed in front of you.”

This optimism was sustained even while Bertha did not reach a point of clarity in the course. Still uncertain of what lie ahead, Bertha was excited for the future. As she wrote in her post-career assessment:

I am most definitely nervous, college is expensive and I do not have the funds to just take random classes until I figure out something I like. Yet, I am also excited to see what/where I decide to do in my life time.

Among participants, hope and optimism endured. Even in the face of significant hardships experienced in the same term (Tina, Charlie, and Jonah) and academic setbacks, the participants spoke of the future from a place of hope and optimism. In final interviews, they noted improved mental and emotional states. Khloe said “I feel good. I’m happy. I’m happier than how I was last year at this time.” C.C., who felt frustrated by his academic difficulty when he had thrived in academic spaces for most of his life, had wrestled with the fear of failure and emerged more confident: “I definitely feel a lot better. When I found out that I had to do all this, [I thought] I may or may not pass college. I was considering a bunch of alternatives, but I feel better now.”

Even with perceived failure in the academic context, participants were optimistic that they would turn things around. This persistent hope manifested another interesting shift in

qualitative data as the semester progressed. The academic probation outcome resulted in feelings of personal deficit. Participants at the start of the term were quick to point out their flaws. However, the negative self-talk I heard so often in early interviews slowly abated, giving way to more hopeful self-perceptions. By the end of the term, participants frequently referenced their strengths and positive qualities, leading to the rise of the second most prevalent theme, a focus on career exploration yields powerful positive self-talk following setback in the academic context.

Theme 2: A Focus on Career Exploration Yields Powerful Positive Self-Talk Following Setback in the Academic Context.

Early in the course assignments, participants were asked to articulate their strengths. However, long after these initial assignments, the artifacts they produced indicated a positive perception of self. In his first submitted artifact, intriguing questions, Ash described the many things he loved about himself:

I love how I am finally comfortable with my sexuality. I love how social I am. It is not hard for me to make friends because I am very outgoing. I think in general I am a very funny person so that is another thing.

Other participants also provided a list of traits they loved about themselves like Baki who wrote “I love hard, [I am] outgoing, [I am] passionate. I feel people truly enjoy my presence.” Bertha noted her “independent mindset” and the compassion she showed others. Like Bertha, Fiona celebrated her independence. Her response to this question of what she loved about herself also demonstrated self-compassion: “I like that I am a pretty confident person, and I know my worth. I do not settle for less. I also love that I am SO independent. I know I am doing my best, and I am enough.”

Bri listed five qualities that she valued in herself. She wrote: “5 things I love about myself: (1) My drive, if I push hard enough; (2) My attention to detail; (3) My friendliness; (4) My calmness; (5) My ability to adapt quickly.” Khloe also identified a list of traits she was proud of when she wrote: “I love that I'm caring. I love that I'm a great listener so I'm usually the go to person when someone wants to vent. I love that I stand up for what I believe in.”

These responses required students to articulate positive traits or behaviors in the first course assignment. They described concrete actions or qualities, or in some cases they made broader statements of appreciation like Charlie who wrote “I love the way that I can exceed my own expectations.” In this same assignment, participants were asked the question “What are you awesome at already?” Here they focused on specific behaviors they took pride in. Marigold responded: “Giving advice/solutions to problems, listening, prioritizing what's important to me.” Whereas C.C. took pride in his ability to “find out how things work.”

Jim knew his work ethic was admirable, a point he noted in both his initial and final interviews. He also used his intriguing question assignment to make note that he could be counted on to “do my job very well and everything that entails.” He also highlighted another point of pride when he wrote: “I believe I'm a really good balance of being book smart and common sense.”

Jonah, as an adult learner, focused on his experiences and interests. He used this first assignment to highlight what he appreciated about himself: “I'm smart, I'm a jack of all trades, I have a lot of life experience for someone my age. I have a lot of hobbies.” While Pablo documented his artistic passions specifically “I am skilled at sculpting, I'm passionate for music and am a huge audiophile, I can play the guitar, love exercise, and I feel that when I am driven I do have a strong work ethic.” He wasn't alone in this. Tina also made a point to highlight her

artistic side when she wrote: “I’m awesome at creating; I like to paint and do pretty much any craft under the sun.”

Other instances of positive self-talk appeared in the letter to self assignment when participants offered words of encouragement to themselves. Marigold reminded herself: “You can do anything you choose to do. You are smart and competitive. You have great people skills and a passion for medicine.”

Marigold was not the only participant to use this assignment to issue themselves important reminders as they began Spring 2021. Bri wrote to herself: “You are smart, hardworking, and thorough when you put your mind to it.” Jim offered himself this succinct reminder: “I am hard working, smart and dedicated.” C.C. reminded himself that if he committed to school, he would achieve his goals: “I know that you will commit to anything once you make it a priority, so try to make school a priority, and keep it there. Keep up some kind of academic momentum and you will succeed.” Fiona left herself words of encouragement: “You are smart, just put time and effort into it and apply yourself! You are hardworking. You can do this.”

Other participants made a point of referencing their recent setback. Tina, who had earned more than 100 credit hours total at three other institutions prior to transferring to Branchline but was still two years away from completing her degree, used this letter to remind herself that her current circumstances were a hurdle she would overcome: “its spring 2021 and you’re finally halfway to completing your bachelor’s degree. Although this isn’t the final finish line, it’s something to celebrate but remember to stay focused on your goals.”

Pablo encouraged himself to remember his strengths in the face of difficulty. In his letter to self, he wrote:

Despite some setbacks and obstacles it is good to remind yourself of some of your greatest strengths and attributes. Your strength is your ability to stay organized, allowing your mind to concentrate on the tasks at hand and not be distracted.

Ash, who knew from past successes that he could thrive in academic spaces when he put the work and time into learning, reminded himself:

If you do your best, then you can conquer online learning and be successful because you do have that capability. You are smart. Your biggest strength is your writing skills and your organization skills. Utilize those and work to improve skills you have yet to master.

Then there were participants who used this assignment to not only highlight their strengths, but also remind themselves that they were continuing to grow. Charlie wrote: "I am kind, reluctant, patient, humorous, loving and above all I am strong. I will grow stronger. I am intelligent." Bertha, who referenced frequently a lack of a support system in her own life, reminded herself that the work she was putting in now was already advancing her personal growth. Her letter was both self-compassionate and hopeful:

I want you to remember how strong and determined you are, to be more than your parents were for you. These days now will set forth the doors to the rest of your life, as a psychologist, sister, and friend. Year 28 is going to be a good year for you, I hope that you realize the butterfly that is becoming of you.

These early assignments naturally lent themselves toward positive self-talk, and yet positive self-talk references appeared minimally compared to the more prevalent themes in the first-five week cluster. Moreover, students had free reign on how they chose respond to the reflection questions within the assignments. Most participants chose to highlight not one, but multiple positive qualities. Participants were kind to themselves and offered words of affirmation

and encouragement. As the term progressed and the assignments turned away from values and strengths and into career exploration, I wondered if positive self-talk references would dwindle or persist. Like hope and optimism, positive self-talk endured and eclipsed other themes as the term progressed.

Midway through the course, as participants submitted artifacts the positive self-talk continued. In the “I am” statements completed in week five, many made a point to articulate their positive qualities again without prompting. Some referenced their social intelligence, a trait we frequently talked about in class as critical to all future professions. Fiona referred to herself as “a very kindhearted, and understanding person.” Bri wrote: “I am compassionate towards others.” Jim shared: “I am good with people.” Marigold celebrated: “I am a great active listener.” While Khloe commented: “I am empathic, I understand people's feelings so I give good advice.”

After conducting his own research, C.C. also believed his strengths would allow him to successfully achieve his career goals: “Additionally, as a strong math student with good visualization skills, I was happy to hear that I could design things and have a chance at being a mechanical engineer.”

Fiona used her life design project to define her work view, but as part of this definition she made a point to celebrate her positive qualities as a means to achieving her goals: “I believe I am a confident, young lady and can do anything I want. I know that I am enough and will reach my goals I have always reached for.” She echoed this in her odyssey plan reflection two weeks later: “I believe I am a very determined hard worker, and can accomplish everything I dream to have in my life, and on this plan.”

In the final weeks of the course, participants were submitting final reflective artifacts through the personal charter and post-career assessment assignments. They were also meeting

with me for final interviews. In class, the discussions focused on academic challenges and difficulty in their continued online learning. Overwhelmingly, participants were frustrated by a lack of break in the term. The University had made the decision just before the start of the term to move the spring recess up from its original date in mid-March to the third of the week of term. The change was abrupt and faculty had little time to make adjustments to their course schedules. This meant that the second week in February when students were technically on spring break, most still had assignments and tests immediately following their break. As such, participants in the present study reported that they did not receive a true break as most were still completing important assignments or preparing for an upcoming test during the designated recess. By week eight of our course, a week or so after the original date of their spring break, participants were unsurprisingly exhausted. These feelings of “burn out” were referenced often in class. However, despite these frustrations and challenges, the positive self-talk was alive in well in our conversations and in their work.

In our final interview, Bertha talked about the pressure she experienced at work. She told me: “I’m always the dependable one.” As the individual her employers knew they could count on, Bertha was often tapped to work longer hours or fill in when others could not. She was justifiably proud of the recognition but frustrated that her hard work produced only additional work rather than additional compensation. She admitted that she could say no, but Bertha did not want to disappoint her employers. These additional hours put undue stress on Bertha. She elaborated that the extra hours did increase her pay check and financially this was hard to turn down as Bertha continuously worked toward having a better life. A week later she submitted her post-career assessment reflection where she elaborated on the artifacts in the course. In reference

to her strengths-based resume and career genogram, she wrote: "This activity taught me that I am already doing better than my parents, and to not put so much stress on myself."

Participants shared in these final weeks what they had learned about themselves. Marigold wrote in her personal charter: "I am more prepared than I give myself credit for." Baki realized that he could produce high quality work when he put the effort in. His early successes beget more success. In our final interview, he told me: "Once I actually sit down and focus, when it comes to doing my work, I can put forth like really good work. I'm showing myself that I can do more now."

Jim continued to acknowledge his work ethic. In our final interview, he made a point of describing how it translated from his job to school: "I feel like I'm resilient because I'm pretty dedicated to work and school. But I didn't really realize that cause most of the time I just focused on work." While C.C., who applied and accepted a new job while enrolled in the course, had seen firsthand how he could rise to any challenge when given more responsibility: "I feel like I have the responsibility to do work the right way. Even with my job at FedEx I notice that I'm a lot more efficient than even people who have been working there for months."

For Bri, the nature of our class assignments had allowed her to produce creative artifacts. She had learned how to use the online Canva tool in the course and had been inspired by the Canva presentation templates. Bri used these templates to generate ideas and created colorful PowerPoints which she presented as her personal charter. In our final interview, she made a point of highlighting that this was a new skill she recognized: "I think visual communication, like making PowerPoints or something creative, that's a strength of mine."

The recognition of personal qualities in these final conversations and artifacts also reflected positive self-talk. Sofia referred to her increased confidence in taking risks. She wrote

in her post-career assessment reflection: “I am a brave person. I never used this word to characterize me but I like to take risks and even if someone tells me I can't achieve something I'm always there trying to prove someone wrong.”

Khloe was pleased to recognize her own social intelligence. At several points in the semester, she described how this single skillset proved useful in many contexts. She elaborated in the final interview: "One thing that I never knew until our discussion in class was [my ability] to read the room and read people. I think that's really important with what I want to do. It's interesting to pay attention to it."

The theme of positive self-talk is powerful for students following perceived failure in the academic context (Milligan, 2007; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). As Ash put it in our final interview when describing the benefit of focusing on his positive qualities in the character strengths activity in our third class meeting: “it just made me feel good about myself at a time when I'm feeling really low about being on probation. It's nice to remember there are good qualities to you as well.”

In early weeks of the course, the theme of future uncertainty was the third most prevalent code. Participants frequently described their fears that stemmed from not having a clear path forward. In part, that uncertainty is what led many to choose the career exploration course as their academic recovery program option. Many were questioning their goals and demonstrating self-doubt. Their artifacts in the course were full of reflection as they redefined their path. They were not merely redefining their goals, they were redefining their purpose. From the data collected in the second half of the course, a third theme emerged to eclipse future uncertainty. Interestingly, this theme addressed the future uncertainty participants had reported in those early weeks. As participants forged new definitions of self, they identified a larger purpose in this final

prevalent theme: a renewed commitment to caring for others is produced through career exploration reflection.

Theme 3: A Renewed Commitment to Caring for Others is Produced through Career

Exploration Reflection

The final discussion post in the course was called the “why” discussion. Participants were asked to outline their purpose. While the question was broad intentionally to allow their answers to reflect life, career, or academics, caring for others was a focal point in their responses. For Fiona, there was a specific population she wanted to support. She wrote: “I think my current purpose in life is to give back to the adolescents of the world my knowledge, experiences, and wisdom. I specify adolescents because I’ve been through a lot in my life, mainly when I was young.” For Charlie, the audience was broader, but the goal the same: “Just showing people that life is too short to be mean or rude. I love to help people. I love to help others. I think my purpose in life is to help people.”

Others, like Sofia, had defined career goals that were intricately linked to their purpose in life. She wrote:

My purpose in life is to serve others and by working in the medical field a great way to do it. This makes me happy and brings me joy, which combined with workview will make my life just like I planned.

This goal of caring for others became a common discussion point in class as participants considered different career pathways. Charlie thought a lot about this both before and during the class. While she had not confirmed her larger plans by the end of the course, Charlie did engage in substantial reflection. In our initial interview she referenced her own mental health and the

impact of the pandemic. Specifically, she noted the courage of mental healthcare providers. She told me:

I think that mental health is probably the most important thing in anybody's life and if someone is willing enough to admit or to help other people through it knowing it would put a deficit on themselves I think they should go ahead and do it cause like it takes courage. And I think I have it.

Later in her "I am" statement assignment, Charlie continued this reflection, highlighting the skills and strengths that would serve her well in a career that focused on helping others with their mental health. She wrote:

I plan on helping people feel better. I want people to feel better by something I have guided them through or with. If I can change one person's way of thinking to better themselves, I will feel accomplished with myself and my studies.

Similarly, Tina's personal experiences had led to her current career goals. She hoped to use her career as a way to provide for others just as others had cared for her. In her initial interview, she told me:

When I was younger, my parents got a divorce and I had a legal guardian in New York when we visited my dad. She hung out with us on those visits and supported us. I always found that really intriguing and wanted to go into psychology to be able to help kids who are going through the same things that I went through and help them cope with their anxiety, their depression, anything they've gone through because of divorce, abuse, whatever the case may be. I've been through a lot in my life. I want to give back.

In that same interview she had shared that she had recently cared for a child in her neighborhood on the autism spectrum. This experience had confirmed what she knew from

working with the case worker during her parents' divorce. Caring for others was instrumental to any career she pursued in the future. She elaborated in her letter to self:

My whole life I've always loved helping people, especially children. The day I turned 13, I signed up for a CPR babysitting course and started finding families in my neighborhood to help out after school. After moving to North Carolina, I babysat for this family and their youngest son had Autism. It felt so rewarding to help him with his school work and designed Autism program.

By the time the course was ending, Tina had done more research and had begun to elaborate on her career goals, all with the same aim of caring for others. In her "why" discussion, she wrote:

I want to open up a "safe space/place" for adults who need the same continuous amount of mental help that children need. What I've learned is that a lot of mental services cut off at age 18. I want to open up more opportunities for adults to receive needed services without being penalized or rejected by their insurance company.

Sofia knew she wanted to enter into the medical profession. In our initial interview, Sofia had explained her love of sciences while in high school, which ultimately led her to declare the biology major in college. Sofia later explained another reason she was drawn to the medical profession: "I know I want to help people, and I know I am intelligent, therefore; I know I can thrive in pursuing this career path."

Baki also was drawn to his profession, in part, for the impact he could make in the community of his future school. As he wrote: "There is a lot of work to be done in my community just to make it a better place. This profession can make a lot of connection with people." Baki had narrowed this career goal down to education just prior to starting in the career

exploration class. He used the course activities to validate that this path was the right fit. By contrast, Bri decided to declare a new major and career pathway while enrolled in the course. The profession she chose is predominately white and male. Bri was determined to use her position to address this inequity. This desire stemmed from her own desire to care for others: “I plan to let people know that everyone is capable of doing that they're passionate about no matter race or gender.”

For Bertha, at the end of the course a clear career path was not finalized. She expressed comfort with uncertainty for the time being, but her artifacts demonstrated a more narrowed focus. In her “I am” statement assignment, Bertha wrote: “I plan to make a difference in the world by providing affective treatment to patients/students.” Later, in her calling connection assignment, Bertha designed an organization she wanted to create: “Business to create: Non-profit organization for people who suffer from addiction. The problem to solve: Rising rates of addiction in opioid/heroin with teenagers and young adults.”

I followed up with Bertha during our final interview about this goal. My question to her, given that she had just confirmed she was still unclear of her career path, was how she felt about the goal she had started to outline in her calling connection. She confirmed she was interested in creating a non-profit, but she was also interested in other spaces where she could support others through the rehabilitation process. She told me: “I want to help people that go into the prison system that have drug charges. I'd like to try to help rehabilitate and let them find their way.” We ended the interview with a discussion of graduate programs where she could focus on addiction counseling.

Like Bertha and Charlie, Pablo was still uncertain of career goals at the end of the course, but he had also used the course activities to reflect. His reflection focused on his current goal of

declaring the exercise science major and his reasons for working toward this goal. When he created his workview assignment, he defined what he found appealing about the profession: "To put it simply, this career will allow me to meet people from different walks of life, establish connections and provide for them the means to live a better, healthier life."

It was clear that caring for others was important to Pablo as he began to articulate how he hoped to contribute to the profession. This theme continued in his "why" discussion when he elaborated on what he wanted to achieve:

I would just like to do the hard work to get in the position I hope to be in, be persistent in keeping it, maintain a strong work ethic, and slowly build a strong reputation of being known as someone that can effectively educate, motivate, and inspire. All of this with the sole objective of ultimately helping others reach their personal health goals.

Not every participant was drawn to specific career goals because they offered the ability to care for others. However, even these participants who did not make an explicit connection between their career goals and serving others referred to finding ways to do this in their professions.

Ash saw his future career in political journalism as a platform. He told me: "I have learned I have a passion for helping and advocating for those without a platform or voice to be heard. I also have a large interest in politics and possibly becoming a journalist." Fiona, working toward a career in public relations, wrote about her ability to "Become a mentor to younger people wanting to do PR." The concept of mentoring others in their prospective fields came up a few times. Jim told me about wanting to become a professional engineer (PE), a process that would require him to pass the Fundamentals of Engineering exam and work as an engineer for a minimum of five years. From working with engineering students over the years, I knew

becoming a PE was a goal for most as it brought heightened status and higher pay. Jim did not mention either of these when we spoke. Instead he told me: “PE’s are mentors in the engineering field for first year engineers.”

Khloe was working toward a career in real estate. She was drawn to the field from watching her father successfully navigate property management. Her dream was to go into business with her family, but in her calling connection assignment she described another reason this career pathway was important to her: “Coming from a family of immigrants, I know how hard it is for families to find a home. It could be financial reasons or their legal status. I want to fight for them and make it easier for them to live in comfortable homes.”

Khloe also wanted to ensure equitable hiring practices in a future business, as well as to grow as an effective leader to those she employed. She described why this was important to her in her life design project:

I’ve worked for companies that treat their employees badly. I realized that they are so quick to replace us, while we waste so much of our lifetime working for them. I want to open new opportunities for people. I want to be different.

Like Jim, C.C. was pursuing the engineering profession. While caring for others did not lead him to this career or the mechanical engineering major, he had already started to consider how he could serve others in his role. In his calling connection assignment, C.C. shared many ideas on how he could effectively care for others such as: “Inspire and direct younger kids pursuing engineering majors as a Pre-Engineering teacher. Become a coach or source of recommendation for a rising engineer. Seek out and extinguish poor practices or call out unsafe designs used or products.” He even had ideas of how he could use his knowledge and skills to address an issue that was important to him, climate change. He wrote in his personal charter:

“With my skills I could work with organizations to develop alternative forms of energy and transportation.”

He was not alone here. Bri still dreamed of “protect[ing] the environment and educat[ing] others so we can live in a safe world and take care of our planet.” Meanwhile, Sofia hoped to “teach kids how to give CPR through workshops.” She elaborated: “it can save a life. CPR is a great way to teach others how to help someone in need, I will gladly offer classes to teach something I know.”

In some cases, caring for others meant caring for immediate family or loved ones. In his current priorities list, Jim listed “help my family- just in general help them with whatever they need.” Trev wrote that family was one of his top values and that he worked hard to make sure that both he and his brother had the opportunity to go to college. When he spoke of his family, he told me: “We are all working together to put my brother and me through college. A lot is at stake.”

When we talked about the life design project in class, I raised the question of what money or wealth had to do with career goals. Responses to this question were interesting. Most participants acknowledged that money had a lot to do with their decisions, but not for personal wealth. Ash wrote about it in workview. He said: “I feel as though money plays a large role in your career decisions. Money is how I provide for myself and how I provide for my family if I decide to start one.”

Fiona also followed up on the discussion of money in her workview. She equated money with stability, but again, not for own personal stability. Like Ash, Fiona saw funds as a way to care for others:

I think it really makes me feel good inside, and secure knowing that I am making a difference, and also supporting myself and my family. I believe money is so important in this life. No, it is not everything, but making money really relieves stress and brings you a feeling of safety knowing you are providing for yourself and ones around you.

Khloe was thinking even further ahead. It was not just about caring for family with her income, it was about building something that would care for future generations, or as she put it in her “why” discussion: “I want to leave behind a business that can one day be passed down to my kids.”

Participants described caring for others in ways big and small. Some made references to small daily efforts of caring for others, like Ash who hoped to “brighten the day of every person around [him]. Or Marigold who wrote in her “I am” statements: “to help as many people as I can.” Others described the desire to care for others as part of their identity like Tina who wrote: “I am a nurturer so any time someone needs me, I'm there.” Or Baki who said “I just care a lot about people and how they feel.” Sofia noted: “[I am] a great friend because I'm always there when someone needs me and a great listener.” Bertha felt a desire to help others after discovering how much she appreciated the help others had shown her. In her letter to self, she reminded herself: “You have always enjoyed helping others, I guess because you always required help that it feels good to help someone else for a change.”

A final component on the “why” discussion was the question of legacy. Participants were asked what they wished to be known for in the future. Several of their responses spoke to the theme of caring for others. Ash, who often spoke about his own privilege in our conversations, wrote:

I work to contribute toward the improvement of society and the betterment of the lives of the people around me. I work to provide goods or services to others around me, to make the lives of people around me easier.

Sofia wanted to be remembered for how she cared for others and her work ethic in the medical community:

By helping others, I make this world a better place. We need more people to care for others and I'm very passionate for that. I want to be remembered as a caring person and to be respected for my work.

Baki had a similar goal. He had picked a profession where he could guide high school students both in the classroom and potentially on an athletic field. His football coach had made a lasting impact. Baki hoped to do the same: "I want to be respected for things I do for others and that I'm an outgoing person who cared more about others than myself."

Trev had been thinking about the impact of the pandemic. Fueled by his new interest in economics, he had been reading everything he could about the effects of pandemic on the global economy. When asked about his legacy, he wrote: "I want to learn and find ways to promote better solutions to help battle the pandemic we are in."

In their own ways, participants wanted to contribute to the world. They wanted to solve important problems. They wanted to improve conditions in work environments and inspire others. A common thread among most participants was the desire to care for others. Even those participants who reached the end of the career exploration course with future uncertainty still at play, caring for others was an important goal.

For Charlie, it did not matter so much what specific career she ended up in. What mattered is how she was able to improve the lives of others: "The legacy I want to leave behind

is to make a change in people's lives. If I can make an optimistic change in someone's mindset, I will feel satisfied with the work I have done on this earth.” Likewise, Bertha felt confident that she would land in a career that supported others. She wrote in her “why” discussion: “Any career I choose there will be someone there that needs a little motivation/encouragement and I will be there.”

Those themes that had emerged in the early weeks of the term, professed competence and future uncertainty, had weakened as the career exploration course came to a close, giving way to positive self-talk and caring for others. In my own analytical memo during coding (dated September 23, 2021), I noted the decline of future uncertainty from the first half of the course to the second (57 unique references in the first five weeks to 16 in the final five).

Professed competence also dropped off in the second half of the term (60 unique references down to only 10 in the final five weeks). Instead, positive self-talk rose to the forefront with participants demonstrating self-compassion. Interestingly, the fourth largest theme overall was growth. Participants frequently referenced the growth they had seen in themselves. They also acknowledged increased confidence. Nonetheless, it was the hope and optimism theme that endured throughout the study, even in the face of academic probation, academic setbacks, and even as the participants themselves disclosed diminished motivation. They began the term from a place of hope, and for the most part, ended there. Through the reflective activities and discussions, participants experienced, to varying degrees, increased clarity in their goals. Most reported enthusiasm as they looked ahead to the next semester and beyond.

In the final class for the Tuesday section, C.C. asked if anyone wished to exchange contact information. Phone numbers and social media handles were shared. I left the Zoom room open while students confirmed they had the information they needed. Ash told everyone (as I

recorded in my memo later that day – dated April 8, 2021), “good luck y’all. Here’s to getting off probation!” There was laughter among the remaining students. Khloe thanked the group for listening to her throughout the term. Charlie echoed that sentiment and Marigold suggested they meet at Starbucks in the fall “or whenever we’re finally back on campus.” Then one by one, they said goodbye and logged off for the final time.

Academic Outcomes

At the end of Spring 2021, seven of the 11 participants on academic probation at the start of term returned to good academic standing (64%). The four participants who began the course in good academic standing remained in good standing. The other four participants who had started the term on academic probation had performed well enough in Spring 2021 to be eligible to remain at Branchline under the indicator of continued probation. This meant that while their cumulative GPA remained below a 2.0, they had successfully earned a minimum 2.3 term GPA and would be eligible to return in Fall 2021 to continue to improve their cumulative GPA. This meant that all participants (100%) in the present study were eligible to return for Fall 2021. Comparatively, in the target population for the academic recovery program, 82% of those who completed the program were eligible to return.

Of the 15 eligible, 14 participants did enroll at the University in Fall 2021 for a retention rate of 93%. By contrast, in the comparison group of all Branchline academic recovery program students who completed the program, 72% were retained in Fall 2021. Fiona was the sole participant who did not enroll in fall courses, but this decision was due to financial reasons rather than academic. All 15 participants completed the Branchline academic recovery program, meaning all earned grades of C or higher in the UCOL 130 course. Moreover, study participants saw larger increases in their term GPAs compared to the target population of academic recovery

program students. The academic recovery target population who completed the program in Spring 2021 demonstrated an average +1.15 term GPA increase. By contrast, the 15 participants in the present study demonstrated an average +2.03 term GPA increase from the previous semester. As such, participants in the present study performed equally or better than those in the comparison group of Branchline students on or at risk of academic probation who completed the academic recovery program in Spring 2021.

Summary

The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation at Branchline University, as well to assess the value students assign to such a course and their experiences within it. The study measured the impact of the career exploration course on career self-efficacy and academic motivation using quantitative measures with pre-/ and post-test assessments, the CDSE-SF and the AMS-C. The findings revealed that participants in the present study demonstrated increases in career self-efficacy, specifically in the career competencies of planning, problem solving, and self-appraisal. A paired t-test confirmed that the increases in career self-efficacy were statistically significant. Quantitative data collected through the AMS-C indicated that academic motivation trended downward as the semester progressed for all three types of extrinsic motivation (external regulation, introjected, and identified) and two types of intrinsic motivation (toward accomplishment and to know). Participants saw slight increases in the intrinsic motivation to experience stimulation, but also slight increases in amotivation. However, overall the findings were not statistically significant. The findings for both assessments are consistent across demographics and student type.

An analysis of qualitative data indicated three larger themes that participants assigned to the value of the career exploration course. They were: the opportunity to engage in reflection is both meaningful and necessary, an increase in clarity and/or validation of larger career goals is valuable during academic recovery, and cultivating a sense of community produces a profound impact for students following academic setback. Qualitative data analysis examining the experiences of students on academic probation within the career exploration course indicate three larger themes: hope and optimism that is sustained, even amid difficulty, positively influences the persistence of students on academic probation, a focus on career exploration yields powerful positive self-talk following setback in the academic context, and a renewed commitment to caring for others is produced through career exploration reflection. The final chapter will expand further on these findings, share implications both at the University and beyond, and offer recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final chapter explores further interpretations of the data collected in response to each of the four research questions. In this discussion, I offer in-depth insights into what the data reveals about the impact of the career exploration course. I end this chapter with the implications of the study and my own recommendations for practice and the direction of future studies.

Discussion

Interpretations of Research Question 1

How do students on academic probation at Branchline conceptualize the value of participating in a career exploration course as part of their own academic recovery? I distilled the perception of value from multiple forms of qualitative data, synthesizing three larger themes: the opportunity to engage in reflection is both meaningful and necessary, an increase in clarity and/or validation of larger career goals is valuable during academic recovery, and cultivating a sense of community produces a profound impact for students following academic setback. It was clear from participant interviews and artifacts that the individualized assignments were helpful. Each activity and assignment required extensive reflection. I worried that the participants might view such a high volume of reflective work as excessive given that many of the reflection questions appeared on more than one assignment, sometimes verbatim. This proved not to be the case. All 15 participants assigned value to the opportunity to reflect in the course. For most, the appreciation for the reflective experiences stemmed from not having another space to commit to this reflection beforehand.

The second theme, an increase in clarity and/or validation of larger career goals is valuable during academic recovery, was a common experience for most in the study, but not all. Of the 15 participants, 12 reported either an increase in clarity of larger goals or validation in

their chosen career path. Only three participants chose to either declare a new major or pursue a new career goal. However, many reported feeling more clear on the specifics of their career pathways or validated that they had selected a career that aligned with their strengths and values.

It is worth noting that this validation comes after a perceived academic setback. The sheer number of references to future uncertainty in the early weeks indicated that the academic probation indicator or recent difficulty in the academic context prompted self-doubt and questioning of previously set goals. Of significance, all but two of the participants had selected either what Gordon and Polson (1985) describe as limited-access majors with competitive requirements for entry or majors that required students to declare and complete the pre-major status first before earning admission into the program. Each of these competitive programs or pre-majors required students to complete a set number of prerequisite courses with specific grades to advance to the major. Consider the message these students receive by such requirements. Participants often referenced the level of difficulty in their majors, even those who had not yet gained access to the major. Trapped in the pre-major status meant the perception that programs were challenging were just that, perceptions. The academic probation indicator, and the questioning and self-doubt it stirred, exasperated those perceptions, ultimately diminishing the academic efficacy of participants working to both return to good academic standing and advance into their chosen major.

The final theme participants assigned to the value of the course was cultivating a sense of community produces a profound impact for students following academic setback. Participants noted the benefit of meeting each week with others on academic probation. Their responses indicated that the rapport developed in the course made the experience of being on academic probation less isolating. Here it is important to note that most participants tied the sense of

community to the circumstance of being on academic probation. Few of the participants referenced the benefit of engaging in career exploration experiences with others who were also working to define career goals. Their responses indicated that the group support options offered to Branchline academic recovery students provides another layer of support through its own student population. A sense of community can be generated without career exploration as the theme, although the career exploration activities lent themselves well to rapport building among members of the course.

Overall, the participants did find the career exploration course valuable. However, they did not agree on the timing of the course. Sofia and Jonah believed the course would be more beneficial if offered prior to academic difficulty. Ash believed the course belonged as an intervention opportunity for students on academic probation. While the position of the course as part of academic recovery remained debatable, all found the reflective experiences offered by the course to be beneficial.

Interpretations of Research Question 2

To what extent does the career exploration course influence the career self-efficacy of those students on academic probation at Branchline? To assess the impact of the career exploration course on career self-efficacy, I administered a pre-/ and post-test CDSE-SF assessment. The CDSE-SF assessed five career competencies: occupational information, goal selection, planning, problem solving, and self-appraisal. In all five of the career competencies, participants demonstrated increases in their mean scores. A paired t-test confirmed that the increases were statistically significant for all, but the most significant increases were in the planning ($p = .02$), problem solving ($p = .05$), and self-appraisal ($p = .0005$) competencies. This is unsurprising given the nature of the course assignments.

The reflective activities in the career exploration course not only stimulated self-awareness overall but also specifically asked participants to reflect on their strengths. I asked participants to then apply their self-knowledge to their larger career goals and reflect on where their strengths and values intersected with those goals. Creating spaces for this reflection appeared to contribute to the demonstrated increase in self-appraisal as it related to making career decisions.

For the planning competency, both the odyssey planning and calling connection assignments required that participants apply the self-knowledge gained in the early weeks of the course to career planning. The odyssey plan provided a space for participants to define five-year plans with concrete action steps to accomplish their goals. Participants identified organizations to join, texts to read, graduate schools to research, and specific internship sites to explore. In the calling connection assignment, I asked participants to reflect on the social, political, and business functions of their future professions and the opportunities they could create in each category. These reflective experiences provided spaces for participants to advance their increased self-appraisal to a new level by engaging in a thorough planning process for their future professions.

The mean score for the problem solving competency in the pre-test was the lowest of all competencies for participants, and yet there was a statistically significant increase from pre- to post-test. The W.O.O.P. activity directly spoke to problem solving. This goal setting activity required participants to go beyond mere goal recognition to identify potential obstacles and define steps to circumvent them. However, during the course of the semester several participants engaged in problem solving outside of class. Three participants experienced a traumatic experience and had to navigate new challenges in addition to communicating with faculty and creating plans to catch up on missed content and assignments. One participant had to engage in

problem solving when he learned he would not advance into his chosen major. One participant had to locate his new advisor when his previously assigned advisor left the University without clear communication on the transition period in their absence. Then there was the problem that 11 of the 15 participants faced, their academic probation standing. These 11 were at risk of academic suspension. This problem required that they engage in positive behavior changes quickly. It required that they utilize their resources, the Branchline academic recovery program being one of them. Participants not only engaged in problem solving through course activities, they engaged in problem solving as they navigated the challenges of online learning. By doing so, in ways both big and small, participants demonstrated growth in the problem solving competency.

Overall, participants in the career exploration course demonstrated a statistically significant increase in their career self-efficacy following a semester of engaging in reflective assignments that addressed each of the five career competencies. The nature of the assignments and course discussions created a space for participants to grow in these competencies. These increases persisted even as few participants made changes to their career or major goals. However, the increase in clarity as indicated in Research Question 1 also spoke to an increase in the career self-efficacy of participants.

Interpretations of Research Question 3

To what extent does the career exploration course influence the academic motivation of those students on academic probation at Branchline? To assess the impact of the career exploration course on academic motivation, I administered the pre-/ and post-test AMS-C assessment. Just as Smith (2004) discovered, participants in the present study entered the course with positive expectations for their performance and experience. This is reflected in strong AMS-

C pre-test scores, in particular in the extrinsic motivation constructs. However, post-test scores indicated a decline in five academic motivation constructs: extrinsic motivation (external regulation, introjected, and identified) and intrinsic motivation (toward accomplishment, and to know). Two constructs saw an increase in mean scores from pre-/ to post-test. These were intrinsic motivation: to experience stimulation and amotivation. These findings align with the documented evidence of other studies (Brahm et al., 2017; Corpus et al., 2020, Liu et al, 2021) demonstrating a decline in motivation throughout the first year of college.

On the day of the post-test AMS-C, participants disclosed heightened stress levels and lowered motivation. Their anecdotal feedback translated on the post-test with mean scores declining overall. However, the paired t-test confirmed that the change in mean scores was not statistically significant, with one exception. The decline in extrinsic motivation, identified was statistically significant ($p = .03$). A number of mediating factors may have contributed to the decline of academic motivation. The present study does not attempt to explore these, but I do offer recommendations in this chapter for the direction of future studies that may address this further.

Upon closer examination, I found that the change in academic motivation scores from the pre-/ to post-test looked different when I isolated students into groups based on attendance behaviors. Those participants who attended 90% or more of the course sessions demonstrated an increase in four academic motivation constructs (extrinsic motivation: external regulation, extrinsic motivation: introjected; intrinsic: to know, and intrinsic: to experience stimulation). The comparison group of peer participants who missed between 20% - 30% of the course sessions demonstrated decline in academic motivation in all constructs with the exception of amotivation, which increased from pre-/ to post-scores. However, a paired t-test calculation confirmed that

when scores were isolated by attendance behaviors, the increase for those who attended most if not all of the class sessions was not statistically significant. Furthermore, the causality between academic motivation and class attendance is negligible. It is not reasonable to draw a reliable correlation between attending class and a change in academic motivation, as it is equally feasible that academic motivation influences attendance behaviors rather than the reverse.

Of significance, pre-test scores demonstrated high extrinsic motivation over intrinsic. This is concerning for an academically vulnerable population as literature consistently points intrinsic motivation to a deeper commitment and engagement with learning experiences and increased academic persistence (Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). While post-test scores did decline in five of the six constructs of motivation, the decline in intrinsic motivation was not as pronounced. The average decline of extrinsic motivation mean scores for the 15 participants was 0.44 overall. Participant post-scores indicated an increase, although not statistically significant, in intrinsic: to experience stimulation. For the other two intrinsic motivation constructs, the average decline from pre-/ to post-test was 0.17. As such, while participants did experience a decline in their intrinsic motivation overall, the decline was less profound than the decline in the three extrinsic motivation constructs. The implications of this are worth noting as intrinsic motivation plays a far more significant role in the academic persistence of students in higher education (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013).

In terms of individual students, not every participant in the study saw declines in their academic motivation. Marigold and C.C. both demonstrated increases in all three intrinsic motivation constructs, as well as in extrinsic motivation, identified. Jim demonstrated increases in all three intrinsic motivation constructs and in extrinsic motivation, introjected. Pablo demonstrated increases in intrinsic motivation, to know and to experience stimulation. As far as

similarities go, these four participants attended every class session without exception. C.C., Marigold, and Jim all reported increased clarity and/or validation in their chosen career path. Pablo did not report increased clarity, but he did report an increase in confidence while enrolled in the course.

From my analytical memos, there is evidence of another similarity of these four participants. Each shared demonstrated successes in the term outside of our class content and assignments. Marigold frequently shared her academic successes with me. In our mid-semester check in, she walked me through her courses and her progress. She had done well on projects and exams throughout the semester in each of her courses. Those successes fueled more successes. In her final interview, she believed she was on track to earn all A's and B's.

C.C. did well academically also, often sharing that he was completing work ahead of time and giving himself the space to check over it before submission. However, during the course, he had also accepted a new job with FedEx. He reported in our final interview that he had a good grasp on his new job responsibilities and regularly performed well in his role. His employers recognized and praised his work ethic. As such, C.C. earned wins in both the academic and professional context.

My analytical memo notes from each meeting with Jim demonstrate the progression of more positive self-talk. In our first interview, Jim referenced his managerial role at work by downplaying it. He reported that the only reason he had a leadership position at work was his ability to work weekends. In our mid-semester check-in, he shared the job functions he performed at work that exceeded his job description. By the final interview, Jim admitted that his move to campus would be a significant loss for his employer. Jim also reported academic successes. In that same final interview, he shared he had put in a substantial amount of time to

studying for a recent statics test and it had paid off. Jim earned a 90 on his test. He reported successes like this often in the term. Like C.C., Jim scored successes in both the academic and professional context.

Pablo had a different success. He continued to produce sculptures and shared images of his art with me. Pablo learned how to use the Canva tool while enrolled in the course. He enjoyed the software and reported that he could spend hours creating different visuals. As he grew more comfortable using Canva, he started to use his new skill to begin designing a website where he could display his art. Each of the artistic pursuits were points of pride for Pablo as the semester progressed. He found ways to use Canva for course assignments both in the career exploration course and in others where there was freedom in the assignment structure. Like his classmates above, Pablo scored wins and reported an increase in confidence. Each of these four had achieved successes in the term. Self-determination theory (SDT) posits that competence is a critical factor in motivation. When individuals feel that they are able to perform effectively in a specific behavior, the intrinsic motivation to engage in that behavior is cultivated (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Other participants who also reported successes in the term demonstrated diminished motivation. While the four participants above did see gains in their academic motivation, overall, the mean scores declined from pre-/ to post-test. However, findings were not statistically significant overall. Nevertheless, participants still assigned value to the course and reported increases in confidence and demonstrated increases in career self-efficacy even as their academic motivation declined.

Interpretations of Research Question 4

What are the experiences of students on academic probation who participate in the career exploration course? To understand the experiences of students on academic probation while enrolled in the career exploration course, I analyzed data in different phases of the course to track the progression of themes. Within the first five weeks of the course, the most common themes in interviews and early artifacts were hope and optimism, professed competence, and future uncertainty. However, the analysis of the second half of the course shifted these themes. Hope and optimism continued to be the more prevalent theme for all participants, enduring despite the documented decline of academic motivation. These findings indicated that hope and optimism that is sustained, even amid difficulty, positively influences the persistence of students on academic probation.

Professed competence, so common in the early weeks, waned into the second half of the course. Instead, a focus on career exploration yields powerful positive self-talk following setback in the academic context rose to the second most prevalent theme overall. Many of the early assignments were geared toward positive self-talk. However, in those early weeks participants referred to those themes of professed competence and future uncertainty more frequently. Interestingly, the second five weeks of the course included assignments that shifted from reflection of values and strengths into career and academic planning. Yet, participants frequently engaged in positive self-talk in the planning stage.

Future uncertainty also lessened in the second half of the course as participants began to engage in more active planning for their future professions. Instead, a renewed commitment to prioritization of caring for others rose as the third most prevalent theme overall. All 15 participants referenced their desire to care for others. In some cases, they had defined their career

goals around a profession that would provide them the opportunity to care for others. Others, like C.C., Fiona, and Jim, referenced finding ways to care for others in their professions through mentoring experiences. Some, like Jonah, Khloe, and Trev, indicated that their future career goals would allow them to provide for their family members. Participants referred to caring for others as a value they prioritized while making career decisions. The theme of caring for others did appear in the early weeks, but the number of references amplified in the second half of the course to eclipse future uncertainty.

As participants completed the course activities and advanced from early self-knowledge reflection to planning and life design, their experiences shifted collectively away from future uncertainty and professed competence to positive self-talk and caring for others. It is possible that this shift occurred because of those early assignments. Participants did report increased recognition of positive qualities and strengths. The volume of positive self-talk indicates that the early focus on strengths manifested into a positive lens through which participants approached their future planning.

Overall, participants experienced hope and optimism, positive self-talk and caring for others. They did so even as their academic motivation declined, but also as their career self-efficacy grew. Participants described their own excitement for their future. They talked about trusting and believing in themselves as the course progressed, acknowledging how far they had come. They told me of their increased confidence in what lie ahead in their futures, even if that future direction was still unclear. Their experiences in the course were paved by self-reflection, which revealed that hope and optimism that is sustained, even amid difficulty, positively influences the persistence of students on academic probation, a focus on career exploration yields

powerful positive self-talk following setback in the academic context, and a renewed commitment to prioritization of caring for others produced through career exploration reflection.

Implications

In the present study, I sought to design, implement, and assess the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation at Branchline University, as well to assess the value students assign to such a course and their experiences within it. I designed the course through the lens of positive psychology with an emphasis on identifying personal strengths. The activities asked participants to engage in reflection of values and positive qualities and to explore the intersection of those with their larger career goals. Overwhelmingly, students in the course reported an appreciation for the reflective experiences. Many reported that at no point in their academic career thus far had they had the opportunity to pause and reflect. To quote one participant: “it’s just a big rat race just to try to get through all the assignments and turn them over so you can get a good grade.”

The implications of this are astounding. The mission of higher education institutions is, in part, to equip students with the knowledge and skills to address society’s larger questions and engage productively as citizens. However, at times the race to graduation can hinder the opportunities for reflection. In theory, general education should provide this space. At Branchline, all students are required to complete the general education program. This includes writing-intensive coursework, mathematics, themes of liberal studies, and an inquiry into the sciences, both natural and social. The undergraduate catalog says this about the general education core:

It provides all undergraduate students, regardless of their majors, with the foundations of the liberal education they will need to be informed people who have the ability to act

thoughtfully in society, the ability to make critical judgments, and the ability to enjoy a life dedicated to learning and the pleasures of intellectual and artistic pursuits

(Branchline, University Leadership)

This is an admirable and important venture. However, participants in the present study indicated that they felt there was no time in the institution's timeline for exploration, reflection, or growth. They viewed the general education coursework, as well as the courses in their chosen program of study, as content to rehearse and then perform on final examinations or projects.

Jonah wrote about the "go-go-go" nature of college, reporting that he had learned concepts that he may or may not be able to recall later but had not learned much about himself. Pablo told me that he had accepted long ago that college was less about learning and more about endurance. He thought his future employers would view his four-year college degree as less knowledge gained and more a commitment met.

All participants in the present study referenced the lack of opportunity to engage in self-reflection while in college. The fault of this challenge does not entirely fall on the shoulders of higher education, but educational leaders have the opportunity to support the reflection and growth of our students. The limitations of the present study may impede the ability to generalize findings across institutions, yet the lessons learned offer insights that are beneficial to any institution with a focus on student learning and growth. Career exploration experiences have positively influenced student self-concept (Lau et al., 2021), self-efficacy (DeWitz et al., 2009), and identity development (Astin et al., 2011). Career courses, in particular those grounded in the exploration of values and purpose, have successfully enhanced academic self-efficacy (Grier-Reid et al., 2009). This study confirmed these findings with participants reporting increased confidence, sustained hope and optimism throughout the academic term, and demonstrated

increases in grade performance and retention. Leaders within higher education have the opportunity to positively influence student learning by designing and implementing career exploration resources beyond designated career centers or expanding career exploration resources across campus.

The findings of the present study will enhance the Branchline academic recovery program, in particular in the training and professional development experiences for course instructors. With the permission of the participants, I shared excerpts of the individual participant portraits during the annual academic recovery Instructor Institute. These portraits offered instructors a glimpse into the experiences of students enrolling in the course following a semester of difficulty. Moreover, these experiences served to remind all instructors of the danger of the assumptions and biases from the role of instructor. As an example, Trev's decision to log into class from his car may prompt the assumption that Trev is intentionally choosing a space that is not conducive to learning and therefore choosing not to prioritize the course and his own education. In reality, Trev's decision to attend class from his car was one of necessity. From his car in the parking lot of his apartment complex, he could access the Wi-Fi of the complex's front office, which he could not from his third floor apartment. The portraits of the 15 participants in the present study provided an authentic view of the challenges that prompted academic difficulty and the self-doubt or questioning that happened following the outcome of academic probation. They also provided instructors a window into the successes of the students served by the program.

Recommendations for Practice

In addition to disseminating findings to enhance the training procedures of all Branchline academic recovery program instructors, the findings presented herein provide insight into

curriculum enhancements within the academic recovery program, as well as academic courses within degree-granting programs. Participants consistently referenced the benefits of reflective experiences. The nature of the course activities in the career exploration course emphasized reflection of larger career goals and purpose, yet participants engaged equally in reflection of academic goals. In this study, career exploration experiences opened the door for reflection, and consequently growth. However, any opportunity for reflection of larger goals is important. Goal-setting theory has long posited that setting goals is intricately linked to success (Locke & Latham, 2002). Travers et al. (2014) confirmed that when students were able to self-determine their goals for growth, they saw improved academic outcomes, reduced stress levels, and enhanced wellbeing. Participants in the present study indicated appreciation for the opportunity to define their career and academic goals, but some felt that the course and the experiences within it would have been more beneficial prior to academic difficulty. Higher education professionals who wish to advance the teaching and learning in classrooms have the opportunity to enhance student learning by embedding these reflective experiences into academic courses or first-year or transfer seminars prior to academic difficulty, or by creating spaces for reflection beyond the classroom including orientation experiences or within academic advising conversations. By doing so, the institution communicates the prioritization of the growth of the students it serves.

Additionally, the benefit of a cultivating a sense of community among learners proved profound for participants in the present study. The added support of peers in academic spaces is advantageous in academic recovery programs, but also beyond them. Higher education practitioners would do well to explore the literature on group dynamics and fostering a sense of community in our classrooms to promote collaborative learning experiences. While the present

study specifically results in a sense of community among those students who have experienced recent academic difficulty, all learners may benefit from academic spaces that are inclusive to diverse learning preferences, goals, and experiences. Theobald et al. (2017) demonstrated that when learners feel comfortable with their peers in college classrooms, content mastery and participation increase significantly. In the present study, rapport-building among classmates began in the early class sessions through a series of reflective experiences that allowed participants to develop rapport gradually. Through the use of reflective exercises, instructors can allow students to establish connection and build trust with one another early in their courses in the effort of fostering learning and growth.

Recommendations for Future Research

The present study contributed to a growing body of career development literature by exploring the impact of a career exploration course for students on academic probation. The study investigated the effect of the course on career self-efficacy and academic motivation following a semester of academic difficulty. Furthermore, the study examined the value assigned to a career exploration course as part of academic recovery and the experiences of those students enrolled in the course. Findings offered insights into the power and benefit of reflection, goal setting, and cultivating a sense of community among students in classroom spaces. The mixed methods case study design allowed for an in-depth examination within a specific setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guetterman & Fetters, 2018). The study was contextually bound within Branchline and the academic recovery program. Similar studies that wish to explore the impact of a similar career exploration course in other settings may wish to conduct studies at other two or four-year institutions of varying sizes.

This study occurred within the COVID-19 global pandemic. Following the guidelines set forth by public health officials, I conducted the study virtually using the University-endorsed Zoom platform. The course and all activities within were completed remotely. Participants referenced the challenge of isolation when taking courses online rather than in the physical classroom space. Yet participants also assigned value to a sense of community with other students experiencing academic difficulty as part of the course. What remains unclear is whether this theme would persist in a traditional semester. A future study may explore the influence of peer support or a group approach in academic recovery programs. In this same vein, future studies may explore which classroom experiences cultivate a sense of community among students experiencing academic difficulty. The career exploration activities lent themselves to reflection and group share. A future study may seek to investigate whether other exploration activities such as goal-setting experiences yield the same impact.

In the present study, the academic motivation of participants diminished from the pre-/ to post-test AMS-C. Participants self-reported a decline in motivation as the coursework and rigor of their courses increased. These findings align with expectancy-value theory (Kosovich et al., 2017; Perez et al., 2014) which posits that students enter an academic term with inflated expectations that produce strong motivation in the early weeks of courses that ultimately diminishes as the term progresses. Beyond this, many predictive factors influence academic motivation including contingent self-worth (Liu et al., 2021), socioeconomic status (Rostami et al., 2018), and emotional intelligence (Tam et al., 2021). I did not attempt to explore these factors in the present study. However, future studies may explore the predictive and mediating variables and behaviors that influence the academic motivation of students on academic probation.

Summary and Conclusions

Students experiencing academic difficulty are one of the most vulnerable populations at both two and four-year institutions. It remains critical that higher education professionals invest the time and resources into providing meaningful support to these students. To do this, educational leaders must maintain a commitment to understanding the experiences of students experiencing difficulty in order to create programs and interventions that holistically assist students in their academic recovery.

Participants in the present study enrolled in the career exploration course following a difficult semester. Of the 15 participants, 11 were on academic probation and therefore at risk of academic suspension. The remaining four participants had narrowly avoided academic probation following the election of the revised Pass/No Credit COVID-19 academic policies. As such, all participants elected to enroll in the course and study during a time of academic recovery. Their stories presented here capture the complexities of this experience. In the beginning, they described their own self-doubt. They questioned their goals, their ability to succeed, and their place in college.

However, from that place of uncertainty they reflected and redefined their academic and career goals. Gradually they transitioned from self-doubt to self-compassion. They explored their individual purpose with many reaching a point of clarity. In the classroom, they cultivated a sense of community during a tumultuous time in the world. They championed and supported the growth of one another. The impact of the academic difficulty had diminished their self-efficacy, but as the term progressed, their confidence grew. Participants engaged in reflective experiences throughout the 10 weeks of the course and slowly, redefinitions of self emerged.

This dissertation sought to provide an authentic portrait of the student experience in the midst of academic recovery. It captured the hopes, the fears, and the questioning produced by difficulty in the academic context. It also captured the demonstrated growth that followed. In the aftermath of setback, participants demonstrated enhanced career self-efficacy by engaging in activities to explore and plan their future selves. The academic motivation of participants did diminish as the semester progressed, and yet the hope and optimism generated by early strengths-based reflection proved lasting.

In Spring 2021, while enrolled in the career exploration course and present study, the participants were still in the midst of the global pandemic which produced one hurdle after another. Additionally, participants were just starting to contend with the residual effects of the continued isolation brought on by COVID-19. Yet participants remained optimistic. They redefined their goals and reaffirmed for themselves their place at the University. In the end, participants reported enthusiasm for what lay ahead. All completed the term eligible to remain at Branchline on the path toward completing their degree. They had defined their next steps, reported increased confidence, and described the futures they had designed for themselves from both a place of pride and a place of hope.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284 ·
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Jordan Bullington](#)
CC: [David Siegel](#)
Date: 12/22/2020
Re: [UMCIRB 20-002819](#)
Exploring the Impact of a Career Development Intervention for Students on Academic Probation

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 12/21/2020. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1 & 2abc.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
AMS-C(0.01)	Standardized/Non-Standardized Instruments/Measures
CITI Certification(0.01)	Additional Items
Consent Form(0.01)	Consent Forms
Email Announcement(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Email Announcement(0.01)	Additional Items
Interview Protocols(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Proposal(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Site Letter Signed(0.01)	Additional Items
Study Protocol(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: IRB-TITLE CHANGE AMENDMENT APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moyer Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Amendment Approved

ID: [Ame1_UMCIRB 20-002819](#)

Title: [Amendment 1 for IRB Study #UMCIRB 20-002819](#)

THE DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION, AND
IMPACT OF A CAREER EXPLORATION
COURSE FOR STUDENTS ON ACADEMIC
PROBATION

Description: Your amendment has been approved. To navigate to the project workspace, click on the above ID.

APPENDIX C: IRB-APPROVED CONSENT FORM



Informed Consent to Participate in Research
Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: A REDEFINITION OF SELF: THE DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION, AND IMPACT OF A CAREER EXPLORATION COURSE FOR STUDENTS ON ACADEMIC PROBATION

Principal Investigator: Jordan Bullington-Miller, MA, MAED (Person in Charge of this Study)
Institution, Department or Division: Associate Director

Participant Full Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____

Please PRINT clearly

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) and Branchline study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of the present study is to explore the potential impact of a career development intervention for students on academic probation at [Branchline] as well as to understand how these students experience the career development intervention.

You are being asked to be in this study because you have chosen to participate in the Academic Seminar Course as part of the [Branchline] academic recovery program in Spring 2021 with the intention of improving your academic standing.

Additionally, you have been identified as a student who may benefit from a career development intervention based upon your response on the [Branchline] academic recovery program Initial Assessment which indicated major/career reasons as a potential factor in your own academic difficulty in Fall 2020.

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 25 people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?

You should not participate in the present study if you are under 18 years of age.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate. You may enroll in this specific UCOL 130 career development course, but not participate in the study. There is no penalty for doing so. You may also withdraw from the study at any point with any reasoning necessary.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at [Branchline] as part of the [Branchline] academic recovery program. The course and all study components will be conducted virtually through Zoom.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to do the following:

- Participate in two virtual interviews with the investigator regarding your experiences in a career development intervention.
- Artifacts you produce within the career course will be analyzed in conjunction with the interview. At the end of the course, the instructor will prepare a portrait of your individual experience within the course based upon your interview and written work. You will be asked to review the portrait and confirm it accurately depicts your experiences.

The interviews will be approximately 30 minutes and may be conducted during your initial/final instructor meeting. The review of your individual portrait will require approximately 30 minutes making the total time beyond class: 30 minutes.

- Additionally, you will be asked to complete two assessments during class time to assess career self-efficacy and academic motivation. Since these assessments will be used to assess impact of the course, you will be asked to complete each assessment twice (first and final class period). These assessments are as follows:
 - I. Academic Motivation Scale for College Students: Measures intrinsic and extrinsic motivation toward academic pursuits. Specifically designed for college students.
 - II. Career Decision Self-Efficacy Short Form: Shortened version of the CDSE which evaluates career self-efficacy. Career self-efficacy is a person's judgement of their own abilities to perform specific career behaviors.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future. This study will provide a space to engage in career exploration and reflection which may be beneficial to your larger career goals.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and [Branchline] may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

All data collected through the interview will be stored in a password protected electronic format. The results of the present study will be used for research and scholarly purposes only. The final report will not disclose any personal identifiers of participants.

The investigator will take precautions to ensure confidentiality and privacy. As such, data will be collected and stored only after consent is granted. With permission of the participants, the interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The transcripts and recordings will be analyzed by the investigator and stored in a password protected electronic format.

The investigator plans to publish the results of this study. To protect participant privacy and the confidentiality of the research data, the investigator will not include any information that could identify participants in the published results.

Other people may need to see the information the investigator collects about you. This may include people who work for [Branchline] and other agencies as required by law or allowed by federal regulations.

What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at (704) 687-7841, Monday-Friday between the hours of 8AM – 5PM.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

Is there anything else I should know?

Identifiers might be removed from the identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens and, after such removal, the information or biospecimens could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or your Legally Authorized Representative (LAR). However, there still may be a chance that someone could figure out the information is about you.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Alias Name (First)

APPENDIX D: INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Initial Interview Protocol

Question	Theoretical Foundation
1. What is your current major? [If a major is declared] How did you choose your current major? [If currently undecided] What are some of the majors or career pathways you have considered?	Occupational knowledge and problem-solving, Career self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983)
2. When you think you about your future, five or ten years down the road, what are your larger career goals?	Goal-setting and futuristic thinking, Career self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983)
3. Do you spend a lot of time thinking about the future? And how does thinking about the future make you feel?	Goal-setting and futuristic thinking, Career self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983)
4. Does thinking about the future influence your motivation in your college courses?	Futuristic thinking, Career self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983)
5. What are your strengths in school? What do you do well when it comes to academics?	Self-appraisal, Career self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983); Performance accomplishments; Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977)
6. What are your strengths in general? What do you do well outside of school?	Self-appraisal, Career self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983); Performance accomplishments; Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977)
7. Do you think major choice plays a part in your academic performance? How?	Emotional arousal and behavioral outcomes, Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977)
8. Do you think a career-focused seminar course is a worthwhile experience at this point in your college career? Explain.	Research Question 1

APPENDIX E: FINAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Final Interview Protocol

Question	Theoretical Foundation
1. Over the last six weeks, have you considered any new careers or majors?	Occupational knowledge, Career self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983)
2. How have you researched different occupations or college majors in the last few weeks?	Occupational knowledge, problem-solving Career self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983)
3. When you think you about your future, five or ten years down the road, what are your larger career goals?	Goal-setting and futuristic thinking, Career self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983)
4. Have your future goals changed in the last six weeks? And if so, in what way?	Goal-setting and futuristic thinking, Career self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983)
5. Does thinking about the future influence your motivation in your college courses? In what way?	Futuristic thinking, Career self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983)
6. What are your strengths in school? What do you do well when it comes to academics?	Self-appraisal, Career self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983); Performance accomplishments; Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977)
7. What have you learned about yourself over the last 10 weeks?	Self-appraisal, Career self-efficacy (Taylor & Betz, 1983);
8. Do you think that a career-focused course was a valuable experience as part of your academic recovery? How?	Reflection Question 1

APPENDIX F: DESCRIPTIONS OF ASSIGNMENTS

Descriptions Presented to all participants within the UCOL 130 course syllabus.

Letter to Self: You are required to submit a letter written to yourself by February 1st, 2021 at 11:59 PM via Canvas addressing the following:

- Your personal academic goal(s) for the semester
- Obstacles you may face in reaching your goal(s)
- Your individual strengths
- Your current career goal(s) & WHY this is your goal

***There is not a length requirement for this assignment, but the expectation is that all 4 prompts are addressed.**

Initial Instructor Meeting: You are expected to meet with me for an initial meeting by February 19th. You will need to schedule this meeting with me using the link on the Canvas page. Our individual meetings will last approximately 30 minutes and will occur virtually using Zoom.

Final Instructor Meeting: You are expected to meet with me for a final meeting at the end of our course. You will need to schedule this meeting with me using the link on the Canvas page. Our individual meetings will last approximately 30 minutes and will occur virtually using Zoom.

Strengths-Based Resume For this assignment, you will create a single document that captures your positive and challenging traits following our discussion of this assignment and related activities in class. Although this resume will differ greatly from the one you will produce and use to seek career opportunities in the future, this resume would be helpful for anyone who will be working alongside you.

There are no hard and fast structural requirements for the document beyond that it should be contained in one page – That said, it should be well organized and relevant to the topics discussed in class. I will share my own example with you in class/Canvas.

Career Genogram: A visual family tree that charts the careers of those closest to you. The purpose is to reflect on how you've viewed the concept of "work" to this point in your life.

Career Assessment Post-Test Reflection: As part of our course, you will take a career assessment. We will carve out time in our class periods for you to complete the assessment twice (once at the start of the term, once at the end). Your grade for the assignment will be a reflection of your results at the end of the academic term.

Life Design Project: The goal of this assignment is to articulate your view of life (Lifeview) and your view of work (Workview) and then to explore how these two perspectives speak to each other. But we will also add a third view – your Collegeview! The goal is to consider the reflective questions and to create a visual that defines your worldview. We will start this process in class on March 2nd and 4th.

Calling Connection: By this point in the semester you will have spent a good amount of time reflecting on your calling. For this project, we are going to launch into your future planning in five critical areas: Business, Creativity, Social/Political Relationships, Teaching, & Research. I'll ask you to create a visual to breakdown your plans and goals in each area and share with you my example.

LASSI: In order to earn points for this assignment, you will need to be present in our virtual class meeting the week of February 23rd or 25th and have your LASSI results in class. **To complete the in-class activities you will need to have a textbook from a different course (Preferably a course you find challenging), so please come prepared.**

***If you are absent for the LASSI interpretation during our virtual meeting, you will be required to complete the LASSI on your own and fulfill an alternative assignment in order to receive credit.**

Career Meet Up: Career Meet Ups are quick, 30-45 minute small group sessions focused on specific career and industry topics that are led by career coaches and industry professionals. There are more than 300 Career Meet Ups each semester. Your task for this course is to choose a Career Meet Up that is most applicable to your career journey. After you've attended this session, you must complete the online reflection in Canvas.

Note: Career Services will track attendance in these Meet Ups and will share a roster with me at the end of our course. To receive credit for this activity, you must be listed on the roster to confirm attendance and have submitted the reflection by the 4/12 date.

Final Reflection – Personal Charter: For the Personal Charter Project, you will create a visual or presentation that captures what you've learned about yourself over the course of the semester. This could be created in PowerPoint or another tool like Canva.com. My advice – hold on to the work for our course so you can easily track down materials (Tip: Create a folder on your computer where you put all UCOL 130 documents).

APPENDIX G: INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANT PORTRAITS

Ash. Ash is a male first-year student. Personal pronouns are he/him. Having been exposed to different texts and learning experiences under the influence of his highly educated family prior to enrolling at Branchline, Ash was highly analytical and open-minded. He found his academic probation standing alarming. He had done well in high school and had the grades and scholastic aptitude test (SAT) score to back this claim up, facts he shared with me in our initial interview. Ash disclosed to his classmates that he made the decision not to share his probationary standing with his family. In the initial assessment, he referenced this decision when responding to the question of what it means to be on academic probation: “To me, it means I have failed my first semester, and I feel like I cannot tell my family.”

At the start of our course, Ash was a declared English major. He was well versed in literature, the result of a mother who encouraged reading in her children at a young age. However, Ash was strongly considering adding a second major: political science. The act of double majoring was also a recurring theme in his family with multiple members pursuing two majors while in college. As he described it, the pursuit of a second major in college was “kind of a theme at this point for [the] family.” Education was significant in Ash’s family with one parent who had earned multiple graduate degrees from prestigious institutions and both his parents and sisters having received full scholarships to attend flagship institutions. As we began the term, Ash shared that his dream job involved combining his strengths in writing and communication with his passion for politics as a political journalist. When asked of the challenges that affected his performance in the previous semester, he named mental health concerns, multiple COVID-19 scares, and required residence hall quarantines.

As the semester progressed, Ash's classes increased in rigor. While he admitted reaching out to faculty members was not an enjoyable activity, he had done so at multiple points in the semester. In our final interview, he described the steps he had taken to advocate for himself. Still, the semester had proven challenging at various points. By mid-March, his stress levels had manifested into a physical reaction. He described the experience in our final interview: "I broke out in like hives. It was bad. It was on my hands. My hands were red and it was going all the way down my arms and up like my arms and legs because of like stress."

Fortunately, the morning of our interview, he confirmed that he woke feeling better. In April, Ash reported an "8.5 out of 10 on the confidence scale" as he headed into the final weeks of the term. He had decided to withdraw from a course much earlier in the spring but felt more comfortable with the workload of his remaining courses. He understood that it might take him more time to return to good academic standing. As he told me: "I want to get back in good standing, but I'm OK if that doesn't happen this semester. I understand that I could be a longer process, which is totally fine as long as you get there."

At the end of the term, Ash did return to good academic standing. In the final interview, he confirmed he had made the decision to add Political Science as a second major. Now that he was back on good academic standing, he was eligible to officially take this step. Ash also reported increased clarity in his larger career goals in political journalism.

Baki. Baki is a male first-year student. Personal pronouns are he/him. Baki was a student athlete and member of the Branchline football program. This meant that in addition to our course and his major advisors, athletic advising staff on campus also provided Baki with academic support. He frequently referred to his football coach as a person of inspiration, often sharing in our conversations excerpts of the speeches and motivational statements shared during team

meetings and practices. At the start of our course, Baki was a pre-business student, intent on exploring a career in real estate. However, just prior to starting the career exploration course, he had determined that he wanted to pursue the history major with the addition of the secondary education concentration on his path toward teaching history to high school students.

The youngest in his family, Baki was excited about pursuing a completely different path than his siblings or parents. With five older sisters in various career fields from the business arena to culinary arts and a mom successful in her career in the technology sector, Baki's educational goal of becoming an educator was unique. As he put it, "I want to drift off and do something totally different from everybody else in the family." While it was a change of pace from what others before him had done, Baki's family supported his new career plan. When asked of the challenges that affected his performance in the previous semester, he named a lack of focus and "bad habits." In our initial interview, Baki was feeling optimistic for the semester and behavior changes he was already implementing. He said, "I've been a lot more focused and been able to turn in a lot of assignments that I could have turned in last semester if I would have kept from being lazy."

Baki did well in his spring classes. He found spaces that were more conducive to studying and described the great strides he had made in completing work ahead of time, something he was justifiably proud to report. In our final interview, Baki talked about the campus resources and support systems he was taking advantage of in Spring 2021 that he admittedly did not utilize in the previous semester. In his post-career assessment reflection, Baki reflected on what he had learned:

“I learned that I can do a lot more if I just focus. It impacted me in the way that I was zoned in more and became a better student athlete. I’ll keep doing more and being focused so I can keep grades likes this.”

Of significance, Baki had taken another course in the term that he found interesting: Introduction to Africana Studies. The course led Baki to decide on the addition of Africana Studies as a second major. He reported that he was still on the path to becoming a history teacher but that he was also considering a second career as a life coach. This role would combine Baki’s passion for helping others to maximize their full potential with both his education and athletic experiences.

Bertha. Bertha is a female transfer student. Personal pronouns are she/her. Prior to enrolling at Branchline, Bertha completed the therapeutic recreation assistant associate degree from a community college in her hometown in western North Carolina. Bertha began the semester as a psychology major and described feeling moderately confident in that decision, but lately had been considering other majors. Among them, the English major had sparked her interest particularly due to a self-identified strength in writing.

While completing the recreational therapy program, Bertha has pursued different internship experiences including interning with a developmental center that assisted people with intellectual disabilities and a psychiatric hospital working specifically with kids. She enjoyed both experiences. In particular, working with the developmental center was fulfilling because of Bertha’s noted passion for the advocacy of those with documented disabilities.

At 27, Bertha was an adult learner. She expressed her excitement to explore different majors. She knew for certain that she had no interest in a career similar to the work she was doing at the time in a local pharmacy. This current job was less than fulfilling and motivated

Bertha to be intentional about the career goals she explored. As she put it, “I don’t want to go somewhere every day that I hate like the pharmacy.” Bertha worked many hours there, averaging between 30-39 hours each week. Often she used her breaks at work to call me from her car in the parking lot so we could complete our interviews. When asked of the challenges that affected her performance in the previous semester, Bertha named her transition to the University, the COVID-19 pandemic, and her “mentality.”

Despite the heavy workload and minimal support on the part of her employer, Bertha stayed actively engaged in the course. During the term, she received some good news in the form of COVID-19 relief stimulus funds, which she hoped would allow her to cut her hours at work. A central theme for Bertha was the commitment to working in a profession that allowed her to assist others. Bertha was a first-generation college student, and she was justifiably proud to have accomplished so much already with her associate degree already complete. She wrote in her career genogram reflection when responding to the question of how the careers of the people in her life had influenced her own career goals:

“Their career goals have inspired me to get my college degree even if it takes me longer to finish. I am determined to be the first person in my immediate family to receive a bachelor’s degree.”

Bertha did not choose a different major at the end of the course but also continued to reflect on whether or not psychology was the best fit. While there remained some uncertainty of future goals, she had started to narrow her focus in Spring 2021. In our final interview, Bertha spoke of exploring other minors like criminal justice and her long-term plan of graduate school that she wanted to keep on the table. Specifically, she was exploring the counseling graduate

program with a focus in substance abuse and addiction disorders. In short, the concrete plan was still forming, but she had some direction.

Bertha and I continued to connect into the fall semester, specifically to talk about her minor options. She decided to replace her current minor of cognitive science with public health, as this minor would be applicable and beneficial to her career path.

Bri. Bri is female first-year student. Personal pronouns are she/her. Bri started the semester with a brand new major, environmental science. This was the third declared major since enrolling at Branchline. The first two were education and business, but she had also considered meteorology and criminal justice. The sciences were a common thread in Bri's listed interests. She was drawn to the environmental science major and the possibility of pursuing a career working with the EPA. Bri talked about the process of exploring majors in her first semester of college and the input of her family in the decision-making process. She said: "I changed it because my dad was like, you're not going to make a lot of money for education." Her transition to the business college aligned with her father's career in real estate. Ultimately, Bri changed course again as she was not "really feeling [the major]."

A point of anxiety for Bri was that she had not been to campus since enrolling at the University. During the pandemic, her classes were fully remote and she decided to stay home to save money. She was not alone in this. Frustration at not being able to attend class in-person was a common point of conversation in the course. Bri described in our initial interview a "nervous excited" feeling about returning for Fall 2021. When asked of the challenges that affected her performance in the previous semester, she focused on a lack of motivation. In our early conversation, I asked what was currently motivating her. After some thought she answered:

“Yeah, I really don’t know. I guess, making people proud and hopefully making a change in the world with whatever I do and just helping the community.”

By the end of the term, Bri’s career goals had changed, this time leading her to the computer science program. She had started researching the major during the course. We talked in her final interview about the process to declare the new major. Her goal was to use the summer session to begin taking the pre-major courses on her way to transitioning into the program.

As we talked more, Bri shared her idea of hosting coding boot camps in her small town to inspire women of color to explore computing and break down stereotypes about the computing profession. She reiterated this in her final discussion post when she said: "The legacy I want to leave behind is that anyone is capable of going into the STEM field, no matter your race or gender."

One of the challenges she faced early on was the input of other people in her larger career goals. Each of the people, as she put it in her personal charter, wanted “only what was best for [her].” However, by the end of the course Bri described a strong shift into taking control of her own decisions. She reported: “I feel more structured since my path was a very blurred at the beginning of this year.”

Bri and I did connect in Fall 2021. She shared that she had done well in summer courses and had enrolled in the required prerequisite courses to declare the computer science major. She reported that all was well and that she was enjoying her computing coursework thus far. After meeting with an academic advisor, Bri confirmed that following her successful completion of her prerequisite computing courses in the fall, she would be eligible to declare the computer science major.

C.C. C.C. is a male first-year student. Personal pronouns are he/him. C.C. was a mechanical engineering student with the intention of declaring the motorsports concentration. The choice of major had been a natural one for C.C. as he was mechanically inclined and had an interest in how things were put together. Most notably C.C. described the act of fixing a bicycle and enjoying this so much that he had explored working at a bike shop in the University area before COVID halted his ability to move onto campus.

C.C. was confident in his major, but others had piqued his interest over the years. He had considered computing and informatics, as well as other disciplines within engineering. C.C. had also considered the arts with a specific interest in music and singing. At the start of our class, C.C. had begun exploring other avenues at the University where he might engage in this artistic interest including clubs and organizations grounded in the performance arts. His family fostered his appreciation for the arts. I asked if their interest had piqued his own. He said: “My mom’s grandfather was a singer and my mom really liked singing. And she encouraged me to sing and do the arts, but she never pushed me to do it if that makes any sense.”

Of importance, C.C. graduated high school and enrolled at the University during COVID-19. The global pandemic drastically altered the course of his first year. C.C. had anticipated living on-campus before the University determined the delivery of courses would remain online. This halted his experience of living and taking classes on the physical campus.

C.C. was not on academic probation while enrolled in my course, although prior to the election of COVID-19 policies he would have been at risk of the probationary standing. His undergraduate college determined that his performance in Fall 2020 put him at risk of future academic challenges and encouraged him to enroll in the Branchline academic recovery program. He chose our class after receiving the IRB-approved email outreach inviting him to

participate in the course and study. I sent this outreach after reviewing C.C.'s initial assessment. While he was certain of his major, on his assessment he listed "No clear career goals" as a factor that contributed to his academic difficulty. When asked of the challenges that affected his performance in the previous semester, C.C. answered with a lack of motivation, online learning, and "forgetfulness."

In our course, C.C. explored different career options. He ultimately determined that he was on the right path all along and reported a renewed commitment to his mechanical engineering major. In class activities, C.C. explored the different avenues he could take with mechanical engineering. He was interested in the design aspects of the field and described the rise of electric cars and the ways he could contribute to this industry in the future. C.C. also articulated ideas on how he could make an impact in the field by mentoring engineering students in the future.

Over time, C.C. acknowledged an increase in confidence as he articulated his goals, but he also demonstrated increased positive self-talk. By our final interview, he had secured a new position with FedEx. This opportunity provided both a flexible schedule and decent compensation. It was early in his tenure with the company, but already C.C. had become an employee his supervisors relied on. He reported justifiable pride in his work ethic in both the academic and professional context.

Charlie. Charlie is a female transfer student. Personal pronouns she/her. Charlie's interest in the medical community stems, in part, from a long history of significant family ties to the field, her grandfather, a renowned neurosurgeon, both her mother and aunts, nurses. Charlie grew up hearing stories about the medical profession, which cultivated an interest early on. At times the success of her family produced additional pressure on Charlie. She described this in our

initial interview: “It makes me nervous. I feel like I have a lot of expectations to live up to with my family’s occupation history and that really stresses me out.” At the start of the course, Charlie had considered a range of career pathways in the field including nurse, nurse practitioner, physician assistant, and physical therapist. However, she had also considered a range of careers in the broader sense of the medical profession including mental health and social work. It was in the latter category that Charlie believed her strengths aligned best.

Charlie had a sense of pride associated with her identity as one of the hardest workers at her current job. She thoroughly enjoyed reading and learning and was committed to her continuous growth as an individual. Charlie chose this section of the course because of its focus on career exploration. We talked about the different pathways she had explored previously and she expressed a strong desire to use the course to reflect, finalize her path and move forward. She described her excitement when she first learned of the course in an early conversation:

“I am so confused with what I want to do right now that when I learned you were offering this class I was so excited! I literally called my mom right after I signed up for the course and was like ‘mom, you’re going to be so proud of me!’”

Of significance, in the year prior to our course, Charlie had prioritized her own happiness. She talked about her reflection on how important happiness was in her own life and the life of others. It is this understanding that led her to question her current major in biology. To Charlie, this major was somewhat intimidating. She referred to it as “scary”. When asked of the challenges that affected her performance in the previous semester, Charlie named her mental health. She shared “My biggest obstacle will be to overcome my depression. I have been struggling with depression for the past 5 years of my life, and it has grown its strongest in the past year or so.” Among career exploration, Charlie defined a goal of committing to self-care.

Charlie was not on academic probation while enrolled in my class. However, she was recruited to participate in the program as she was originally placed on probationary status following Fall 2020. Charlie utilized COVID-19 grading policies to return to good academic standing. She chose to stay enrolled in the course. In a phone conversation with her prior to the course beginning, Charlie shared that she had planned to step away from school for the semester until she learned of this course with its career-theme. The career exploration course was the only one Charlie enrolled in during Spring 2021.

Following the traumatic experience of losing a close friend in the middle of the term, Charlie missed three classes, or 30% of the course but managed to produce the majority of work completed outside of the class. We did attempt to schedule a final interview, and discussed multiple dates, but ultimately we were unable to connect.

At the end of the term, Charlie was still planning to pursue a career in the medical field. While she continued to question her biology major, she was more firmly committed to supporting the mental health of individuals. Early in the semester, the class wrote meaningful work statements. These single sentence statements captured the work an individual wanted to do in the future with the specific audience they wish to serve. Charlie's meaningful work statement was: "Because I value empathizing for others, I want to use my talents and gifts in motivating, helping and healing others to use my abilities to help others be the best version of themselves that they can be." In her personal charter, when reflecting on this statement and her future, she wrote:

"My meaningful work statement has opened up my thought about how I want to spend my life, and who I want to impact. This has impacted my academic progress because I

have begun to comprehend what it is that I want to do. I will remember this statement, because it gives me motivation and confidence for my future.”

Charlie continued into Fall 2021 as a pre-biology major but did not enroll in any biology courses. She shared after registration that her goal was to take fewer classes each semester as she continued to reflect. Her plan still focused on graduate school in the future. Specifically, she planning to apply to a graduate program that would prepare her to counsel others through mental health crises.

Fiona. Fiona is a female transfer student. Personal pronouns are she/her. Prior to beginning the career exploration course, Fiona had considered a few different majors, including nursing and marketing, before landing on her major of communication studies with a concentration in public relations. Fiona came from a family of hard workers, and she grew up recognizing the importance of a solid work ethic. While enrolled in my class and others, she worked several hours each week caring for young children (ages 3 months to 8 years old) while completing her course work online.

In early artifacts, Fiona shared that she wanted to focus on her study skills in our course. The previous semester had been a challenging one and didn't end as Fiona had hoped. She said:

“I would like to change how angry and upset I get with myself if I do not accomplish something. I feel like I have been extremely hard on myself, especially last semester because I did not succeed as planned. I know I am doing my best, and I am enough.”

She acknowledged that in the previous semester she had difficulty keeping up with assignments without the cue produced from being in a physical classroom. Fiona missed assignments and as she fell further behind it became difficult to catch up. She started the

semester with a planner and used it to track daily progress of assignments in an effort of making progress toward her goal for the term: “To bring all of [her] grades back up to A’s.”

Another goal of Fiona’s was to finalize her career field. This prompted her to select the career exploration course to explore. She shared:

“The last thing I would change about myself is my uncertainty that I feel with my life, and my career. I feel as though I am so behind because I do not know what I want to do with my life. I feel like I haven't found what really inspires me, and that hurts.”

In the early weeks of the course, Fiona expressed anxiety over her own future uncertainty. By the end of the course, Fiona expressed excitement for what lie ahead: “What excites me is the endless possibilities of this plan. I think that I could do so much with my life, and it is crazy that my career hasn't even started.”

In our mid-semester check-in, Fiona shared that she was confident she had selected a career pathway that aligned well with her strengths. What remained to be decided was the specifics of her career goals given that the PR career path could take her anywhere. As the semester went on, Fiona began to narrow in on specific industries where she was interested in pursuing PR experiences: namely skincare and fashion. She began considering internships as her next step and imagining where the degree could take her. She wrote in her post-career assessment reflection:

“I am more excited than nervous now. In the beginning, I was very nervous and not so confident. As I mentioned last question, I feel more confident with myself and what I can accomplish. I think I am more excited than ever, and will be happy with my career.”

That confidence extended into her academics. In our final conversation, Fiona shared her successes thus far in the term in each of her classes. Fiona reported a renewed pride in the work she submitted in our class and others.

Jim. Jim is a male transfer student. Personal pronouns are he/him. In high school, Jim excelled in drafting and technical courses. His work was noticed by a teacher who took an interest in him. At the time, Jim was considering a career in architecture. In conversations with this teacher, Jim learned that the architecture field was a competitive one. The teacher recommended that Jim consider alternative career pathways and suggested that Jim explore the civil engineering major and profession. That conversation stuck with Jim and led to his eventual declaration of the major at Branchline.

Prior to the semester of the career-themed UCOL 130 course, Jim had been taking courses in the engineering major. The road wasn't always easy. In the sequential, math-intensive civil engineering program, Jim had already completed Calculus III with differential equations still ahead of him. At his technical college, Jim had started in developmental math courses and worked his way through the developmental curriculum to complete Calculus II prior to transferring. This work ethic and resilience was a recurring theme in Jim's pursuit of his degree.

Despite Jim's resilience and success working his way through a challenging plan of study, he was often hard on himself or chose not to give himself credit for the things he accomplished. In an analytical memo (dated February 1, 2021) following my first meeting with Jim, I wrote:

“Jim's interview indicates substantial negative self-talk. Even in spaces where he is responding with strengths, he tends to downplay (When I asked him about his personal

strengths he said: "I guess math? But I've taken so many math classes that I should be strong in math."). His responses indicate that he is hard on himself."

In addition to taking classes as a full time student, Jim also worked a substantial amount of hours as a manager for his current employer, sometimes averaging well over 40 hours each week. While Jim felt relatively confident about his major, the uncertainty of the future made him nervous. He described this feeling in our initial interview:

"I'm scared. Just being honest. I'm afraid that I'll never get there. And I think I have my future planned but just because I have it planned it doesn't go that way. That I might not ever graduate, or something may come up to where I have to force myself out of school money-wise, so I try not to think about it too much."

When asked of the challenges that affected his performance in the previous semester, each of Jim's answers were tied to his significant work commitments: "Bills: I was worried about bills and not worried enough on school," and "Motivation: while working 40+ hour weeks I would find myself tired and not really focused on school."

By our final meeting, Jim acknowledged his own resilience and work ethic. In addition to taking classes as a full time student, Jim continued to work a substantial amount of hours as a manager for his current employer. He referenced this work ethic in his career genogram reflection:

"Work for me has always been an easy for me, but I also was always taught that there isn't such a thing as "that's not my job" and I also thinks that helps me in my work today because I'll do anything my boss tells me to do and it has progressed me through the company I work for now."

At the end of the course, Jim remained committed to his engineering major, although he confirmed that he felt validated in this decision. He had used his major mapping assignment to investigate different concentrations he could declare. By the time he completed the CDSE-SF post-test, he reported increased confidence: “I was more confident and felt better about my classes and in myself.” In assignments, Jim elaborated on his goals in the profession. He intended to work toward becoming a professional engineer (PE). This role would allow him to serve as a mentor to first-year engineers. In that final meeting, Jim also shared that he was applying to internships in the University area for Fall 2021.

In Fall 2021 when Jim and I re-connected, he was experiencing academic difficulty in his course schedule but had been in conversation with his advisor and his individual faculty members and reported that he was working to turn things around. His Spring 2021 term had ended well. Jim told me he was determined to stay in good academic standing.

Jonah. Jonah is a male transfer student. Personal pronouns are he/him, At 26, Jonah had experienced what he referred to as a “long bath” of exploring majors in college. He started college right out of high school at another four-year institution as a biomedical engineering student. Eventually he changed to computer engineering unsure of whether this was the right fit given that his work with computers had long been a hobby. Eventually, he left college and worked full-time for a little more than a year before returning to a community college to study architecture. The plan at the time was to finish the architecture degree, but the program spaced the courses out making it difficult to graduate in a timely manner. Consequently, Jonah began exploring the transfer path, but learned that the architecture credits did not transfer to other colleges.

At the time, Jonah realized that he had already completed several courses required in an engineering curriculum including introduction courses, math courses, and some of the science requirements like physics. He decided that he was already on this path and may as well pursue it as originally planned, only this time he decided to change focus to civil engineering which somewhat aligned with his architectural interests. As our course was beginning, Jonah was motivated to finish college and begin his professional career in the civil engineering field. Jonah was optimistic and highly engaged. He regularly offered insights in class. I asked Jonah about his strengths, and he offered as his answer the pace with which he processes new information. He also described this as detrimental:

“I absorb information pretty quickly. That’s probably the biggest thing. Just picking up on new stuff quickly. Tends to get me in more trouble than it being an advantage because I’ve been in school for so long so I like put stuff off because I know I get it done. I create more stress for myself.”

When asked of the challenges that affected his performance in the previous semester, Jonah shared: his “father’s stroke,” the COVID-19 pandemic, and “poor time management.”

During the semester, Jonah experienced a traumatic event that meant he needed to step away from our class for a while. He returned, made up missing work, and finished the semester. This trauma made it challenging to stay motivated, but Jonah did submit strong reflective work. While at the end of the course he reported not having learned anything new about himself, he did self-report an increase in clarity and confidence in his major. In his calling connection assignment, Jonah shared that he was applying for a summer internship. In a comment within his post-career assessment reflection, Jonah noted:

“I’m more confident in my goals, I feel that through having to define them I’ve cemented them to myself. But it’s made me more nervous. I feel that now that I know it’s something I definitely want I have something to lose.”

Jonah acknowledged the complexity of mixed of emotions when you define your goals: excitement but also the anxiety of the pressure that comes with it. Jonah and I connected in Fall 2021, and he shared that his classes were going well and was grateful to be back on campus.

Khloe. Khloe is a female transfer student. Personal pronouns are she/her. At the start of our semester, Khloe was undeclared of a college major, although she had an interest in the business college, specifically the marketing major. While the major itself was uncertain, Khloe had a clear vision of her future career goal. Khloe aspired to lead her own real estate company, a dream cultivated by watching her father’s successful entrepreneurial efforts. Just prior to starting our course, Khloe’s father had begun investing in properties which introduced her to the field of property management and investments. The plan following graduation was a collaborative one. Khloe planned to pursue her real estate licensure, and once this was accomplished, she and her father hoped to start their own real estate business together. With this plan in place, I asked Khloe if she spent much time thinking about her future. She replied: “All the time! Every day. I always, I feel like the decisions I’m making now always tend to like go back to ‘will this effect something for when I graduate.’”

For Khloe, this goal of investing in properties and working alongside her family was exciting. Furthermore, this goal aligned well with Khloe’s strengths. In the academic context, Khloe was an exceptional writer. Her ability to communicate well in writing also stemmed from her ability to research and form strong arguments. On a personal level, Khloe was perceptive. She was able to recognize the emotions of those around her. As she explained, this ability to

“read the room” often allowed her to adapt based on the needs of others and to effectively connect with them.

Khloe’s consideration of the marketing major was born from her understanding of the skills that could be honed in the courses including effectively communicating and building and promoting a brand, all skills Khloe recognized as important for her future entrepreneurial aspirations. However, Khloe was also starting to consider other majors that might provide these skills and provide a quicker timeline to graduation. As a transfer student, Khloe brought more than 40 credits from her previous four-year university to Branchline. A focus while in our class was to find a major that made the most out of those credits without adding significant time to Khloe’s completion of the degree. The graduation timeline was an important factor in the major decision. Academic probation felt like a significant setback for Khloe, as it potentially jeopardized her ability to reach her expected graduation date. She said:

“Sometimes, I question college, if it’s worth it, or if it’s actually worth me finishing, but I always have to think, snap myself out of it because I’m obviously here for a reason. I’ve stuck by it for so long. I’m almost done. I might as well finish. But it’s easy to get discouraged.”

When asked of the challenges that affected her performance in the previous semester, Khloe shared “I procrastinate a lot, so this is something I’m currently working on changing.” During our class, Khloe began researching other majors of interest. Of importance, a major factor in this process was a result of a meeting with her advisor to map out her academic plan, a process we talked about in our class and during our one-on-one meetings. In this conversation with her advisor, she learned that her graduation path would be far longer than she had hoped. A delayed graduation was disappointing, but Khloe approached that obstacle from a place of

action. She continued researching majors that would allow her to reach graduation on her timeline, while still pursuing an area of interest that would propel her forward in a professional setting.

While a common question from students in our course drew upon the connection of major to career, Khloe's exploration of majors wisely focused on the skills she could develop in a major. She used our course to reflect on her strengths, her experiences, and her goals. In the calling connection assignment, Khloe dove deeper into her purpose. As she explained, coming from a family who had immigrated to the United States, she was well aware of the barriers in place that prevent others from owning their own home. This is where Khloe planned to make an impact. She described her passion of helping others to find and build a home.

I connected with Khloe in Fall 2021 to check in. Following a strong Spring 2021 term, she had successfully declared her new major in political science. Khloe was still pursuing her future career goal in real estate. She reported enjoying her courses, especially the ones in her new major. Her graduation timeline of December 2022 was still intact.

Marigold. Marigold is a female transfer student. Personal pronouns are she/her. Marigold was a biology major and was working to complete both her degree requirements and prerequisite requirements for a physician assistant (PA) program in the future. In addition to biology, Marigold hoped to declare the Spanish minor with the explicit goal of becoming fluent in the language, which she believed would be helpful in her medical profession.

Prior to the class, Marigold considered other majors like psychology and biomedical engineering, but quickly changed course when she considered how important it was for her to have patient interaction in her daily work. She confirmed this when shadowing a cardiology PA, an opportunity she thoroughly enjoyed. Her decision to pursue this career path had been

sustained by regular exposure to the medical field. Marigold's mother, a nurse practitioner, had worked in various medical settings, including a hospital, and her experiences opened the door for Marigold to connect with doctors, nurses, and PAs to learn more about their work. These conversations solidified Marigold's interest in the profession.

Marigold enjoyed her time as an undergraduate, but because of its more restrictive nature, she was excited to progress to medical school. She possessed a love of learning and talked openly about her own growth mindset. An English teacher had introduced the concept of growth mindset to Marigold in middle school. In a conversation early in the semester, Marigold noted her love of learning:

“I love learning. I love information, and I think it's great, um, I am very aware of what I know and what I don't know. And what I don't know excites me because that means there's always something else.”

She was inquisitive, which was apparent in our conversations when at multiple points she referenced “Googling” things she heard in the profession but was not familiar with at the time. Her love of learning spanned to her research in her future career goals. By the time our class began, in addition to job shadowing, Marigold had researched the realities of her future graduate program including the importance of a broader education in PA school rather than limiting herself to a single specialized form of medicine. Additionally, she had already leveraged her affiliation with the Pre-PA organization and the Pre-Health advising team on campus to review resources related to her professional goals. In the same semester in which Marigold enrolled in the career exploration course, she was taking two electives included on a pre-approved list of electives to be competitive in the medical school application process. In short, Marigold had done her homework.

When asked of the challenges that affected her performance in the previous semester, she named her concern over the health of her grandmother, her own mental health, and like many of her peers, difficulty amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Marigold was not on academic probation while enrolled in our course, although she was identified in the target population for the Branchline academic recovery program initially because of her original academic probation status following Fall 2020. She elected to utilize the COVID-19 grading policies, which returned her to good academic standing. In a conversation with an advisor from her undergraduate college, Marigold decided to participate in the program to receive academic support. She chose our class after receiving the IRB-approved email outreach inviting her to participate in the course and study. I sent this outreach after reviewing Marigold's initial assessment. While in our early interviews she expressed strong confidence in her career goals, on her assessment she listed "Unsure what jobs are associated with my major," "No clear career goals," and "Not sure why I'm in school" as factors that contributed to her academic difficulty.

Over the course of the term, Marigold grew more confident in her chosen career path. While she had explored alternative plans, she ultimately emerged from our course committed to her goal of continuing her education in a PA medical program and entering the medical profession.

One point of growth Marigold identified in herself was a renewed comfort in her graduation timeline. In the life design assignment, Marigold referenced the length of her undergraduate experience. As a transfer student pursuing a competitive major and the addition of courses through the Pre-PA curriculum, Marigold's undergraduate experience would not conclude in the traditional four-year window. During this project, she acknowledged feeling more

comfortable with her timeline. She noted that while her college experience was “atypical” as a twice-transfer student, she knew she had grown:

“My struggles and challenges have made me who I am. They have [made] me stronger and more resilient towards new challenges. We can only grow by being challenges. My struggles have made me more confident in my choices.”

She used the course to clarify details in her plan. In our final meeting, she shared that she had been thinking proactively about possible elective courses to make the most of the remaining time in her undergraduate career. On a personal level, she also contacted a realtor to talk about buying a house.

Pablo. Pablo is a male transfer student. Personal pronouns are he/him. Pablo’s greatest strength may well be his creativity. He was an artist, a sculptor. His artistic pursuits brought him immense joy. However, while his art continued to be a significant part of his life, Pablo was not convinced that this would lead to a realistic career path. As such, at the start of our class in Spring 2021, Pablo was declared a pre-kinesiology major working toward the upper division exercise science program.

Pablo transferred to Branchline in Fall 2020. The decision to major in exercise science was somewhat natural. Exercise was a big part of his life, and it seemed like a practical career path that would include both an interest with the ability to earn a reasonable income so that he could, as he described, “keep the lights on.” However, equipped with a major, Pablo was still unclear of the specific career role he might pursue in the field. Outside of his current major and an interest in art and sculpture, which he was not ready to completely rule out either, Pablo had not spent much time considering different majors or careers. This is what brought him to our class in Spring 2021.

As we began the course, Pablo was interested in pursuing exercise science as career field while still producing art for purchase as a “side hustle.” He was also interested in investing in the stock market in the future. Pablo self-reported a talent for writing and openly expressed appreciation for the freedom offered in his humanities courses over the more rigid rules in a math-based course.

Of concern, as of our initial interview, Pablo had not been able to connect with an advisor since transferring to Branchline. In his review of this portrait, Pablo offered more contextual detail. He shared that during the term, he was able to connect by email and brief Zoom meetings, but those conversations yielded minimal answers. He was frustrated when there were changes in his college that resulted in a new academic advisor assigned to support him, but Pablo did not receive any communication from the college or this new advisor. Rather, any success he had with connecting to his new advisor came from his numerous outreach attempts, or as he put it “aka blowing up her email” after trying several times unsuccessfully to make an appointment. The delay in setting up this meeting meant that he had yet been able to have some of these important conversations with a staff member from his academic college. While many of the participants made reference to their pending graduation dates, the timeline of when he would finish school was not concerning. He said:

“I’m not too worried about the timeline as long as where I’m headed is good, so as long as I need to. I just need to kind of figure out what the goal is to figure out what classes I need to take and then I could kind of realize how long it would take me to do that.”

A goal for Pablo in the course was to define his larger goals. When asked of the challenges that affected his performance in the previous semester, he shared: “I’m pretty sure I

have a learning disability that I haven't fully evaluated. This learning disability seems to really distract me from fully being able to concentrate, focus and retain information.”

While the semester proved motivationally challenging for Pablo, he acknowledged his own growth, specifically in his stress management and mindset. An interesting revelation came from our final interview. Pablo did not believe he put adequate time and reflection into his assignments in the course. He wrote in his post-career assessment reflection: “I do feel as though I did not spend enough time to learning more from these activities and presentations, about myself, and the advice/strategies.” This was surprising to me. Pablo turned in some of the most impressive artifacts. They were creative and reflective. In my analytical memo (dated April 16, 2021) following our final interview, I wrote:

“I asked Pablo, as a follow-up to his comment that he had not taken his assignments seriously, what his process was to complete an assignment for my class. What he described: he would open a Word doc and then did real-honest-to-goodness reflection before he turned to Canva to design a visual to go with the reflection. To be clear, I do not know what else I would want from a student. He took the time to reflect and then created a high quality visual. This is exactly what I want students to do.”

A continuous challenge was that Pablo was still in the pre-major status of exercise science program. This meant he was completing general education requirements and other pre-kinesiology courses to gain entry into the major in the future. While the wait was frustrating, ironically, Pablo also felt that the classes themselves were flying by with little time for reflection and practical application. He hoped that once he reached his major courses, this would be different:

“My relationship with school has been pretty weird for the most part. I don’t know, everything is just so like break-neck speed in high school and [his community college] it’s like just a big rat race just to try to get through all the assignments and just turn them over so you can get a good grade. And that’s all it really feels like some times. At least with general ed[ucation], it’s like you’re checking off a checklist for you to be able to move on to the real stuff you’re trying to get to.”

When reviewing this portrait after the conclusion of our course, Pablo told me that he still stood by this statement, but he did want to provide one point of context. He felt that many of the struggles he spoke of above were “heightened or exacerbated by the symptoms of [his] previously undiagnosed ADHD.”

By the end of our course, Pablo continued to be unclear on his major. He did not know whether it was the right fit given that he still did not have access to major courses. Access to courses in specific majors for non-majors is a significant barrier across colleges at the University. The colleges utilize the concept of pre-major status to allow students the opportunity to take an introductory course or required core classes before declaring and taking courses in the major. However, this does produce an added barrier by halting progression toward graduation.

I continued to meet with Pablo in Fall 2021. As of this writing, Pablo is compiling his artistic work for the application to add the art major. He does not plan to complete the degree, but admission to the art program will grant him access to the studio art classes, which Pablo knows from his time at his last institution, will provide an outlet for creative expression. Since the conclusion of our course, Pablo had begun working with a psychologist on a regular basis and had begun treating his diagnosed ADHD. He reported improved attention and increased motivation. In our conversations in Fall 2021, he seemed more hopeful and confident, a

statement he agreed with during his last review of this portrait. Pablo continued to meet with me to provide updates on his academics and artistic pursuits.

Sofia. Sofia is a female transfer student. Personal pronouns are she/her. As a biology major, Sofia had a strong interest in the natural sciences. This interest grew during high school. Sofia's high school actually contained five different schools in one. Each school had its own unique focus from biological sciences to engineering to the business arena and more. Sofia enrolled in the biology program and was able to take a series of classes in the subject where she discovered a passion for biology that has persisted into college. While the coursework was more demanding in college and required more time for studying, Sofia's interest in the subject matter kept her moving forward. She shared in our early conversation when asked if she was enjoying her biology major: "In some courses I am. Some courses are more challenging, but overall, they're pretty interesting. It's a lot more studying, but it's worth it."

At the beginning of our course, Sofia planned to use her biology degree to pursue a career in the medical profession, specifically working in a lab taking and analyzing body samples. As a child, Sofia had considered pursuing medical school. She recognized early on the competitive nature of the admission process and felt somewhat discouraged. However, she was not ready to rule out any continued education in the medical field and was not opposed to a graduate degree in the future.

Sofia was close to graduating. Her timeline had her graduating one year from the end of our course in May 2022. Her probationary standing threatened that graduation date, which Sofia found concerning: "but now that I only have, after this semester, one more year left I'm just worried that maybe I won't finish all my credits or maybe I'll need more hours and that's what worries me sometimes." In light of her approaching graduation date, Sofia had been thinking a

lot about her future. While she was ready to start planning and taking steps to prepare for her professional career post-college, she acknowledged that much of the future was still uncertain.

When asked of the challenges that affected her performance in the previous semester, Sofia named difficulty managing her time, online coursework, and a “lack of interest” in some of her courses that impacted her motivation. She also described the impact of early setbacks in her courses that negatively influenced her motivation:

“When you do good in a class or you understand the class, that keeps you more motivated, for me if I do bad on a grade that’s, that just unmotivates me a lot, but, and it’s hard to keep motivated after that.”

During the course, Sofia began exploring new medical professions. In her final interview, Sofia shared that she had become interested in genetic counseling and had started researching the specific credentials she would need. In that conversation, she talked about graduate school, which had become a top priority. Sofia had also already connected with her advisor to talk about this career field. Together, she and her advisor made a plan for her to register for a series of classes with genetics as the focus area to align with her interest and career goals. Sofia had also mapped out her graduation timeline with these courses now included.

Sofia described a renewed focus on her strengths during our final interview. She reported increased confidence and improved motivation after spending time reflecting on her positive qualities. In particular, the odyssey plan assignment proved motivational. As she described it in her personal charter:

“Usually when you're a kid you do similar activities but now it seems more real and very close to happening. I learned that I want a work and life balance to enjoy the simple

things in life. This 5 year planning will motivate me to follow my goals and be aware of what my next move will be.”

I asked Sofia if she could sum up what she had learned in our course and she described the importance of leaning into strengths. The career exploration course, taught through the lens of positive psychology, carved out many opportunities to articulate the things she was doing well. Sofia confirmed that these experiences were helpful for her and that she had learned a great deal about herself in the course.

Tina. Tina is a female transfer student. Personal pronouns are she/her. For Tina, her psychology major had a personal connection. As a child going through the divorce of her parents, Tina received the support of a caseworker who served as a legal guardian through the process. The impact of this individual and the pivotal role they played was lasting. This profession intrigued Tina and it led to her eventual declaration of the psychology major.

Prior to attending Branchline, Tina attended three other institutions. She completed an associate degree at a community college in New York where she also enrolled in another course focused on career exploration. Between the four colleges, Tina had explored as many as eight different majors. As she began the spring semester, she was excited for her current major because of the potential to make the same lasting impact for others, specifically children experiencing similar hardships, as her former legal guardian had made for her. However, the strain of multiple transfers and a graduation date that was more moving target than hard date produced anxiety. On the initial assessment she said: “this will be the 4th college I’ve attended. I’m ashamed in myself that it’s taking me this long to get my degree so I’m really trying to focus and follow my goals this time.”

Tina was an effective communicator with a willingness to share her experiences and engage others in dialogue. She was open-minded and maintained a commitment to learning and growth through new experiences. Tina also had the extraordinary ability to cultivate community, even in the most challenging of circumstances. In our course, Tina contributed to the conversation and engaged her peers. She fostered a sense of community despite the virtual barriers of our classroom. She had three goals for the term: to “Do [her] homework to the best of [her] ability,” to “Pass all [her] classes,” and to “Get a job in [the psychology] field.”

When asked of the challenges that affected her performance in the previous semester, Tina named a lack of motivation and focus, as well as her own “Anxiety/Depression.” She was optimistic about the term and about making strategic behavior changes to enhance her performance. Tina described a desire to help others and told me about her babysitting position once she moved to North Carolina that allowed her to support a child on the autism spectrum. She thought about this experience often, which served as a source of motivation to move closer to graduation.

Tina experienced a traumatic experience early in the term. She was in a car accident and sustained injuries that made it difficult to work on a computer for long periods. This was challenging given that all of Tina’s spring classes, ours included, were taught online. However, Tina was proactive. She stayed in contact with me and with her other instructors and continued to complete work for her courses. Not only had she maintained communication with faculty, she had advocated for her needs and was well on her way to catching up when we spoke in the final interview. Despite this setback, Tina finished all five of her classes with passing grades.

Even in the face of this challenge, Tina went on to score other successes. She applied and accepted a position as a Certified Behavior Technician, an important step that would take her

even closer to her ultimate career goal. In our final interview in April, she described the extensive training process. She was already meeting with clients and managing to juggle both her new position, her schoolwork, and make time to prioritize herself and the people in her life. She shared in her post-career assessment reflection that she was confident in the major she had selected. Beyond her major and career goals, she described growth in her personal life. She wrote:

“I’m happy that I’ve had the things that have happened to me, happen. I’ve grown as a person, I’ve learned many new things, my boyfriend and I have grown closer, and I’ve realized who my real friends are. I’m genuinely happy.”

Trev. Trev is a male transfer student. Personal pronouns are he/him. At the start of the course, Trev was a pre-business analytics major, a program he became interested in during the COVID-19 pandemic when he was able to do some research into different majors. Business analytics combined Trev’s interest in the financial markets and technology with his self-identified strengths in math-intensive subjects. This program was competitive for admission and Trev had one more opportunity to successfully complete an accounting course or risk losing eligibility to declare the major. He was also working to increase his GPA.

Trev was employed at McDonalds where he worked each weekend, managing to pack, on average, 23 hours of work into three days. Occasionally, he found time to work on assignments during slower periods or breaks in his shifts. He clocked in at 4:00 PM for each shift and closed the store on Friday and Saturday evenings. On Sundays he was able to clock out by 11:00 PM unless the store was understaffed, an agreement he struck with his managers due to his 11:59 PM Sunday deadlines for most courses. His managers gave him permission to utilize the free Wi-Fi to sit in an empty booth in the dining area and focus on homework during slower periods at the

restaurant. This was why many of Trev's assignments were submitted late on the weekend evenings.

Trev had earned the respect of his managers. They trusted him due in large part to his work ethic, often taking on jobs his coworkers avoided. During our initial interview, Trev logged in from the library where he had been spending a considerable amount of his days since the semester began. He often took the bus to campus where he could focus on school, even while his classes were mostly online. The extra trip by public transit (to avoid the purchase a costly parking pass) was to carve out a physical space where he could minimize distraction.

Occasionally, though, this commute wasn't ideal and barriers hindered his motivation:

"I basically live [in] my car so that's what I did at the apartment complex. They got Wi-Fi so sometimes if it's before class and it was raining and I don't feel like going to class I just did class in my car."

In these instances, he had permission to access the Wi-Fi of his apartment complex. It was not unusual for Trev to log into our class from his car, especially as the semester progressed.

The apartment Trev was living in while enrolled in our class was shared with his parents and brother. He was working to save money to get a place of his own. This was partially due to a desire to score more independence, but also because as long as he lived at home, Trev was expected to financially contribute to the family. He also helped his parents by caring for his brother. Trev was happy to do this, but it left him with little time to focus on school. In addition to working at McDonald's, Trev maintained a second part-time job as a lifeguard. His third source of income was aligned more with his interests: "my thing is thrifting. That's how I like to make my money." Trev bought and sold clothing he purchased at various thrift shops. He had started small, but over time had created a thriving business. He often shared his success stories

with me, but also the lessons he had learned about how to sustain his business model. The self-promotion aspect of building an online presence and branding yourself on social media platforms intrigued him.

Since transferring to Branchline, Trev had had a hard time connecting to others. At his community college, he found it easy to meet new people. The transition to online learning made this challenging, but those trips to campus in the beginning of the term were Trev's way of trying to connect with others. Unfortunately, he found it difficult to engage with other students. He said: "But sometimes even on campus when I'm out at URec [University Recreation] where there's a lot of people, you walk past some people and they'll just like ignore you." This was discouraging to Trev and his trips to campus dwindled. He started logging into class more often from his car.

Trev was extraordinarily kind. The car he occasionally logged in from for class was a family vehicle, and since he shared it with his parents, he often took public transportation home from work. In our initial meeting, he told me that most weekends while leaving work he would pack up any leftovers that would have been thrown away otherwise and shared them with people he met on the way home who may be without a hot meal on a regular basis. When asked of the challenges that affected his performance in the previous semester, he named not knowing about the resources available to him and difficulty putting time and effort into his schoolwork.

In our final interview, Trev updated me on his exploration of new majors. He had also continued to save for his own place in the near future. Early on in the term, Trev referenced the strong grades he had earned at his community college. He was still working to adjust to the four-year but made great strides while enrolled in the career exploration course. In the final interview, he caught me up on his progress:

“Honestly, seeing how the credits transferred and learning more about how the college credits work at a four-year, but I just learned how to just keep my head up, and stick to it.

The main thing is just staying consistent, basically just staying on top of my work.”

In his post-career assessment reflection, Trev described what he had learned about himself during the Spring 2021 term. He wrote: “I hold myself liable for my results but my goals are still attainable with a new mindset. Breaking old habits are hard but not impossible.”

Throughout the spring term, even amid setbacks, Trev maintained his optimistic perspective. He continued to work hard and learn. He returned in Fall 2021, this time as a pre-economics major. The conversations with his economics professor had ignited a new passion.

