

College support systems, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals among students in
community college baccalaureate programs

by

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B.S., Arizona State University, 2006
M.Ed., Northern Arizona State university, 2016

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) programs have expanded access to bachelor's degrees for students who might not otherwise pursue them, yet little is known about how students in these programs experience institutional support or how their motivational beliefs shape progress toward degree completion. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how students enrolled in CCB programs experience college support systems and how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals influence their progress toward degree attainment. Tinto's (1993) Model of Institutional Departure served as the theoretical framework, and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994) provided the conceptual framework. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 students enrolled in upper-division CCB coursework at a large metropolitan community college district in the southwestern United States, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Eight themes emerged from the analysis. Addressing the first research question, participants experienced faculty as their primary support system; student support services were available, useful, and accessed as needed; information resources helped students navigate their programs; and flexibility and familiarity made the CCB pathway attainable. Addressing the second research question, students built confidence by completing difficult academic work; persisted by managing competing work, family, health, and school responsibilities; connected the degree to their future careers through hands-on and work-based learning; and were kept moving toward completion by career goals, degree attainment, and expected future outcomes.

The findings suggest that persistence in CCB programs emerges from the interaction between institutional conditions and student agency. Implications for community college leaders, faculty, and student support professionals include strengthening faculty–student relationships,

improving the clarity and timeliness of program information, designing learning experiences that build self-efficacy, and aligning programs with workforce outcomes. Recommendations for future research include examining the experiences of lower-division students who intend to enter CCB programs and replicating the study in other states and program areas.

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Dedication

To my children, Elias, Clay, Taylor, and Rian: Take the journey that fills your hearts with hunger, compassion, and happiness. Always take the chance.

And to my wife, my person, my human, Dr. Jacqueline Levy: Thank you for your unwavering support, encouragement, understanding, and love. I could not have completed this journey without you.

Preface

This dissertation was completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education in Community College Leadership at Kansas State University. My interest in this study grew out of my professional work in community colleges and my commitment to expanding access to affordable bachelor's degrees. As community colleges across the country, and particularly in Arizona, began offering baccalaureate degrees, I wanted to understand how students enrolled in these new pathways experience the support their colleges provide and what keeps them moving toward graduation. The voices of the 14 students who shared their experiences are at the center of this work. My hope is that their stories help community college leaders design programs and support systems that serve future students well.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) programs have emerged as an increasingly popular educational pathway, particularly for non-traditional students seeking affordable and accessible baccalaureate degrees. As of 2025, 24 states have authorized community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees in response to local workforce demands (Community College Baccalaureate Association [CCBA], 2024). Arizona approved CCB programs in 2021 and the state legislation mandates that community colleges demonstrate that their proposed CCB programs address local labor market demands and do not duplicate programs already available at state universities (Weissman, 2021). CCB pathways are often labeled workforce baccalaureate degrees that community colleges confer in applied, high-demand fields such as teacher preparation, allied health, law enforcement and public safety, public service, business, and information technology (Bragg et al., 2022). Scholars emphasize that this expansion represents a deliberate broadening of the community college's mission; to deliver on that promise, institutions must also expand academic advising, financial-aid counseling, academic support, and other wrap-around supports that cultivate student retention, persistence, and completion at the baccalaureate level (Bragg et al., 2022; Wright-Kim, 2021).

As students progress through coursework in CCB programs and work toward degree completion, the demand for intentional, targeted support becomes increasingly critical. Many CCB students manage the simultaneous pressures of employment, family responsibilities, and academic commitments, making institutional support an essential factor in their success (Floyd & Skolnik, 2019; Martinez & Elue, 2020; Remenick, 2019; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Wright-Kim, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

Students that start at community colleges have lower baccalaureate completion rates compared to their traditional four-year baccalaureate-granting institution counterparts. Only 31.2% of community college students that identified intent to transfer actually go on to transfer, and among them, 45.2% do so having earned an associate degree or another credential (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSC Research Center], 2024c). Of those who transfer with a credential, approximately 49.1% complete a baccalaureate degree, highlighting significant gaps in both transfer efficiency and overall degree completion (NSC Research Center, 2024c). Research has identified several factors contributing to the low rate of baccalaureate degree attainment among students who begin at community colleges, including institutional barriers such as limited credit transferability, financial challenges, and familial responsibilities (Taylor & Jain, 2017). The structural design of higher education is not well-suited to accommodate the mobility of transfer students, creating further difficulties for those trying to navigate the system (Taylor & Jain, 2017). By comparison, two-thirds (67.4%) of students who enrolled at a public four-year institution in 2017 completed a baccalaureate degree within six years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSCRC], 2023).

Although institutional support is widely recognized as a key driver of student persistence in community college settings, inconsistencies in the delivery of such support significantly undermine its effectiveness (Bragg et al., 2022; Community College Baccalaureate Association [CCBA], 2024; Madamanchi et al., 2019; Martinez & Elue, 2020; Ring & Bodzin, 2025; Wright-Kim, 2021). Martinez and Elue (2020) reported that while individualized academic advising helps students stay on track for degree completion, inconsistent access and support, caused by limited institutional capacity, leads to disparities in support that can derail student progress.

Wright-Kim (2021) echoed these concerns, noting that resource constraints often result in uneven advising availability in CCB programs, which negatively affects student persistence. Even in programs with demonstrated success, such as those documented by Solor and Bragg (2016), including the Washington State Community and Technical College Board's review of 35 applied baccalaureate programs across 15 colleges, the Florida College System's evaluation of community college baccalaureates, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's assessment of baccalaureate programs in fields such as nursing and applied sciences, the ability to sustain effective support services, including tutoring and faculty interaction, relies on sufficient staffing and institutional commitment, which are not always consistent. Madamanchi et. al. (2019) found that mentorship and internship experiences boost confidence and goal clarity, but students state access to these opportunities varies widely, particularly with first generation students, hence further contributing to inequitable student outcomes. Additionally, Ring and Bodzin (2025) emphasized that institutional support improves self-efficacy and goal orientation, critical drivers of persistence, but when inconsistently applied, those benefits are diminished for underrepresented students.

Growing workforce demand across critical sectors such as healthcare, information technology, and advanced manufacturing has become a primary rationale for expanding community college baccalaureate programs. The Community College Baccalaureate Association (2024) reports that 24 states now permit community colleges to award bachelor's degrees, primarily to address shortages in high-demand fields that are essential to local and regional economies (Fulton, 2020). These degrees are strategically designed to fill employment gaps while increasing access to affordable four-year education for place-bound, working, and nontraditional students. The Community College Baccalaureate Association (2024) also notes

that approximately 187 colleges across 24 states currently offer bachelor's programs aligned with workforce needs, with many graduates securing immediate employment and earning roughly \$10,000 more annually than peers with associate degrees. These findings underscore the need for community colleges to not only expand degree access but also provide sufficient academic and career support to ensure students' readiness for workforce integration. Meeting workforce demand also requires aligning educational outcomes with the evolving skill requirements of modern industries. Madamanchi et.al. (2019) emphasized that the rapid technological transformation of the labor market, especially in fields such as engineering and computing, necessitates that community college graduates acquire advanced technical competencies and self-efficacy to navigate increasingly complex work environments. This demand for applied, industry-responsive education is further supported by Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994), which posits that self-efficacy and outcome expectations directly influence students' persistence and career choices. By integrating workforce-aligned curricula, experiential learning opportunities, and strong institutional supports, CCB programs can better prepare graduates to meet labor market needs while enhancing students' confidence in achieving successful career outcomes.

While existing literature highlights the presence and variability of institutional support services in CCB programs, there remains a critical gap in understanding how these supports are perceived by the students they are intended to serve, particularly in relation to their baccalaureate degree completion in the state of Arizona. This study addresses that gap by examining how CCB students perceive institutional support in the context of their academic progression and degree attainment. By centering student perceptions, this research seeks to gain an understanding of the

role institutional support plays in facilitating, or hindering, baccalaureate completion within CCB programs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how students enrolled in community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs experience college support systems. The study also explored the influence of CCB student's self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals in progression toward degree attainment.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are the following:

RQ 1: How do students experience college support systems while enrolled in community college baccalaureate programs?

RQ 2: What is the influence of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals in CCB students' progress towards degree attainment?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

For this study, Vincent Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (1993) serves as the theoretical framework. Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994) serves as the conceptual framework. Collectively, these frameworks align with the research purpose, which seeks to understand how CCB students experience college supports, and the influence of their self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals in progression toward degree attainment.

Tinto's (1993) model focuses on student departure and the conditions under which students persist or withdraw from higher education institutions. The theory emphasizes academic and social integration as key determinants of institutional commitment and degree completion. According to Tinto, students are more likely to persist when they experience a sense of

belonging and engagement within their academic community. In the context of CCB programs, many students are similar to typical public two-year college students, they are older, nontraditional learners balancing work, family, and school, conditions that often limit their engagement in traditional campus life (Bragg et al., 2022). According to the Community College Research Center (2021), nearly half of public two-year college students are 24 years old or older, 28% have children or other dependents, and about two-thirds attend part-time. The same report notes that approximately 81% of part-time and 47% of full-time students work while enrolled, indicating a strong trend of employment among these students. Institutional supports such as advising, mentorship, and career services may serve as alternative mechanisms for integration, making Tinto's model particularly salient. Tinto's framework offers a lens to explore how colleges promote student retention through targeted supports.

The study draws on Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994) as a conceptual lens to explore the psychological processes that shape students' academic and career-related behavior. SCCT is built from Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, based on the construct that learning is affected by cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors. SCCT posits that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals are the primary drivers of individual decision-making and persistence in educational and career pathways. These variables are not only internally generated but are also shaped by contextual affordances and barriers (Bandura, 1986; Lent et al., 1994). For example, a student's belief in their ability to complete a bachelor's degree (self-efficacy) may be strengthened or weakened depending on access to academic resources, feedback from instructors, or the presence of role models. Outcome expectations, students' beliefs about the consequences of completing a degree, can influence their motivation to persist, particularly when tied to career advancement or economic mobility (Lent et al., 1994). Personal

goals serve as mediators that channel self-efficacy and outcome expectations into sustained effort and commitment (Lent et al., 1994).

By using Tinto's institutional departure theory with the cognitive-personal emphasis of SCCT, this study bridges macro and micro levels while exploring students' persistence in CCB programs. SCCT provides insight into how CCB students engage with college support systems while developing academic and career pathways influenced by their self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals as they advance toward degree completion.

Alignment Table

The alignment table demonstrates how the study's problem, purpose, research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and methodology are systematically connected to ensure coherence and rigor throughout the research design.

See Appendix A.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology designed to explore how students enrolled in community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs experience institutional support systems and how these experiences influence their self-efficacy, expected outcomes, and goals. A qualitative approach is well suited for studies that seek to capture complex social and psychological processes through participants' own words rather than through numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). As Saldaña (2011) explains, qualitative research is "study of natural social life" (p. 10) that allows researchers to study phenomena in their real-life contexts. This approach aligns with the study's purpose to illuminate how CCB students perceive and navigate college supports within their educational environment. Generic qualitative inquiry, in particular,

provides flexibility to investigate the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences without the constraints of a specific qualitative tradition (Percy et al., 2015).

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 students from two different CCB programs at two separate community colleges within a large Arizona community college district offering baccalaureate programs. This design allowed for depth and nuance while maintaining consistency across interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Participants were purposefully selected to ensure they are currently enrolled in upper-division CCB coursework and can provide informed perspectives about institutional supports and barriers. Data was analyzed using Saldaña's (2011) multi-cycle coding process, progressing from inductive coding to pattern identification and thematic development. These methods enabled a systematic, rigorous, and ethically grounded examination of how institutional supports interact with students' self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal development in the context of community college baccalaureate programs.

Limitations and Assumptions

This study was delimited to students enrolled in Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) programs that have completed 12 credits in upper division courses in their CCB program. Additionally, the study is geographically limited to two community colleges located within a large community college district located in Arizona. Because of these Limitations, findings may be limited to similar CCB student populations in comparable institutional and geographic contexts.

The study is based on several assumptions. It is assumed that the students participating in the interviews will share their true thoughts, feelings, and experiences about supports, challenges, and career-related beliefs in their CCB program. Students have the capacity to reflect

on and articulate their experiences in ways that meaningfully inform the research questions, particularly regarding self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals. The researcher assumes the participants understand the interview prompts as designed and that their responses accurately reflect their interpretations of the questions, not unrelated or misinterpreted concepts.

Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to the growing body of literature on community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs by centering the student experiences of CCB students and exploring how they perceive supports and challenges. While CCB pathways continue to expand nationally, relatively little research has focused on how students experience these programs. The findings will enhance scholarly understanding of how academic and social integration, combined with internal psychological processes like self-efficacy and outcome expectations, shape the student journey in CCB programs. Additionally, the results of this study may help inform policies and practices for college administrators seeking to strengthen student support and improve degree completion rates in CCB programs.

Definition of Terms

Academic Advising: Academic advising is a systematic, developmental process in which a student and an academic advisor establish an ongoing relationship that facilitates informed decision-making, resource identification, collaborative problem-solving, and goal-setting across the student's personal, professional, and academic endeavors (Swecker et al., 2013).

Academic Integration: The degree to which students are engaged with their academic work, including relationships with faculty and their involvement in the academic community. Successful academic integration is associated with higher levels of retention and academic success (Tinto, 1993).

Career Counseling: A collaborative, goal-directed interaction between a student and a trained counselor in which they (a) clarify the student's interests, values, abilities, and vocational self-concept, (b) relate those self-insights to accurate educational and labor-market information, and (c) co-create and implement an academic-and-career action plan that supports informed decision-making, persistence toward degree completion, and a successful transition to satisfying work (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2023b).

CCB Student: A student enrolled in a Community College Baccalaureate program.

Commitment to Educational Goals: The degree to which a student is dedicated to achieving their academic objectives. Tinto (1993) identifies commitment to educational goals as a critical factor influencing student retention and persistence.

Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) Programs: A Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) program is a four-year bachelor's-degree pathway conferred by a community college that builds on associate-level or applied-science coursework, adds upper-division study, and remains true to the sector's open-access, workforce-oriented mission (Floyd & Skolnik, 2019).

Experiential Learning: A teaching–learning approach that integrates theory, hands-on application, and structured reflection so learners transform concrete experience into abstract understanding and future action (Walker, 2023)

Financial Aid: Any grant, scholarship, fee-waiver, loan, or work-study award that supplies monetary resources to students and thereby reduces or removes the economic obstacles to enrolling and succeeding in post-secondary education (Beer & Bray, 2020; Caldwell & Nzau, 2024; Hillman, 2022).

Goal: The determination to engage in a particular activity or to effect a particular future outcome (Bandura, 1986). “Goals operate principally through people's capacity to symbolically represent desired future outcomes and to react self-evaluatively to their own behavior based on internal standards for performance” (Lent et al., 1994, p. 85)

Learning Resources: Institutional learning-support services—including library collections, tutoring and learning centers, computer labs, learning technologies, and related instruction—that extend students’ opportunities to master coursework outside scheduled class time (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges [ASCCC], 2021).

Mental Health Services: Coordinated clinical and supportive interventions that colleges provide, on campus or virtually, to prevent, assess, and treat psychological distress, so students can function effectively and persist academically. These services typically encompass individual or group counseling that ranges from preventing the onset of personal and emotional needs, to addressing emerging or clearly existing concerns (Schwitzer et al., 2018)

Non-Traditional Students: Often referred to as adult learners, are undergraduates 25 years of age or older who re-enter or begin post-secondary studies after time away, typically enroll part-time, juggle employment and family responsibilities, and therefore follow enrollment patterns that differ markedly from recent high-school graduates (Tinto, 1993).

Outcome Expectations: An individual’s beliefs about the results of performing particular behaviors (Lent et al., 1994).

Persistence: A student’s continued progress toward a credential, evidenced by uninterrupted enrollment at the same or a higher level institution, the earning of a certificate/degree, or a lateral/upward transfer without a break of four or more months (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSC Research Center], 2024b).

Self-efficacy: An individual's beliefs in their capabilities to execute actions necessary for achieving desired outcomes (Lent et al., 1994)

Social Integration: The process by which students become connected and engaged with their peers, faculty, and the broader campus community. Social integration is considered a key factor in student retention and persistence, particularly in Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (Tinto, 1993).

Student Retention: The institution's success in maintaining a student's continuous enrollment from one fall semester to the next (Swecker et al., 2013).

Student Success: "Student engagement and positive outcomes," which often includes academic achievement, completion, persistence (continuing from one term or year to another), and retention (Soika, 2021).

Student Support Activities: Structured academic and co-curricular services that colleges intentionally organize to bolster student learning, persistence, and completion (Blankstein & Woeff-Eisenberg, 2019). In this study, student support activities include academic advising, career counseling, experiential learning, financial aid, learning resources and mental health services.

Chapter Summary

Chapter One introduces the topic and outlines the major components of the study. It begins with a general introduction and background of the problem, followed by a clear statement of the problem and the purpose of the study. The research questions are presented, along with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding the research. The chapter also provides an overview of the methodology, including the research design and data collection approach. Additionally, delimitations and assumptions of the study are discussed. The significance of the

study examines how CCB students experience college support systems and how supports, barriers, and factors such as academic integration, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals shape their educational pathways. Lastly, key terms are defined to support clarity and consistency throughout the dissertation.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the study, including the background, problem statement, purpose, research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, methodology overview, and relevant definitions. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature related to the key topics and frameworks that inform the study. Chapter Three outlines the research design and methodology, including data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter Four reports findings and the results of the data analysis. Chapter Five provides a discussion of the findings, conclusions, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature

Community colleges in the United States have traditionally awarded associate degrees and prepared students for workforce entry, but since the early 1990s many have expanded their mission to include baccalaureate programs that address workforce gaps and broaden affordable access to four-year degrees (Fulton, 2015; Levin, 2004; Meza & Love, 2023). These Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) programs, often in high-demand fields such as nursing and education, depend on institutional supports like advising, counseling, and experiential learning to foster persistence and completion (Remenick, 2019; Swecker et al., 2013). Such supports are especially important for CCB students, who are frequently older, first-generation, and balancing work and caregiving responsibilities (Madamanchi et al., 2019; Meza & Love, 2023).

This chapter provides an overview of the literature that frames the study. It begins by outlining the literature review protocol and then examines the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding this study, specifically Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (1993) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994). The discussion then transitions to the history of community colleges, the development of CCB programs in the United States, and their emergence in Arizona. Finally, the chapter explores four central themes: (1) the benefits of the community college baccalaureate, (2) the challenges these programs face, (3) the role of student support systems, and (4) the influence of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals in progression toward degree attainment.

Literature Review Search Protocol

A structured search strategy was employed using several academic databases, including ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center), EBSCO Education Full-Text, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global, and Ruffalo Noel Levitz. These databases provide access to

peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and other academic sources that focus on community college education, student success, and workforce preparation. Additional searches were conducted using Google Scholar and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) to include broader perspectives and recent studies on CCB programs.

Keyword searches were conducted to search for published literature and research for information on “community college baccalaureate degrees”, “community college bachelor degrees”, “community college students”, “Social Cognitive Career Theory”, and “support activities”.

The literature review prioritized peer-reviewed empirical studies published within the last five years that examined CCB programs, their outcomes, and the relationship between student supports and academic success. Publicly available data from the National Clearinghouse and other educational reports were also included to provide context on retention, transfer, and completion. This review synthesizes current findings and highlights research gaps that this study seeks to address.

This study is guided by two interrelated frameworks: Vincent Tinto’s (1993) Model of Institutional Departure as the theoretical foundation and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) as the conceptual framework. Together, these frameworks provide a structure for examining how students in CCB programs experience college support systems and their self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals influence their progression toward degree attainment. While Tinto’s model offers a macro-level understanding of student retention and institutional integration, SCCT allows for the exploration of student-level motivational and cognitive processes that underlie decision-making and persistence behaviors.

Vincent Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure

Vincent Tinto's (1993) Model of Institutional Departure is a widely recognized and frequently applied theory in higher education research. Originally developed to explain student attrition in four-year institutions, the model has since been adapted to examine student persistence in a variety of postsecondary contexts, including community colleges and non-traditional programs (Tinto, 1993). At its core, Tinto's model posits that student persistence is significantly influenced by the degree of academic and social integration a student experiences within an institution. Academic integration involves a student's engagement with the formal educational system, such as classroom learning, faculty interaction, and academic progress, while social integration refers to the extent to which a student feels connected to the campus community through peer relationships, participation in student life, and feelings of belonging (Tinto, 1993).

For CCB students, academic and social integration can be particularly complex. These students often differ from traditional undergraduate students in meaningful ways. They are more likely to be older, employed full-time, supporting families, and enrolled part-time (CCBA, 2024; Community College Research Center [CCRC], 2021). Tinto states factors such as these may limit their opportunities for community college engagement or require institutions to think creatively about how to provide accessible, meaningful forms of integration. Tinto's model is relevant because it acknowledges that failure to become academically or socially integrated into college life can lead to a gradual process of departure, rather than a singular event (Tinto, 1993). This theoretical emphasis on integration aligns closely with the challenges many CCB students face in balancing their academic responsibilities with external obligations.

In applying Tinto's model to this study, the concept of institutional integration is extended to include student perceptions of the supports and challenges they encounter during their time in a CCB program. For instance, academic integration may be influenced by the perceived accessibility of faculty, availability of course offerings, or quality of advising. Social integration may depend on the degree to which students feel recognized and supported within the college community, even in the absence of residential experiences or full-time campus presence. Skagit Valley College promotes a Equity 360 model for CCB students that cultivates regular student-faculty interaction through weekly Zoom sessions and 48-hour faculty outreach when grades slip, yielding 82% completion within 150% of program time and 70% on-time graduation (Bragg et al., 2022). The cohort structure and spiral-learning design of the model deepen social integration and a sense of empowerment, evident in qualitative student comments and follow-up data showing virtually every graduate employed, many promoted, and several pursuing master's degrees, thereby illustrating how integrated supports translate into strong educational and career outcomes (Bragg et al., 2022).

The City University of New York's (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) weaves structured full-time, block-scheduled coursework together with scholarships, transit passes, textbook stipends, intrusive advising, tutoring, and career services, creating academic and social integration, and this comprehensive design drives a 53% three-year graduation rate, more than double the 25% achieved by a matched comparison group (City University of New York [CUNY], 2025). Among first-time freshmen in the 2021 cohort, the same integrated model produced three-year completion rates of 35% versus 15% for non-participants and helped close graduation gaps for Black and Hispanic males, underscoring Tinto's view that purposeful academic and social bonds are pivotal for persistence (CUNY,

2025). This study examined associate degree-seeking students at community colleges, whose demographics are comparable to those enrolled in CCB programs.

Similar to CUNY's ASAP, Ohio State University's STEP, Second-Year Transformational Experience Program, is a holistic, multi-semester initiative that engages students in cohort meetings with a faculty mentor, co-curricular activities, and the development of a capstone project to support academic, career, and personal growth (Van Jura et al., 2025). Similar to CCB students, the participants in this study were bachelor's degree-seeking; however, the research was conducted at a traditional four-year institution rather than a community college. Research on STEP shows participants reported higher perseverance and significant gains in academic, career, and leadership self-efficacy compared to non-participants, while also maintaining their sense of belonging during the critical sophomore year. STEP students had an increase in their perseverance over an academic year ($p = .01$, $d = .12$), and those not in STEP did not ($p = .65$, $d = .03$) (Van Jura et al., 2025). By fostering academic integration, faculty-student engagement, and a strong sense of community, STEP reflects Tinto's (1993) model that emphasizes purposeful social and academic connections as central to student persistence.

Tinto also emphasized the significance of student commitment, to both educational goals and the institution, as critical to persistence. This commitment is often shaped by a student's early interactions with institutional structures and personnel, and it can be reinforced or undermined by institutional responsiveness to student needs (Tinto, 1993). In the case of CCB students, institutional support, or the lack thereof, may have a direct impact on their academic momentum. For example, a student struggling to access program coursework, receive timely feedback, or find program-specific academic advising may experience diminished academic integration, ultimately weakening their commitment and increasing the risk of departure.

Tinto's model also suggests that retention should not be understood solely as a student responsibility, but as a dynamic interplay between individual characteristics and institutional environments. The model recognizes the agency of institutions in shaping student outcomes and emphasizes the need for colleges to provide environments that are conducive to student success (Tinto, 1993). This perspective is especially pertinent to CCB programs, which are often newer and still evolving in terms of how they support baccalaureate-level students. As Bragg et al.(2022) acknowledged, Equity 360 is the beginning of a much longer journey, signaling that even well-regarded CCB models are still building the full suite of supports their baccalaureate students need. Likewise, Love et al. (2023) report that many newer CCB programs operate without clear equity plans or targeted student-support strategies, indicating that institutional practices are still being refined.

Research has demonstrated that even non-traditional students benefit from meaningful academic and social integration, although the mechanisms may differ (Bragg et al., 2022; CUNY, 2025). In the context of this study, the model serves as a theoretical lens through which to examine how student experiences, both positive and negative, affect their engagement, persistence, and success.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) is used as this study's conceptual framework. Developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), SCCT builds on Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) by focusing on how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals influence educational and career decisions.

Many community college students are navigating complex academic environments while also managing external responsibilities such as employment and caregiving (CCRC, 2021; Meza

& Love, 2023). SCCT is particularly well-suited for exploring the internal decision-making processes of students in higher education. SCCT shows how both immediate and broader contextual factors, such as financial support, job availability, and sociostructural barriers, interact with personal traits and learning experiences to shape interests, goals, and actions, making it an ideal lens for understanding the career decisions of working, caregiving CCB students navigating complex external constraints (Lent et al., 1994). Their choices to persist, seek out resources, or abandon certain goals are often informed by personal beliefs about their capabilities, anticipated outcomes, and long-term aspirations. These constructs, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals, offer a nuanced view of how students assess the value and accessibility of institutional supports and how they respond to challenges (Lent et al., 1994).

Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their ability to successfully perform specific tasks or behaviors. In academic contexts, self-efficacy influences how students approach learning, manage obstacles, and persist in the face of setbacks (Bandura, 1999). For CCB students, self-efficacy may be shaped by prior educational experiences, feedback from faculty, and the degree of academic support received. If students perceive that institutional structures are accessible and responsive, their confidence in their ability to succeed may increase. Conversely, systemic barriers, such as inconsistent advising, may undermine academic self-efficacy and discourage continued enrollment.

Outcome expectations represent an individual's beliefs about the consequences of engaging in particular behaviors. In this study, outcome expectations are especially relevant in understanding how CCB students evaluate the potential benefits of navigating institutional challenges. For instance, students may engage in additional coursework, pursue internships, or

persist through difficult semesters if they believe these actions will result in favorable career or academic outcomes (Lent et al., 1994).

Personal goals serve as a motivational anchor in SCCT. They direct behavior and reflect desired academic and career achievements. Goals can be short-term (e.g., completing a capstone course) or long-term (e.g., securing a career in a chosen field). When institutional supports align with students' goals, motivation tends to increase. When supports are perceived as irrelevant, inaccessible, or unclear, students may disengage or redirect their efforts elsewhere (Lent et al., 1994).

SCCT also emphasizes the role of contextual factors, both supports and barriers, in influencing students' self-efficacy and outcome expectations. These environmental conditions include institutional culture, access to faculty, support service quality, and broader life circumstances (Lent et al., 1994). This emphasis is crucial for understanding CCB students, who often contend with multiple intersecting responsibilities and institutional complexities. Studies by CUNY (2025), Aquino & Plump (2022), Madamanchi et al. (2019) and Cadenas et al. (2018) highlight how thoughtfully designed support mechanisms, tailored to cultural, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds, can significantly boost self-efficacy and clarify career pathways. Madamanchi et al. (2019) qualitative study found the students wanting to transfer to a four-year institution stated the preparation they received from the faculty raised transfer self-efficacy. CUNY (2025) also increased support to influence the environmental conditions that included intrusive advising, tutoring, and career services that led to 53% three-year graduation rate, over double the 25% achieved by a matched comparison group. These findings are particularly applicable to CCB students, who often represent historically underserved populations.

History of Community Colleges and Community College Baccalaureates

Community Colleges

Community colleges have long been a cornerstone of American higher education, founded on the mission of accessibility and affordability for populations historically excluded from traditional four-year institutions (O'Banion, 2015). Their open-access model allowed students from a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds to enter higher education, including first-generation students, working adults, and part-time learners (Vaughn, 2006).

The rise of community colleges in the early 20th century reflected the nation's effort to democratize education and meet the growing needs of an industrializing economy (Drury, 2003). These institutions offered two-year programs that could serve as a springboard for transfer to universities or provide immediate workforce preparation, making them particularly effective at bridging local labor needs with educational opportunities (Vaughn, 2006).

Over the decades, community colleges have evolved into vital workforce development engines. They developed programs in healthcare, information technology, and advanced manufacturing, creating educational pathways that were directly aligned with the needs of employers (O'Banion, 2018). This responsiveness positioned them as essential players in regional economic growth and workforce readiness (O'Banion, 2018).

Today, community colleges continue to adapt to the demands of a knowledge-based economy. They increasingly provide training in high-demand fields such as cybersecurity, renewable energy, and healthcare technology, reaffirming their role as flexible, responsive institutions serving the workforce (CCRC, 2021). Their adaptability remains central to their identity, ensuring continued relevance in rapidly shifting economic and social contexts (Vaughn, 2006).

The emergence of community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs marked one of the most significant transformations in their history. Initially met with resistance from traditional four-year universities, these programs expanded as states recognized the importance of affordable, place-bound bachelor's degrees for underserved populations (Levin, 2004). By stepping into this role, community colleges further extended their mission of accessibility while reshaping their institutional identity (Levin, 2004).

Evolution of Community College Baccalaureate Programs

The earliest CCB programs began in West Virginia in the early 1990s as a response to local workforce shortages, particularly in healthcare and applied sciences (Meza & Love, 2023). These programs represented a pragmatic solution to regional challenges by allowing community colleges to expand credential offerings in ways universities could not meet at the time (Meza & Love, 2023).

From these beginnings, CCBs spread across the country. Florida and Washington emerged as early leaders, demonstrating how community colleges could provide affordable, workforce-aligned bachelor's degrees at scale (Meza & Love, 2022). By 2024, there were 187 community colleges in 24 states offering bachelor's degrees, with most programs concentrated in high-demand fields such as nursing, teacher education, and applied sciences (CCBA, 2024).

The CCB model is especially effective at serving non-traditional students, including first-generation learners, parents, and working adults. Many of these students face barriers that make traditional university pathways inaccessible. Flexible formats, such as evening, weekend, and online classes, allow them to balance educational goals with employment and family responsibilities (Cuellar & Gándara, 2020).

Affordability remains another defining characteristic of CCB programs. In states that offer CCBs, tuition is capped well below university rates, students avoid the high levels of debt often associated with pursuing four-year degrees (Weissman, 2021a). For place-bound students, this makes CCB programs an attractive and often the only viable path to bachelor's degree attainment (Cuellar & Gándara, 2020).

The expansion of CCBs has not been without controversy. Opponents argue that community colleges risk mission drift and unnecessary duplication of university programs, while others worry about straining already-limited institutional resources (Meza & Love, 2023). Nonetheless, labor market pressures and regional workforce shortages continue to push states toward embracing CCBs as an essential higher education strategy (Weissman, 2021b).

Ultimately, the evolution of CCB programs reflects a broader transformation in higher education, in which community colleges expand their role from serving as gateways to universities to offering complete, workforce-relevant bachelor's degrees. This shift underscores their enduring adaptability and their ability to meet pressing workforce demands while maintaining affordability and access (Levin, 2004).

Primarily Associate Degree-Granting Baccalaureate Institutions

As CCB programs expanded, the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) reclassified some community colleges as four-year institutions. These colleges, known as Primarily Associate Degree-Granting Baccalaureate (PAB) institutions, still confer most of their awards at the associate level but are recognized as bachelor's-granting due to their new authority (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSC Research Center], 2024a).

Retention and persistence challenges in PABs mirror those of traditional two-year institutions because most students remain enrolled in associate programs. Many are part-time,

working adults who face external pressures such as employment and childcare, which directly affect persistence (Dones, 2021). These demographic realities produce outcomes that differ from those of traditional four-year universities, where students are more likely to be enrolled full time and reside on campus (NSC Research Center, 2024b).

In Washington, where PAB's have been conferring CCBs since 2005, system data summarized by New America show that CCB students' progression is robust and aligns closely with four-year pathways: persistence and term-to-term continuation are at 70% four-year completion, which is effectively on par with the 72% completion for students who transfer to public four-year universities (Meza, 2024).

Completion rates in PAB's CCB programs more closely mirror those of traditional four-year colleges, largely because students are pursuing targeted, career-focused degrees (Gonzales, 2024). Completion remains a significant concern across the broader community college sector. For example, among the 2016 cohort of transfer-intending community college students, only 15.3% completed a bachelor's degree within six years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSC Research Center], 2024d). These patterns reveal the persistent barriers facing students in open-access institutions, particularly those juggling employment, financial obligations, and family responsibilities (Pretlow et al., 2022).

In Washington, 70% of CCB students completed within four years of enrolling, compared with 72% among students who transferred to a public four-year institution; 83% of CCB completers were employed within a year with a median annual wage of \$68,000, underscoring strong academic and labor outcomes alongside high completion (Meza, 2024). A complementary analysis from the University of Washington's CCRI further notes that completion rates in several PAB CCB programs have risen to approach transfer bachelor's completion, including 66%

completion among Latinx students in business, a rate comparable to White and Asian peers in that discipline (Wetzstein et al., 2020).

In California, program-specific evidence from the statewide CCB expansion shows strong graduation performance in pilot programs. For example, at PAB West Los Angeles College, the CCB in Dental Hygiene achieved 75% two-year and 83% three-year graduation for the 2016–2020 cohorts, benchmarks that compare favorably with many public four-year program rates in the same field and timeframe (Aguiar et al., 2022). While California reports don’t always publish a direct cross-sector comparator for each program, the available figures indicate that CCB completion there is at or above typical public four-year graduation rates in allied-health programs serving similar student populations (Aguiar et al., 2022).

PAB institutions thus highlight the dual nature of the community college mission. While they face the same challenges of persistence and transfer as traditional community colleges, their bachelor’s programs demonstrate the potential of workforce-aligned education to improve student outcomes. For underserved students, these institutions provide a crucial bridge to economic mobility through affordable and accessible four-year credentials (Cuellar & Gándara, 2020).

Arizona Community College Baccalaureate Degree

Arizona’s pathway to authorizing CCBs illustrates both the political resistance and eventual acceptance of community college bachelor’s degrees. The state’s first serious attempt occurred in 1997, when Senator Carol Springer introduced Senate Bill 1109 to allow applied bachelor’s degrees in public safety, allied health, and business (Thor & Bustamante, 2012). Although the bill passed the Senate, it was defeated in the House after strong opposition from

universities, and Governor Fife Symington vetoed a modified version, citing concerns of mission drift (Thor & Bustamante, 2012).

During the 2000s, legislators revisited the issue several times, introducing bills to create pilot programs in high-demand fields such as nursing, teacher education, and fire science (Thor & Bustamante, 2012). While public opinion polls showed strong support, universities and lobbying groups such as the Arizona Tax Research Association opposed the measures, arguing duplication and hidden costs. Ultimately, these campaigns failed, particularly after the 2007 economic downturn reduced higher education funding (Thor & Bustamante, 2012).

The decisive shift occurred in 2021, when Governor Doug Ducey signed Senate Bill 1453, making Arizona the 24th state to authorize community college bachelor's degrees (Duda, 2021). The law allowed districts to create programs that addressed workforce needs while preventing duplication of existing university programs (Weissman, 2021a). To maintain balance, Maricopa and Pima community college districts were restricted to CCB programs representing no more than 5% of their total awards for the first four years, with a later cap of 10% (Renfro, 2021).

The legislation also capped tuition for CCB programs at 150% of associate-level rates, ensuring affordability relative to university tuition. This provision aimed to improve access for place-bound and low-income students who might otherwise lack options for completing a bachelor's degree (Weissman, 2021a). By tying affordability to workforce relevance, the law reinforced the community college mission while carefully expanding it (Renfro, 2021).

Following passage, Maricopa County Community College District developed initial bachelor's programs in information technology, early childhood education, and public safety administration. These programs launched in Fall 2023 after securing Higher Learning

Commission accreditation (Willard, 2021). Rural-serving institutions such as Northland Pioneer and Yavapai College also moved quickly to design bachelor's programs in applied sciences to serve their regional communities (Tripiccone & Love, 2023).

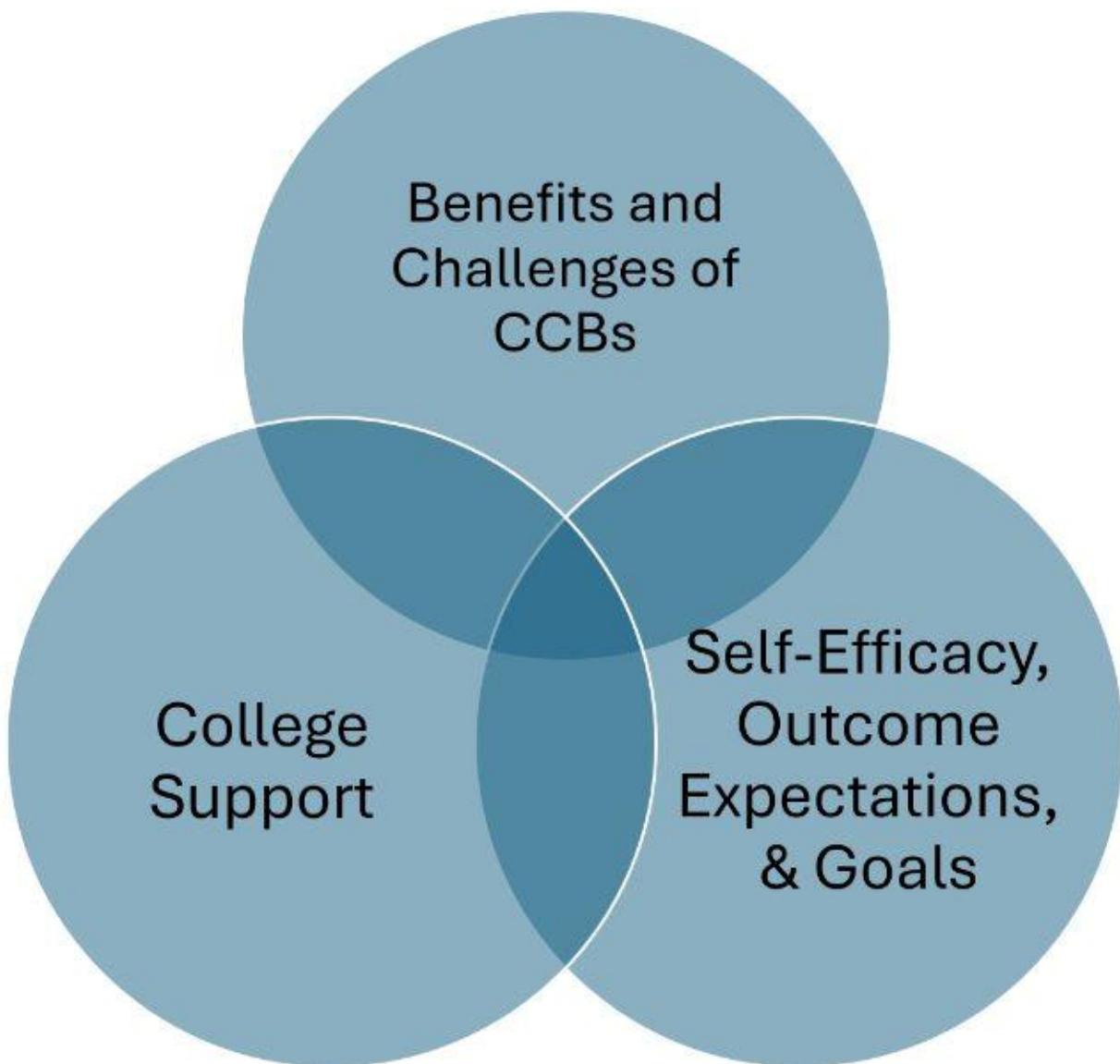
Supporters of Arizona's CCB law emphasize its potential to improve workforce pipelines, expand affordability, and reduce student debt burdens. Critics, particularly universities, continue to voice concerns about mission creep and weakened transfer pathways (Duda, 2021; Weissman, 2021a). Nonetheless, the expansion illustrates how community colleges are increasingly positioned to meet local labor demands while preserving their tradition of access and affordability (Tripiccone & Love, 2023).

Benefits and Challenges of CCBs, College Support Systems, and SCCT

Concepts

This study examines four central themes that are framed by the literature on community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs. First, it considers the benefits of CCBs, including affordability, access, and workforce alignment, alongside the challenges these programs face. Another theme is the critical role of student support systems and how students experience those supports. Also, the study looks at how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals influence a student's progress within the CCB pathway.

Figure 1. Interconnected Themes



Benefits of the Community College Baccalaureate

Accessibility and Affordability for Non-Traditional Students

The significance of CCB programs extends beyond affordability and workforce alignment to accessibility for non-traditional students, flexible scheduling, and lifelong learning opportunities. CCB programs aim to provide high-quality, affordable education to students who might otherwise be excluded from the baccalaureate's degree track, addressing gaps in both social and geographic accessibility. By operating within local communities, CCB programs

reduce these barriers, allowing for reduced commuting times, increased family support, and an overall more feasible academic structure (CCBA, 2024; Cuellar & Gándara, 2020). Accessibility of CCB programs addresses geographic constraints, which is particularly beneficial for students in rural or underserved areas where access to four-year institutions is limited. Dones (2021) highlights that community colleges are often located closer to home for non-traditional students, reducing the need for relocation and long commutes. This proximity not only supports students with limited transportation options but also allows them to maintain critical social and familial support networks while pursuing their education. Being able to stay within their communities while earning a baccalaureate degree can significantly enhance these students' ability to balance educational pursuits with personal responsibilities (Dones, 2021). Eighty percent of community college presidents either strongly agree or agree that community colleges are well-positioned to offer bachelor's degrees to students who might otherwise be unable to pursue them due to financial constraints or geographic barriers (Jaschik et al., 2019).

Compared to traditional universities, CCB programs provide an affordable pathway to a baccalaureate degree, helping to mitigate the economic barriers that often hinder educational attainment among lower-income and first-generation students (Martinez & Elue, 2020). For many students, the high cost of tuition at traditional four-year universities creates a significant barrier to pursuing a baccalaureate degree. Community colleges, known for their lower tuition rates, offer a financially viable alternative through CCB programs. In addition to lower costs, many CCB programs provide flexible payment plans and targeted financial aid to further alleviate financial burdens. This focus on affordability makes higher education a realistic and attainable goal for students who might otherwise be excluded from baccalaureate programs due to economic limitations (Martinez & Elue, 2020). Petek's (2020) evaluation of California's CCB

programs, six years after the state granted community colleges the ability to offer CCBs, found by offering a comparatively low-cost pathway, the community college baccalaureate programs persuaded students who might otherwise forgo higher education. This is evidenced by 51% of a student survey reporting they would not have pursued a bachelor's degree had these affordable options not existed at their community college (Petek, 2020).

Alignment With Local Workforce Needs

CCB programs cater to local employment needs by offering programs in fields where regional demand is high, such as healthcare, education, and applied sciences (Education Commission of the States [ECS] & Fulton, 2015; Gonzales, 2024). These programs offer tailored education that meets specific local labor requirements, helping students develop the skills needed to fill gaps in the local workforce. This connection between CCB programs and local industries also benefits employers, as they gain access to a pool of locally trained candidates who are ready to enter their respective fields immediately upon graduation (Dones, 2021).

A significant strength of CCB programs is their alignment with local workforce needs, providing students with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills that prepare them for high-demand careers. Unlike many traditional four-year programs, CCBs are often structured with direct input from regional employers to ensure that graduates are well-prepared to meet the specific demands of the local economy. This workforce alignment is essential, as it helps community colleges fulfill their mission to support economic development and create a skilled labor force in sectors critical to local industries, such as healthcare, education, and applied sciences (Dones, 2021; ECS & Fulton, 2015).

CCB programs address regional workforce needs by tailoring curriculum and skill-building opportunities directly aligned with local industry demands, offering students a direct

path to employment post-graduation (Cuellar & Gándara, 2020). Through close collaboration with industry partners, CCB programs integrate real-world applications into their curricula, thereby enhancing the employability of graduates. Research has emphasized that practical components in educational programs, such as internships and service learning, provide students with hands-on experience that bridges the gap between academic study and professional requirements (55th ACM Technical Symposium on Computer Science Education et al., 2024). For example, nursing programs within CCBs often include clinical placements, which allow students to gain essential patient care experience under professional supervision. Similarly, technology programs may involve cooperative education or apprenticeships that allow students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world projects, reinforcing their technical skills and understanding of industry standards (55th ACM Technical Symposium on Computer Science Education et al., 2024).

As Cuellar and Gándara (2020) note, the structure of CCB programs is particularly effective in meeting the needs of working adults who prioritize education that will lead to economic advancement. This approach is beneficial for students who may not have the time or resources to pursue a traditional liberal arts education and instead desire training that will translate quickly into job opportunities and career progression (Cuellar & Gándara, 2020).

CCB programs often incorporate experiential learning opportunities, including internships, apprenticeships, and fieldwork. These components allow students to apply their academic knowledge in real-world settings, gain valuable work experience, and build professional networks within their chosen fields (Meza & Love, 2023).

CCB programs emphasize the development of soft skills that are highly valued by employers, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities. This

comprehensive approach to workforce training equips students not only with technical expertise but also with the interpersonal and analytical skills needed to thrive in professional environments. According to the Community College Baccalaureate Association (CCBA, 2024), the incorporation of soft skills into CCB curricula is part of a broader educational strategy that aims to produce well-rounded graduates capable of adapting to various professional settings and challenges. These skills are particularly important in fields such as healthcare and education, where effective communication and teamwork are crucial for success.

The localized focus of CCB programs allows for continual adaptation to the evolving needs of the workforce. As industries change and new demands arise, community colleges offering CCBs can modify their programs more nimbly than traditional universities, which often have more rigid curricular structures. This adaptability makes CCB programs particularly relevant in sectors experiencing rapid technological advancement or shifting economic priorities, as they can swiftly incorporate emerging trends and technologies into their curricula (ECS & Fulton, 2015; Pretlow et al., 2022). For example, programs in fields like information technology can incorporate new programming languages or software tools in response to shifts in industry demands, ensuring that graduates have current and marketable skills upon entering the workforce.

In Ohio, the legislation allowing community colleges to offer CCBs outlined in the house bill criteria for CCBs:

Evidence of an agreement between the college and a regional business or industry to train students in an in-demand field and to employ students upon their successful completion of the program;

That the workforce need of the regional business or industry is in an in-demand field with long-term sustainability based upon data provided by the governor's office of workforce transformation;

Supporting data that identifies the specific workforce need the program will address;

The absence of a bachelor's degree program that meets the workforce need addressed by the proposed program that is offered by a state university or private college or university;

Willingness of an industry partner to offer workplace-based learning and employment opportunities to students enrolled in the proposed program.

These criteria mandate community colleges to have structured relationships with their industry partners promoting strong workforce baccalaureate programs (Ohio State Legislature, 2023).

CCB programs foster partnerships with local businesses and community organizations, creating mutually beneficial relationships. For colleges, these partnerships provide resources such as guest lecturers, mentoring opportunities, and access to job placement networks. For local businesses, these partnerships ensure a steady supply of skilled graduates who are familiar with the specific challenges and opportunities within the local market (Dones, 2021).

Challenges of the Community College Baccalaureate

Despite their benefits, CCB programs face a range of challenges that affect their operational effectiveness, student success, and long-term sustainability. These challenges include academic, social, and financial obstacles faced by students, as well as unique operational demands that place additional pressures on community colleges. The student demographics in CCB programs differ substantially from those in traditional four-year programs. Many CCB students are older, employed full-time, and often first-generation college students, which brings

unique challenges in balancing academic obligations with external responsibilities such as work and family (Cuellar & Gándara, 2020). These non-traditional students may face added stress, given that they are often returning to education after an extended break, which can affect academic performance and persistence.

The differences between CCB students and traditional transfer students further compound these challenges. Unlike traditional students, CCB students often have limited engagement with campus life and are typically more focused on immediate job placement or career advancement. This contrasts with students in four-year programs who may benefit from more immersive campus experiences that foster a sense of belonging and facilitate social integration (ECS & Fulton, 2015). In many cases, CCB students' primary motivation is obtaining specific skills for career progression, which shifts the educational focus toward job readiness rather than a broader liberal arts education. This functional approach, while valuable, can limit opportunities for holistic development, which traditional college experiences are often designed to provide.

Student Support Systems

As Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) programs expand nationally, understanding the student experience has become increasingly important. Unlike traditional undergraduate students, many CCB students are older, work full-time, care for dependents, or are the first in their families to pursue higher education (Love, 2020; Wetzstein et al., 2022). In Florida, the average CCB student is 31 years old, while the average age of students in upper-division courses at public universities is 22 years old (Love & Palmer, 2020). Similarly, in Washington, the average age of a CCB student is 32 years old, while the average age of a public university undergraduate student is 22 years old (Meza, 2019). These types of characteristics shape how

students interact with institutional environments and affect their perceptions of the support systems and challenges they encounter (Lent et al., 1994; Tinto, 1993).

CCB students frequently report that academic advising plays a central role in helping them navigate complex degree requirements, particularly when transitioning from associate to baccalaureate pathways (Martinez & Elue, 2020; Meza & Love, 2023). Goemans and Kapinos's (2024) study at a large, multicampus, community college with more than 34,000 students found that when community college advisors maintained a manageable caseload of approximately 200 to 300 students per advisor, institutions were able to demonstrate the critical role advising plays in student success. Persistence rates increased substantially as the frequency of advising appointments increased: students with no advising persisted at 64.2%, compared to 82.1% for students who met with an advisor once per semester, and 86.9% for those who engaged in two or more advising sessions (Goemans & Kapinos, 2024). However, advising consistency and quality often vary across institutions and programs, leaving some students without the guidance they need (Wright-Kim, 2021). Martinez & Elue (2020) found only 23.7% of colleges had mandatory advising policies for CCB students. Martinez & Elue (2020) also found that CCB programs often exacerbated high student-to-advisor ratios. Advisors consistently identified heavy student-advising loads of 1,200 and 2,000 students, and some as high as 3,000 to 4,000 per advisor (Martinez & Elue, 2020).

Similarly, career counseling services can influence students' perceptions of academic relevance and future employability, key dimensions of outcome expectations. Effective career guidance helps students connect educational experiences with workforce outcomes, bolstering motivation and goal clarity (Bradley, 2023). Yet despite its importance, many CCB students report limited engagement with career services, often due to scheduling conflicts, unclear

messaging, or underdeveloped employer partnerships (CCBA, 2024; Madamanchi et al., 2019). Madamanchi et al. (2019) found through their interviews students reported limited prior exposure to computing or career-related preparation, with many noting they had avoided computing classes in high school or lacked access to technology at home. Additionally, students indicated they had to rely almost exclusively on faculty guidance for navigating computing and career-related skills, highlighting a gap in broader structured career services support (Madamanchi et al., 2019).

Experiential learning, through internships, capstones, practicums, or clinical placements, allow students to apply knowledge in real-world contexts and develop professional identities (Madamanchi et al., 2019; Walker, 2023). Walker's study of community college students enrolled in a core program course showed that those who participated in experiential learning had a higher course completion rate, 84%, compared to non-participants, 75%. Similarly, end-of-course grade data indicated greater success among experiential learning participants, with a 96% course success rate, versus 91% for students who did not participate (Walker, 2023). However, access to high-quality experiential opportunities remains unequal. Students from historically underserved backgrounds often face additional barriers such as limited networks, unpaid positions, or competing work responsibilities (55th ACM Technical Symposium on Computer Science Education et al., 2024; Hora et al., 2019). These type of disparities in access can widen gaps in self-efficacy and make it more difficult for students to visualize successful career outcomes (Lent et al., 1994).

Mental health is another domain where students' experiences with institutional support vary widely. Lent et al. (1994) emphasizes that individuals' ability to balance multiple roles (education, work, and personal life) significantly affects their psychological well-being. Stress

and anxiety often arise when environmental barriers outweigh supports, directly shaping persistence and satisfaction in academic settings. When institutions provide accessible, well-communicated mental health services, students report higher levels of emotional resilience and academic engagement (Upswing, 2022). Cheche (2024) found significant differences in how continuers and stop-outs perceive and access mental health services. Continuers are students who remain enrolled at community colleges and stop-outs are students who dropped out after a semester (Cheche, 2024). Among continuers, 61% reported that their institution offered mental health services, compared to only 25% of stop-outs who were certain such support had been available at their former college. 42% of stop-outs indicated they were unsure if their college provided these services at all, reflecting a lack of awareness that may have hindered access. Cheche found other disparities. While 30% of continuers reported using mental health services and another 19% expressed willingness to do so if available, only 6% of stop-outs had used these services, with 22% stating they would have been interested in accessing them. These findings suggest that continuers are more likely to be both aware of and engaged with mental health supports than stop-outs (Cheche, 2024). The contrast underscores the importance of clearly communicating, expanding, and normalizing mental health services as critical institutional supports that can help students manage stress, remain enrolled, and ultimately complete their degree programs. These challenges, when left unaddressed, can undermine students' sense of agency and weaken their belief in their ability to persist through adversity, core tenets of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2002; Lent et al., 1994).

Financial constraints are among the most commonly cited challenges faced by CCB students. While community colleges generally offer lower tuition than four-year institutions, the cumulative cost of attendance, including fees, textbooks, transportation, and childcare, often

exceeds students' financial means (Beer & Bray, 2020; Caldwell & Nzau, 2024). CCB programs are designed to remain affordable. CCBA (2024) highlights that in California, the average total tuition for a CCB degree is \$10,560, less than half the average cost of comparable programs at a public university. Similarly, Maricopa County, Arizona, caps tuition at about \$3,000 per term, allowing students to graduate at a quarter of the cost of a state university. Florida and Texas colleges commit to keeping tuition under \$10,000 for CCB programs (CCBA, 2024). When students are forced to work excessive hours to cover expenses, their academic performance and engagement may suffer. Research suggests that increased access to financial aid, especially when bundled with wraparound services like emergency grants and childcare assistance, can positively influence persistence and academic self-efficacy (Anderson & Zaber, 2024; LaSota et al., 2024). In a meta-analysis of 86 studies involving more than 7.6 million students, LaSota et al. (2024) found that grant aid had a statistically significant positive effect on persistence ($k = 39$, $m = 135$ effects) and completion ($k = 43$, $m = 119$ effects). That translates to across 39 different studies with 135 separate measurements, students who received financial aid were more likely to stay enrolled, and across 43 studies with 119 measurements, they were also more likely to finish their degrees. Translating the results, eligibility for just \$1,000 in grant aid increased college enrollment by about 4%. Notably, 61% of the programs reviewed included additional non-financial supports such as advising, mentoring, or cohort models, demonstrating that aid combined with wraparound services plays a critical role in strengthening persistence and self-efficacy (LaSota et al., 2024).

Learning resources, including tutoring, library services, and academic technology, are essential for promoting academic integration and persistence. Tutoring services in particular have been linked to improved retention and academic confidence (Rheinheimer et al., 2010). Writing

centers and learning labs help reinforce critical thinking and communication skills, which are essential for success in upper-division coursework (Findura, 2021). CCSSE (2023) showed that nearly 44% of community college students rated tutoring services as very important, with another 34.2% rating them as somewhat important. Similarly, 43.1% of students considered skill labs in areas like math and writing to be very important and 34.2% rated them somewhat important, underscoring the critical role of academic support resources in helping students succeed (Community College Survey of Student Engagement [CCSSE], 2023). However, disparities exist in how consistently these resources are offered and accessed. Students who are unaware of available academic supports or who lack the time to use it due to work, and family responsibilities often experience a decline in their perceived academic competence (ASCCC, 2021; Weissman & Coffey, 2024). Additionally, faculty involvement in learning centers, shown to enhance both engagement and instructional alignment, is often limited by institutional resource constraints (Crawford, 2021; Findura, 2021).

Technology-related barriers further complicate the student experience in blended or online formats. As more CCB programs incorporate digital learning platforms, consistent access to high-quality technical support becomes essential. Students with lower digital fluency or inadequate internet access may struggle to keep pace with course demands, affecting both their academic performance and self-confidence (Kintu et al., 2017; Robinson, Jr., 2024). Robinson (2024) studied 366 students at a southwestern university and found that when students believed their college provided strong technical support, they were more engaged in their classes. Statistically, this relationship was significant ($\beta = 0.216$, $t = 5.326$, $p < .001$), meaning the finding is very unlikely to be due to chance. The study also showed that good technical support shaped how students viewed their instructors. Students who felt their school offered reliable

support were more likely to describe their instructors as skilled with technology, organized, and motivated ($\beta = 0.290$, $t = 6.590$, $p < .001$). Better support services not only helped students stay more engaged but also made teachers look more competent and effective. The study concluded that when technical problems are resolved quickly, students feel more confident, but when issues go unresolved, students may blame themselves, which lowers their self-efficacy and reduces their motivation to stay engaged (Robinson, Jr., 2024). For online learners in particular, access to real-time academic and technical support is a determinant of persistence and satisfaction (Pape & Prosser, 2018).

The student experience in CCB programs is influenced by a constellation of institutional supports and challenges. These elements are interconnected: when students experience clear, consistent support, from advising and mental health to experiential learning and financial aid, their confidence and motivation to persist increases. When barriers dominate, such as unclear communication, inequitable access, or lack of responsiveness, students may experience diminished efficacy and disengagement.

Self-Efficacy, Outcome Expectations, and Goals

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), provides a foundational model for understanding career development by emphasizing the interaction of three core concepts: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals. These constructs are especially pertinent in the community college context, where students often balance complex academic, socioeconomic, and institutional variables. Recent empirical research demonstrates that these cognitive variables are not only predictive of persistence and career development, but also significantly shaped by contextual supports and barriers.

Lent et al. (1994) defines self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their capabilities to execute actions necessary for achieving desired outcomes. Multiple studies demonstrate that self-efficacy in academic domains is critical to student success.

George et al. (2022) followed 2,415 students from 15 colleges and found that students' self-efficacy in their computing abilities was one of the strongest predictors of whether they stayed interested in computing careers. After two years, students who started with higher self-efficacy were about 55% more likely to still want a computing career (1.553, $p < .001$). Being involved in computing-related student groups also boosted confidence, showing the importance of peer and campus support. The study also measured how supportive students felt their departments were. This was done using three survey questions: whether they felt a sense of community, whether the department cared about its students, and whether the environment inspired them to do their best. Together, these questions formed a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .856$), meaning the items consistently measured the same idea of departmental support (George et al., 2022).

In a study conducted by Marco-Bujosa et al. (2023), data further emphasizes the importance of support systems in developing self-efficacy. In the phenomenological study of first-generation college students, participants expressed that advisor encouragement and personal success in difficult coursework enhanced their belief in their ability to succeed. One participant reflected on the benefits of advisor support, "I met my current advisor my freshman year and if it hadn't been for her who told me herself, 'Hey I have my PhD and I was the same way.' It took me weeks to learn something that it felt like the rest of the class picked up the first minute of a lecture" (Marco-Bujosa et al., 2023).

In Ring and Bodzin's (2025) study of 314 community college students using the SCCT Community College Model (SCCT-CCM), the study measured goal orientation, outcome expectations, and self-efficacy. Gender differences were found in goal orientation and outcome expectations. On the 5-point likert scale instrument, females scored higher than both males and non-binary students, with differences of about 0.34 points in goal orientation and 0.50 points in outcome expectations compared to non-binary students. These differences were statistically significant ($p = .043$ and $p = .038$, respectively). In practical terms, this means females were slightly more focused on setting and pursuing academic goals and had somewhat higher expectations about the benefits of their education. These results suggest that females reported somewhat stronger academic goals and expectations than their peers.(Ring & Bodzin, 2025).

Outcome expectations is defined by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) as an individual's beliefs about the results of performing particular behaviors. These beliefs include anticipated outcomes such as job attainment, income level, social approval, and self-satisfaction. In community college contexts, outcome expectations serve as a psychological bridge between student self-efficacy and the formation of their career or academic goals. They influence how students evaluate the worth of pursuing particular academic or vocational pathways, especially when navigating economic uncertainty or competing responsibilities. The stronger the belief that academic and career investments will lead to valuable outcomes, the more motivated students are to persist and complete their programs (Lent et al., 1994).

In a large-scale study involving 2,415 students across 15 institutions, George et al. (2022) examined how college environments shaped computing career interests over time. The study found that higher levels of computing self-efficacy and a sense of belonging were positively associated with outcome expectations about computing careers. Additionally, student

engagement plays a critical role in shaping outcome expectations, particularly through participation in discipline-specific activities such as computing student groups. In the study by George et al. (2022), students who engaged more frequently in computing-related student organizations were 30.7% more likely to express interest in a computing career than their peers who participated less often. This elevated interest, even after controlling initial career interest through a proxy pre-test, illustrates the influence of active engagement on students' expectations about potential career outcomes. By participating in these groups, students gain exposure to career-relevant information, mentorship, and real-world applications of their skills, all of which reinforce the belief that their academic efforts can lead to meaningful and attainable career opportunities. Thus, frequent participation in student groups not only reflects interest but also cultivates stronger outcome expectations, aligning with SCCT's emphasis on how learning experiences contribute to students' beliefs about future success (George et al., 2022).

Ring and Bodzin (2025) further explored outcome expectations among 314 community college students enrolled in traditional and career and technical education (CTE) programs. Using the SCCT Community College Model (SCCT-CCM), the study revealed significant differences across gender and age groups. Female students scored lower than males across three of the outcome expectation items ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.81$ vs. $M = 4.89$, $SD = 0.76$; $p < .05$), and students aged 25–34 scored significantly higher on all outcome expectation items compared to students aged 18–24. These differences suggest that younger students may have less clarity or confidence about the outcomes of their educational and career efforts, possibly due to limited exposure to workforce experiences or less-developed career plans (Ring & Bodzin, 2025).

Guan et al. (2022) also emphasized the role of contextual and sociocultural influences on students' science career outcome expectations. In their study of community college and

baccalaureate students, they found that students who reported experiences of prejudice or cultural value conflict within educational environments held lower expectations about the benefits of science careers. Conversely, students who received encouragement from family or faculty reported higher outcome expectations. The findings from Guan et al. (2022) underscore that outcome expectations are not merely cognitive but are shaped by the broader social and cultural landscape in which students live and learn. This highlights the need for institutions to foster inclusive and supportive environments that validate students' identities and aspirations (Guan et al., 2022).

Goals are the determination to engage in a particular activity or to effect a particular future outcome (Bandura, 1986). "Goals operate principally through people's capacity to symbolically represent desired future outcomes and to react self-evaluatively to their own behavior based on internal standards for performance" (Lent et al., 1994, p. 85). While these goals are influenced by self-efficacy and outcome expectations, they are further shaped by contextual factors such as social support, barriers, and institutional practices (Lent et al., 1994).

In their study of CCB students, Cuellar and Gándara (2020) identified that underrepresented racial minority (URM) students often enrolled in CCB programs with the intention of improving socioeconomic mobility. However, only some CCB programs provided outreach or structured support for these students. While 65.6% of Asians and 42.9% of Whites had completed a bachelor's degree by age 29, only 22.7% of African Americans and 18.7% of Hispanics did so illustrating structural inequalities that impede goal achievement despite comparable aspirations (Cuellar & Gándara, 2020).

When analyzing goals, the study by Guan et al. (2022) investigated sociocultural and contextual factors influenced science career goals among students at a community college and a

baccalaureate-granting institution. The researchers found that students' career goals in science were shaped not only by individual interests and academic experiences but also by cultural value alignment and social support. Encouragement from faculty and family members emerged as a critical factor that reinforced students' confidence and motivation to pursue long-term goals in science fields (Guan et al., 2022). These findings underscore the importance of culturally responsive educational practices that validate students' identities as a means to strengthen goal development.

The SCCT-CCM results from Ring and Bodzin (2025) also revealed significant differences in goal orientation across age and employment status. Students aged 18–24 scored lower on the goal orientation scale ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.88$) than older peers aged 25+ ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.74$; $p < .01$), suggesting developmental and life-stage differences in clarity and commitment to goals. Similarly, full-time employed students reported significantly clearer goal orientations than unemployed students ($p < .05$), which may reflect exposure to real-world occupational environments (Ring & Bodzin, 2025).

In Marco-Bujosa (2023) study, the importance of how instructional and academic support directly affects students self-efficacy is evident. The study found that participants that had a feeling of falling behind also had a decline in academic self-efficacy (Marco-Bujosa et al., 2023). Esparza et al. (2025) observed that perceived support from instructors significantly predicted increases in students' self-efficacy ($\beta = .32$, $p < .01$) and persistence intentions ($\beta = .35$, $p < .01$). This was especially true among underrepresented students in STEM disciplines (Esparza et al., 2025). Barriers such as low-income status, racism, and marginalization were also cited by students as obstacles. In Marco-Bujosa's (2023) study, students described how working long

hours, lack of childcare, and negative campus interactions diminished their confidence (Marco-Bujosa et al., 2023).

These findings support the SCCT model's assertion that personal agency interacts with environmental factors to influence goal development and career persistence (Lent et al., 1994).

Conclusion

While general studies on student retention and persistence underscore the importance of support services in higher education and among community college students, few have examined CCB students specifically. In particular, limited research explores how support systems shape CCB students' beliefs, motivations, and progress toward their goals, leaving a notable gap for investigation. Chapter Two highlights the transformative role of CCBs in expanding access to higher education and meeting workforce needs, as well as the critical function of student support activities in fostering success and persistence. This synthesis of existing literature establishes the foundation for the present study, which aims to explore how CCB students experience college support systems and understand the influence of CCB student's self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals on their progress towards degree attainment.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

This chapter details the qualitative methodology guiding this study and is organized around the following components: the Purpose of the Study and guiding Research Questions; the Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks that position student supports within persistence and social-cognitive perspectives; a Research Design that justifies in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the primary strategy of inquiry; descriptions of the Site Selection and Study Participants; the Instrumentation used to elicit rich narrative data; Data Collection and Data Analysis procedures rooted in inductive coding and thematic development; acknowledged Limitations and Delimitations; the Ethical Considerations undertaken to protect human subjects; and the measures used to establish study quality and trustworthiness.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how students enrolled in community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs experience college support systems. The study also explored the influence of CCB student's self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals in progression toward degree attainment.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do students experience college support systems while enrolled in community college baccalaureate programs?

RQ 2: What is the influence of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals in CCB students' progress towards degree attainment?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Tinto's (1993) Model of Institutional Departure supplies the overarching theoretical framework that links the investigation to a well-established body of persistence literature. Tinto's model posits that students' pre-college characteristics, goals, and external commitments interact with their academic and social experiences inside the institution to influence continued enrollment.

Social Cognitive Career Theory by Lent, Brown, & Hackett (1994) functions as the study's conceptual framework, specifying the particular constructs and relationships explored at the participant level. SCCT highlights self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal-setting as central mechanisms through which individuals navigate educational opportunities and obstacles. Accordingly, interview questions were guided by SCCT and probe how CCB students assess college support systems and the influence of their self-efficacy, outcome expectations and goals.

Research Design

A generic qualitative inquiry was selected for this study. Generic qualitative inquiry, as defined by Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015), is particularly appropriate for studies that explore people's reports of their subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences. This approach is not bound by the rigid structures of phenomenology, grounded theory, or ethnography, but instead provides a flexible and systematic means of capturing participants' accounts in their own words. Such an approach allows the researcher to remain open to the variety of student perspectives and utilize theoretical and conceptual lenses without forcing the data into a predetermined disciplinary framework. The study was structured around individual, semi-structured interviews with 14 students who were currently enrolled in CCB programs at the selected site.

Site Selection

The site chosen for this study are two community colleges in a large community college district located in Arizona that has 9 community colleges currently offering CCB programs. Both community colleges are part of the same community college district, although they are all independently accredited. The large metropolitan county is known for its significant population density and urban infrastructure.

Study Participants

The participants for this study were students enrolled in two selected CCB programs at the two identified community colleges, both within the same community college district. At the two identified community colleges these two programs, the Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) in Computer Technology and the Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Elementary and Special Education, served a combined enrollment of more than 1,500 students. Using criterion-based purposeful sampling, the study invited students who meet the following criteria: (a) currently enrolled in one of the two designated CCB programs, (b) have completed at least 12 upper division courses within their CCB program, and (c) are 18 years of age or older. This sampling strategy ensures that participants have progressed into upper-division coursework and had exposure to institutional support systems, enabling them to provide rich and informed perspectives aligned with the study's research questions. All participants completed their first two years of coursework within the same community college district, though not necessarily at the institution hosting their CCB program.

Instrumentation

Data for this qualitative inquiry was gathered through a semi-structured interview protocol, with the researcher serving as the chief human instrument. The interview consisted of

eight questions, with clarifying follow-up questions as needed, lasted about 30–40 minutes and took place over Zoom. See Appendix G. The interview questions were developed to align with the study’s two research questions and then organized around the interplay of four domains: (1) college support systems, (2) self-efficacy, (2) outcome expectations, and (4) evolving goals. The questions were intentionally open-ended to encourage participants to describe incidents, feelings, and interpretations in their own words. A short demographic questionnaire was administered after the interview was completed to gather contextual information such as program of study, enrollment status, number of credits completed, and demographic information; this data will aid within-case comparisons during analysis. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, audio recorded, and professionally transcribed verbatim, producing accurate textual data for subsequent thematic analysis.

Data Collection and Data Sources

This study followed a systematic, step-by-step approach to gather data in a rigorous, ethical, and transparent manner (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The research design prioritized participant protection, data integrity, and depth of insight into student experiences within community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs. Before data was collected, approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kansas State University and from the participating institutions. IRB approval ensured ethical standards related to confidentiality, consent, and participant welfare were upheld. A password-protected Google Drive folder with two-step verification was established to store all study materials, including consent forms, recruitment communications, interview schedules, recordings, and transcripts. Labeling conventions and pseudo names were used to remove any identifying information to maintain participant anonymity. Maintaining strict data management and security protocols is vital to

protect participants from harm and to uphold the integrity of the research process (Fowler & Evergreen, 2013). Recruitment began after IRB authorization. CCB program directors and designated staff at the two selected community colleges received an email invitation (Appendix B). They were asked to share an approved recruitment message (Appendix C) with students enrolled in the selected CCB programs. The researcher also emailed the students in the CCB program that had been identified to have completed more than 12 credits of upper division credits. These messages included a study overview and a student interest participation form. Eligible participants received a follow-up email with a Doodle scheduling link, a Zoom meeting link, and the consent form to fill out and send back to the researcher. (See Appendices D, E, and G). The emails sent to the students provided transparency about the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and potential benefits and risks, allowing students to make an informed decision about participation (Fowler & Evergreen, 2013). Transparency and clarity at this stage helped establish trust and improve participant understanding, both essential for collecting authentic qualitative data. Each participant signed and returned the consent form prior to the interview. Students who completed an interview received a \$20 Amazon e-gift card as a token of appreciation, although some students declined the Amazon e-gift Card. Responses from the interest form were stored securely. This process ensures informed consent and provides flexibility for participants to schedule at their convenience, reinforcing accessibility and voluntariness in participation. The primary data source was semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 30–40 minutes and conducted via Zoom.

A generic qualitative inquiry is especially appropriate for this study, which seeks to understand how students in community college baccalaureate programs experience institutional support, challenges, and career development influences. Structured surveys would limit the depth

of understanding, whereas unstructured interviews might yield inconsistent data. The semi-structured method thus ensures comparability while allowing participants to elaborate in their own words, an essential feature when examining nuanced constructs such as self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career goals.

Before beginning each interview, participants were reminded of the study's confidentiality procedures and their right to skip questions or stop at any time. Permission to record the session was requested verbally and documented. Audio recordings were saved under anonymous codes, uploaded to the secure folder, and transcribed using Zoom software. The researcher reviewed each transcript line-by-line while listening to the recording to ensure accuracy and completeness. Participants received a copy of their transcript via secure email to review for accuracy prior to data analysis. This member-checking process allows participants to verify their words, clarify meanings, or provide corrections. This step strengthens the credibility and dependability of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). After verification, the final transcripts were prepared for coding and analysis. All data will be stored securely for five years consistent with Kansas State University policy and federal research regulations. After this period, all electronic files will be permanently deleted, and any physical materials will be shredded. Each phase of the data collection process is designed to ensure accuracy, reliability, and ethical integrity. The use of semi-structured interviews provides flexibility to capture participants' experiences within a consistent analytical framework. The inclusion of a participant information sheet and consent process ensures ethical transparency and voluntary participation. Data verification through member checking enhances credibility, while secure storage and anonymization safeguard participant confidentiality. Together, these procedures ensured that the

collected data are both methodologically sound and ethically managed, forming a strong foundation for inductive analysis aligned with qualitative research traditions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this qualitative study followed the inductive and systematic approach outlined by Saldaña (2011) in *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research*. The goal of analysis is to identify meaningful patterns and relationships within the data that illuminate the experiences of students enrolled in community college baccalaureate programs.

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. Transcripts were imported into MAXQDA software for organization and coding. Each transcript was labeled with a unique identifier to protect participant confidentiality and facilitate data management. Data was stored on a secure, password-protected device, and analytic files were backed up regularly.

The first cycle of analysis involved line-by-line inductive coding to capture the essence and meaning of participant responses. Following Saldaña's process coding method, short words or phrases were applied to segments of data to represent actions or processes participants describe. This initial cycle of coding served as a heuristic tool, allowing the researcher to explore, classify, and pattern the raw data into emerging categories that reflect participants' experiences and perspectives.

During the second cycle, codes were reviewed, refined, and clustered into broader categories to identify relationships and recurring concepts. Saldaña (2011) emphasizes that categories evolve from the researcher's increasing familiarity with the data and the analytic comparison of codes across interviews. Codes that share conceptual similarity were grouped, and analytic memos documented the rationale for emerging patterns. Through this process, higher-

order categories were developed that represent significant dimensions of the participants' experiences, such as perceived support systems, institutional barriers, and personal coping strategies.

Throughout the analysis, analytic memos were composed as a critical intermediate step between coding and final interpretation. Memos captured reflections on potential meanings, early interpretations, and connections between codes and categories. As Saldaña (2011) explains, writing is analysis itself, and memos enable researchers to elaborate on the inferential meanings behind truncated codes, leading to more coherent narrative findings. Memos were revisited and revised throughout the process, ultimately informing the development of thematic statements and the structure of the final report.

As the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, the researcher played a reflexive role in interpreting participants' perspectives. The researcher's positionality as a community college administrator and doctoral scholar was acknowledged through continual self-reflection and memoing to monitor potential bias. By maintaining reflexive notes and adhering to systematic coding procedures, the researcher ensured credibility and transparency in the analytic process.

MAXQDA software was used to assist in data organization, retrieval, and comparison. While the software facilitated the technical management of data, the interpretive and analytic work remains the responsibility of the researcher. Coding and categorization was grounded in the data and guided by Saldaña's iterative, inductive approach rather than by automated functions.

The analytic process progressed from the detailed examination of words and phrases in the first cycle of coding, to the abstraction and synthesis of broader patterns in the second cycle. Through careful memo writing, comparison, and reflection, the researcher constructed an

interpretive understanding of the participants’ experiences. This process aligns with Saldaña’s (2011) view that qualitative data analysis is both systematic and creative, an iterative act of sense-making that transforms raw data into meaningful findings.

Figures 2 and 3 provide examples of the coding process in MAXQDA, illustrating how codes were applied to segments of the interview transcripts for the participants Elias and Sam.

Figure 2. MAXQDA Coded Transcript Excerpt for Elias

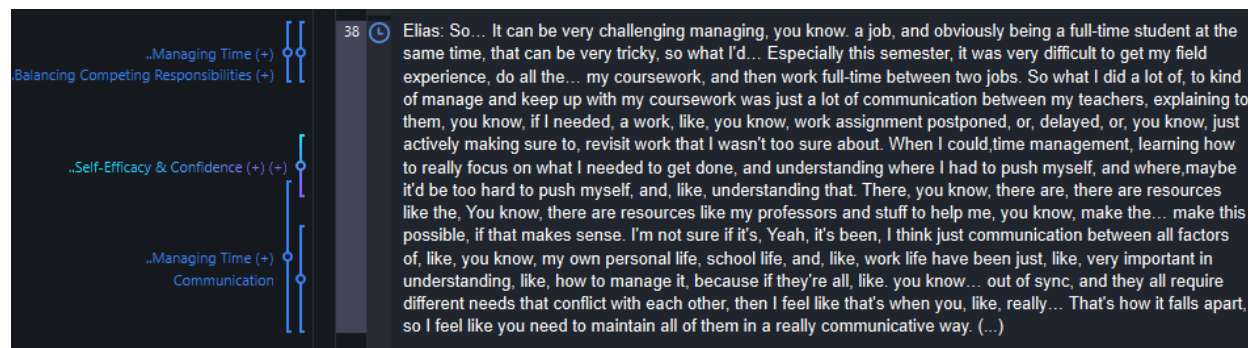
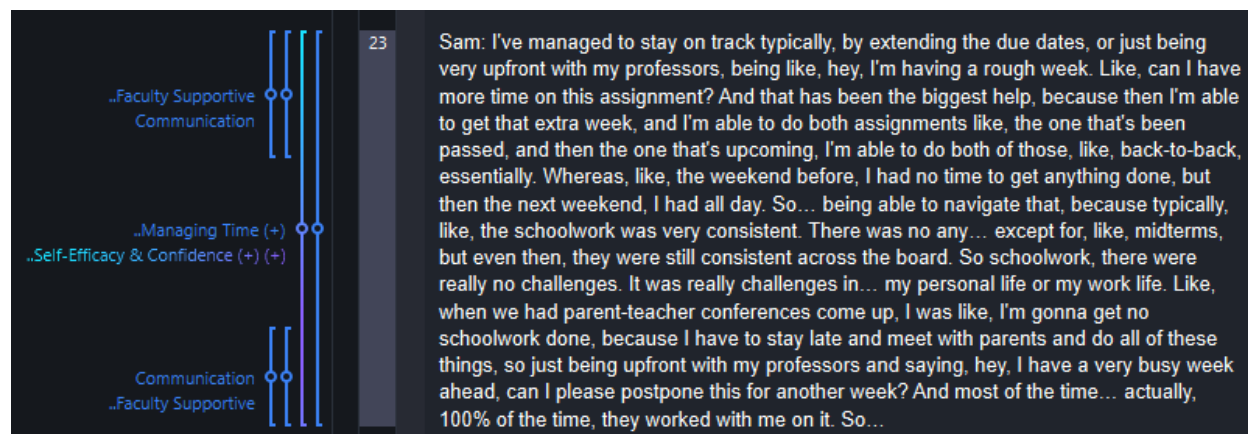


Figure 3. MAXQDA Coded Transcript Excerpt for Sam



Alignment Table

The alignment table demonstrates how the study’s problem, purpose, research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and methodology are systematically connected to ensure coherence and rigor throughout the research design.

See Appendix A.

Limitations

This qualitative inquiry is intentionally designed to generate rich, contextualized understandings of community-college baccalaureate (CCB) students' experiences, yet several features of the design necessarily constrain the scope of the findings. Because data was co-constructed through semi-structured interviews and interpreted through the researcher's analytic lens, the study is vulnerable to subjectivity and confirmatory bias. Although reflexive memoing and member-checking were employed to surface and bracket personal assumptions, the researcher's positionality did not influence coding choices and thematic emphasis. Moreover, the purposeful sample, approximately 14 students drawn from the two community colleges, favors depth over breadth; as a result, the insights produced here should not be generalized statistically to all CCB populations. Instead, transferability rests on thick description that allows readers to judge relevance to their own institutional contexts.

A second set of limitations centers on logistical and ethical considerations. Conducting all interviews via Zoom may restrict observation of non-verbal cues and limit participation to students with reliable internet access, potentially excluding voices from underserved groups. This did not occur as there were no internet issues during any of the interviews. Data security protocols (encrypted recordings, password-protected files, and a restricted Google-Drive repository) mitigated confidentiality risks. The reflexive thematic-analysis process, though systematic, relies on interpretive judgment; decisions made at each stage (segmenting, coding, and theme definition) were attentive not to mask divergent perspectives or overstate commonalities. By articulating these constraints and documenting an auditable analytic trail, the study strived for transparency and trustworthiness while acknowledging the inherent boundaries of qualitative research.

Ethical Considerations

All phases of this study conformed to the ethical standards articulated by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020) and the federal regulations governing research with human participants. Prior to any data collection, approval was obtained from the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and from the IRBs of the participating community colleges. Each prospective interviewee received a plain-language consent form outlining the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, potential risks (for example, discomfort when recalling challenging academic experiences), anticipated benefits, and the \$20 Amazon e-gift card incentive upon completion of the interview. Informed consent was obtained electronically, and participants were reminded that they can decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

Confidentiality was protected through multiple safeguards. Zoom sessions were conducted with the platform's pass-code and waiting-room features enabled; recordings are stored on an encrypted, access-restricted drive within the researcher's secure Google Workspace. Transcripts were de-identified by replacing names and other traceable details with pseudonyms, and the master key linking codes to identities is stored in a separate, password-protected file. Findings are reported in aggregate form, and any quotations were stripped of identifying details. These procedures collectively uphold the principles of respect, beneficence, and justice, thereby ensuring that the study's contributions are both ethically and scientifically sound.

The researcher brings professional experience as a Technical Project Manager Principal for a large community college with a substantial online presence in the southwest US. In this role, the researcher leads information technology teams and oversees complex institutional projects. The researcher also teaches both in-person and online information technology courses

as an adjunct faculty member at another college within the same district. Although the researcher works within the community college system, they do not teach upper-division coursework nor coordinate any Community College Baccalaureate programs, which helps limit direct influence on the student population participating in this study.

The author utilized ChatGPT exclusively for editorial support, including grammar checks and sentence refinement. The conceptualization, arguments, and conclusions presented remain entirely the author's own work. See Appendix F.

Study Quality

To bolster credibility, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) analog to internal validity, multiple complementary procedures were used. The study engaged in prolonged engagement with each participant through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that allow for follow-up probes and clarification. Member checking was conducted by returning transcripts to participants for confirmation of accuracy and resonance (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A pilot test was run to measure the effectiveness of the interview structure.

Steps were also taken to ensure dependability and confirmability, the qualitative counterparts to reliability and objectivity. A detailed audit trail was kept, including field notes, analytic memos, coding iterations, and decision logs (Nowell et al., 2017). A code–recode strategy, setting aside initial coding and revisiting it after two weeks, was employed to verify coding stability (Kakar et al., 2023). All data management followed a chain-of-evidence structure linking raw transcripts, codes, categories, and final themes. To promote transferability, contextual descriptions of program focus, and participant demographics are provided so that readers may judge the applicability of findings to analogous community-college contexts (Nowell et al., 2017).

Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the qualitative methodology guiding this study, including its purpose, research questions, and use of Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure and Social Cognitive Career Theory as guiding frameworks. A generic qualitative inquiry design was described, with semi-structured interviews of 14 CCB students as the primary data source. Procedures for site selection, participant recruitment, data collection, and thematic analysis were detailed, alongside ethical safeguards and strategies to ensure trustworthiness. Together, these elements establish a coherent and rigorous framework for addressing the study's research questions.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of this qualitative study examining how students enrolled in community college baccalaureate programs experience institutional support systems and how social cognitive factors influence their persistence toward degree completion. Fourteen students enrolled in upper-division coursework within two CCB programs in Arizona participated in semi-structured interviews. These participants represent early cohorts within Arizona's expanding CCB landscape, offering insight into how institutional structures and personal belief systems interact during the final stages of baccalaureate attainment at a community college.

The findings are organized around the two research questions guiding this study.

Research Question 1: How do students experience college support systems while enrolled in community college baccalaureate programs?

Research Question 2: What is the influence of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals in CCB students' progress toward degree attainment?

Eight key themes emerged from this study. These themes were identified and developed when at least half of the participants described substantively similar perspectives or experiences during the interviews. Four themes addressed Research Question 1, which focused on how students experienced college support systems while enrolled in community college baccalaureate programs. These themes were: faculty were students' primary support system; student support services were available, useful, and accessed as needed; information resources helped students navigate the program; and flexibility and familiarity made the CCB pathway attainable. Four additional themes addressed Research Question 2, which focused on the influence of self-

efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals in students' progress toward degree attainment. The themes were: students built confidence by completing difficult academic work; students persisted by managing competing demands; hands-on and work-based learning helped students connect the degree to their future careers; and career goals, degree attainment, and future outcomes kept students moving toward completion.

The participants in this study are enrolled in newly established bachelor's degree pathways, providing insight into student experiences during the initial years of program development. As of the Spring 2026 semester, Institution A's BA in Early Elementary Education and Special Education, launched in 2023, has produced 12 graduates and had 541 students enrolled at the time of this study. Institution B's BAS in Information Technology, also introduced in 2023, has graduated 89 students with 1,144 students enrolled. These enrollment patterns indicate early growth and demand, situating student experiences within programs that are still evolving in structure, delivery, and institutional support systems.

Table 4.1. Participant Demographic Data

Pseudo Name	College	Program	Gender	Age	Ethnic Background
Adam	Institution B	BAS IT	M	36	Asian/White
Deanna	Institution B	BAS IT	F	34	Hispanic
Elias	Institution A	BAEE/SPED	M	22	Hispanic
Heather	Institution A	BAEE/SPED	F	21	White
Jane	Institution A	BAEE/SPED	F	31	White
Joe	Institution B	BAS IT	M	21	White
Josh	Institution B	BAS IT	M	34	White

Karen	Institution A	BAEE/SPED	F	24	White
Katie	Institution A	BAEE/SPED	F	24	Asian/Vietnamese
Mary	Institution A	BAEE/SPED	F	41	White
Phil	Institution B	BAS IT	M	22	Hispanic
Sam	Institution A	BAEE/SPED	Non Bi	25	White
Shelly	Institution B	BAS IT	F	31	African American
Vicky	Institution B	BAS IT	F	31	Hispanic

Faculty Were Students' Primary Support System

Participants consistently described faculty as the primary source of support in their baccalaureate programs. Students explained that faculty helped them understand assignments, manage challenges, receive feedback, request flexibility, and continue progressing when academic, work, family, or personal responsibilities became difficult.

Katie stated:

All of my teachers were very accommodating, very understanding, and I think that comes with being at a community college. It's a smaller environment, so the instructors were very understanding with coursework. They were able to, no problem, no questions asked, give extensions, or say, 'What do you need? How can I lessen the burden of an assignment?' For one of my assignments in that really rough period of time, I actually ended up just doing an alternate assignment. They didn't have to do that. They went above and beyond. They took time to reach out and say, 'Hey, we've noticed that you are not as on top of it.' I always had my coursework in on time, and they noticed themselves that I wasn't quite there. The teachers actually reached out to me and were like, 'How can we help? Are you okay? We've noticed that some of your assignments are lacking in

some areas. Is there anything that we can do?' Which I felt was so above and beyond, and that's the teacher that we all strive to be for our students.

Similarly, Sam stated:

Working full-time, teaching full-time, and then also being a student full-time has been a lot, but thankfully every single semester, with every single class, my professors have been very accommodating. I just let them know at the beginning of the semester, 'Hey, I'm also a teacher full-time, so there might be some times where I have to submit an assignment later, or I won't have time.' They're very, very good as long as I communicate and let them know, 'This week was rough. I'll submit this next week.' Then I submit a due date change. They're really good, and they're really empathetic about being able to be like, 'Don't worry about it. Take care of it when you can.'

Joe described faculty support in the online environment. He stated:

Overall, it's been a very positive experience, especially considering that it's online. The professors have always done their best to make sure everyone's collaborating and not just on their own doing work, and I've always got really good feedback in a short amount of time. I submit my assignment, and usually within 12 hours, if I had done anything wrong on a project, I already have feedback offered. So it made me feel like I wasn't isolated or anything like that, like I was actually in a real-life school.

Josh also described faculty support when learning difficult course material. He stated:

I haven't used those, so I've had to actually sit down and learn the material, and the professor's been fantastic with going through that. His material has been focused, targeted, well-explained, and he's been really open and available for help, which I did have to reach out a couple times during some of the projects to be like, 'I know

PowerShell syntax, but R language is backwards, so I'm kind of having trouble here with this.' He's like, 'Well, have you looked at it this way?' So he's been able to talk through it without giving the answers away. The material makes sense, and the professors have been good at explaining it and helping.

Elias explained how communication with faculty helped him manage coursework. He stated:

What I did a lot of to manage and keep up with my coursework was just a lot of communication between my teachers, explaining to them if I needed a work assignment postponed or delayed, or just actively making sure to revisit work that I wasn't too sure about. Just time management, learning how to really focus on what I needed to get done, and understanding where I had to push myself and where maybe it'd be too hard to push myself. There are resources like my professors and stuff to help me make this possible.

Mary described faculty as a direct source of clarification when she needed help. She stated, "Everything else, like my classwork, if I have issues, if I don't understand anything, I just email the teacher. They're pretty quick in responding, getting back to me, clarifying."

Jane connected faculty support to her ability to continue her education while managing family responsibilities. She stated:

We have five kids. This is number five. Very, very, very busy. Everybody that I've come in contact with as far as teachers and advisors, they've all been very good if I just communicate that. If I communicate, 'I'm so sorry, it's been a busy week with the family, my assignment's coming in a couple days late,' that's been very, very good for my education path. And it's made this all possible.

Shelly also described faculty and staff as accessible sources of support, even in an online program. She stated:

I know primarily I took online classes, but just because you're online, that doesn't mean there's no resources available to you. I could still communicate with my teachers when I needed to. I could still reach out to the counselors. You could reach out to them via chat, set up Zoom calls, set up phone calls, go in person. Everyone who did not know an answer, they knew how to go find it, or where to direct me. Through my experience with this program, it has been positive. I didn't get pushback. I didn't feel like I was judged.

Vicky described how faculty consistency and clear expectations helped reduce feelings of overwhelm. She stated:

Most of the professors I've had at least once or twice, because I've taken their classes. They've been pretty straightforward as to what they expect for the class, and so that's helped not feel so overwhelmed. Last semester, I actually ended up taking a full-time schedule, so that was a little rough, just because I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to finish all my classes and pass them and do a good job with full-time school and full-time work. Luckily, I did pass my classes, and I'm back to three classes this semester. It's been really good. It's been consistent, so that's helped a lot.

Heather described faculty support when she began falling behind. She stated, "I felt myself kind of falling behind, and what I ended up doing was I talked to some of my professors, and originally I got extensions over my moving period."

This theme addressed Research Question 1 by demonstrating that students experienced faculty as the most immediate and consistent form of institutional support in their CCB programs. Across interviews, participants described faculty as accessible, responsive, flexible,

and supportive in ways that helped them understand coursework, manage competing responsibilities, and continue progressing toward degree completion.

Student Support Services Were Available, Useful, and Accessed as Needed

Participants described student support services as available and useful when they needed assistance. Although some students did not report regular use of services such as tutoring, career services, libraries, financial aid, technology labs, or advising, they generally knew these resources were available and accessed them when needed.

Mary described financial aid support as helpful when she had questions about her eligibility. She stated:

I've actually, this last semester, utilized the last of my financial aid that I'm eligible for. It's been a blessing that they've been able to help me so far in my educational journey. They've been really helpful if I ever have had any issues with it. If I have issues, I just call them up, and they've helped out. When this semester ended, they were able to explain to me exactly why it ended, why I no longer qualify, and made it easier to understand the reason why I no longer get it.

Phil described limited use of support services while also noting that career-related information was regularly available. He stated:

I bought the textbooks and stuff that I was required to, but I never used the in-person resources or tutoring. Just the provided ones, mostly. In terms of outside help, I didn't really use any of it, just whatever was in the class. I never really used career services either. I've had the same job most of my time before and after I graduated. I would always get emails about them, like, 'Hey, there's a job fair going on,' or 'XY company is

going to be at the college at this time. Go out there, give your resume out.’ But I never used them.

Shelly described using several campus resources when she needed them. She stated:

Whenever I needed the library, it was available, and I needed it a few times. If I had a power outage and I had an assignment that was due within a few days, or that same day, I could go up to the computer lab. Also, one time I rented a hotspot. That was nice, very convenient. I’ve used the library before for a meeting. They have little separate rooms that you can reserve.

Elias described the technology computer lab as a useful place to focus and complete coursework. He stated:

I’ve definitely used our TC Center, the technology computer lab, and utilized the computer usage. It has been really good having that resource as a student. It’s good to have an environment where you can just focus and feel welcomed in the school community, and sit down and focus on accomplishing all of the tasks you need. Knowing that if I can’t work at home, or if I need an area to focus that isn’t a public center, the school computer lab is somewhere I can finish my assessments and even seek tutoring. I’ve never sought it myself, but it’s nice to know that’s there.

Katie described using the online library database as a helpful academic resource. She stated:

I didn’t really use many of them. I never really felt the need, and then when I did, I reached out separately. I’m sure they have a bunch of different programs and stuff like that, and I’m sure it would be easier had I gone on campus, but because my entire degree was online, I didn’t really go on campus for any of that stuff. In terms of their academic

library, the online database, I found that really helpful, just somewhere where all of the scholarly articles could be in one place.

Deanna described the virtual lab as useful when she needed access to specific programs for coursework. She stated:

I have had to use the virtual lab a couple of times because there were some programs that I didn't have on my computer that I needed for an assignment, and I thought it was really cool. It sounded too good to be true. You just log in, click on a computer, and you're in there. I was pleasantly surprised how well that worked. It was pretty seamless, and it wasn't laggy at all or difficult to use. I was quite happy with it.

Sam described student resources as easy to access, even though they did not use them often. They stated:

I haven't really had any problems with those learning resources. I didn't really use them very often. I didn't really use the library. I didn't use tutoring. I found it very easy, if I did need it, to reach out to anyone. Anytime you accessed your student center, tutoring was right there. The library thing was right there. So, if I needed it, I would be able to very easily access it.

Vicky described using library resources both in person and online. She stated:

I've used the library in person and also online. It's been really good. I've been able to go in and do my work, print out stuff if I needed to, and then online, I've used it for a lot of my classes that require, for example, Microsoft Project, kind of like Excel. You have to buy that program, so it helps out because I don't have to buy it. I can just go online and go through the library and be able to access the program and do my coursework, so that's been really helpful.

Adam described receiving support from several student service areas when he encountered an issue with his enrollment. He stated:

I was so lost at first, and it's like, 'Hey, here's your checklist.' Anytime I had an issue or a question, I'd call, someone answered. Their whole academic side for financial aid and academic issues were great. I dropped the ball and forgot to submit a promissory note for the VA, and I got dropped from all my classes on my last semester. I called them and said, 'It's my last semester, guys. I got dropped from all these classes. They're all full. What can you do?' And they were like, 'It happens all the time.' The girl personally emailed each teacher saying, 'This happened. I'm getting you back in the class.' They got me back in all my classes in an afternoon. The college's academic, counseling, VA office, financial aid, all that stuff was top tier.

This theme addressed Research Question 1 by describing how students experienced support services as accessible resources that could be used when specific academic, financial, technical, or enrollment needs arose. Participants described services such as financial aid, advising, libraries, technology labs, tutoring, career resources, and veteran support as available and helpful, even when they did not use those services regularly.

Information Resources Helped Students Navigate the Program

Participants described information resources as important tools for understanding program expectations, locating support, planning coursework, and completing assignments. These resources included college websites, learning management systems, Canvas, RioLearn, financial aid information, degree planning, assignment instructions, and advisor guidance.

Shelly described using the college website and announcements to stay informed about available resources. She stated:

I looked at the community college website just to see what resources were available and to read the announcements, because there are so many things that are provided to you that if you don't go look for it, you may not have a clue. I didn't want to be in the dark. Just because you're online, that doesn't mean there are no resources available to you. I could still communicate with my teachers when I needed to. I could still reach out to the counselors. You could reach out to them via chat, set up Zoom calls, set up phone calls, or go in person. Everyone who did not know an answer knew how to go find it or where to direct me.

Mary described how the learning management system helped her plan and prepare for coursework. She stated:

The way they have it set up is it shows you all your assignments that you're going to have for the whole semester. You can't submit them early, but every week you have set assignments that need to be submitted. For me, if some weeks I'm not very busy at work, I'm able to do extra assignments, save them, and get ahead. I really enjoy that part of the program, and also being able to see exactly what all I'm going to be learning in the class. That mentally helps me prepare, like, 'Okay, I know I'm going to have three papers to write in this class and two papers to write in this class,' where I feel like a traditional classroom class, you don't know until further on in the semester what assignments you're going to have to accomplish for the week.

Karen described online program information as mostly easy to navigate. She stated:

For the bachelor's program, I've navigated it mostly online, and it's pretty self-explanatory. You're able to go on and see your modules, what you need to do, and what you're going to learn. I've also required help navigating it when links didn't work, or

something about an assignment was unclear, because I can message my professors and they get back to you.

Vicky described Canvas and clear course expectations as helpful in reducing overwhelm.

She stated:

It's all pretty much been consistent. I already know how Canvas works. Most of the professors I've had at least once or twice because I've taken their classes. They've been pretty straightforward as to what they expect for the class, and so that has helped it not feel so overwhelming.

Adam described financial aid and VA information as helpful when navigating the program. He stated:

I think they did great. That was one of the things they were really good at. The FAFSA stuff is easy enough: 'Here's your FAFSA link. Apply. If you can get a Pell Grant, cool.' Their VA office made it way too easy. I was so lost at first, and it was like, 'Hey, here's your checklist.' Anytime I had an issue or a question, I'd call, someone answered. Their whole academic side for financial aid and academic issues were great.

Joe described relying primarily on Canvas and required digital materials rather than broader online resources. He stated:

I haven't really used any of the online resources on the college's website. It's just been using whatever is on Canvas, whatever I have to electronically download, and textbooks and whatnot. I haven't really done any of the extracurricular or anything in that regard.

Deanna described planning her coursework in advance. She stated: "I kind of try to map it out to where I know exactly what classes I'm going to be taking."

Some students also described challenges with information resources, particularly when program or technology information was unclear. Katie described difficulty submitting assignments in RioLearn and the need for clearer technical guidance. She stated:

The college has their own platform. Navigating turning in assignments was especially difficult because through RioLearn, there are all of these requirements, like your document can't have any special characters in the title or underscores. There was a time when every assignment was getting returned back to me. It was like, 'Oh, it's blank, it's not attaching.' And I was like, 'Why isn't it attaching?' None of my professors could tell me, and even tech support didn't tell me. It wasn't until the end of this semester that one of the tech support guys sat on the phone with me and literally walked me through it and was like, 'Okay, it can't have this, this, and this in it. Your safest bet is to have no spaces, no special characters.' It was kind of a shame, because I had been reaching out for numerous semesters trying to see how I could submit assignments. I kind of wish that I would have gotten through that sooner and had that information.

Phil described difficulty getting information early in the bachelor's program. He stated: It was hard initially getting info, I will say that. I had a couple meetings, especially with my academic advisor. I had to make a couple of calls, a couple of emails to both the admissions faculty and some of the teachers in regard to how my credits would transfer from my associate's. Most of them did end up transferring, thankfully, and they would end up updating the page for the IT bachelor's program. After that, it was mostly me figuring out, 'Okay, if I need to apply for graduation, I just need to go to this page, fill out this form, and then this person will contact me.' But before, it was mostly just a lot of outreach to both faculty and the admissions center.

This theme addressed Research Question 1 by demonstrating how students experienced information resources as important tools for navigating program expectations, course requirements, institutional processes, and available supports. Participants described websites, learning management systems, financial aid guidance, course modules, assignment instructions, and advisor communication as helpful in planning and completing their programs, although some students also encountered challenges when information was unclear or difficult to locate.

Flexibility and Familiarity Made the CCB Pathway Attainable

Participants described flexibility and familiarity as important reasons the CCB pathway was manageable. Students emphasized that online access, flexible course loads, lower cost, familiar systems, prior community college experience, and the ability to continue working made the bachelor's degree more attainable.

Deanna described the community college pathway as more flexible and easier to transition into after completing an associate degree. She stated:

It's been really good. I'm grateful that I have the option to do this through a community college. Compared to when I was at ASU, I spent half a semester there, and it was completely different. It seemed a lot more complicated. It was not as flexible, I would say, as my experience with doing this through this college instead. Because I know the community college district so well, it was really nice to be able to very easily transition into the bachelor's program after having earned my associate's degree. The flexibility of being able to take two or three classes at a time, even one class at a time, is really helpful for me in that regard. The flexibility is huge for me.

Elias described the program as familiar because it felt similar to his previous community college experience. He stated:

My introduction into my associate's degree at another district college was a very good introductory, as it still feels very much like a community college level type of course. I don't feel like the workload has changed all that much, but I think the intensity of what I'm learning about my career, or what I want my career to be, has changed a lot. I don't think navigating has been all too different from when I was studying for my associate's. It has been very easy. The only thing I've really had to adapt to when joining my college for my bachelor's program was their own in-house assignment thing, which was a little hard to get used to, but after that, it was good. It wasn't too cumbersome navigating my bachelor's program so far.

Phil described flexibility as one of the most valuable parts of the program. He stated:

“Just the flexibility. It was just the fact that I could get home from work and do my own thing, do my classes. I could use some of my real-world knowledge that I had from my job.”

Vicky described how online courses helped her manage the program with full-time work.

She stated:

At the beginning of the program, I was going more in person to the classes, to the IT institute downtown. That was nice, although it did conflict with my work schedule. That was the period where I was more tired, and it was harder to concentrate. After that, most of the classes that I've enrolled in have been online, which actually has helped me be able to do them with full-time work and school. After that, it has gone better because I can manage my time better. I don't have to physically go somewhere or drive there.

Mary described online coursework and advisor guidance as making the program easier to navigate. She stated:

Most of it's been online. I do my classes all online. When I first got into the program, not signing up for my own classes was different. Normally, for my associate's, I would be like, 'Okay, I want this, this, this, this. I know it pertains to my degree.' So I didn't really utilize an advisor, but being forced to utilize an advisor and them telling you, 'Okay, these are all the classes you need. You can still pick which ones you want to take at what time, but we have to enroll you,' was different, but it was very helpful. It made it easier.

Katie described the online bachelor's program as a pathway she would recommend for students who work and cannot attend a traditional classroom. She stated:

Getting to interact with students this semester really just exceeded my expectation of the bachelor program online, and I would recommend, and I do recommend, it to anybody who might work a lot and so they can't go to a traditional classroom if they have a 9-to-5 job. I would recommend this program to anybody and everybody, despite the bumps that I had here and there.

Elias also described affordability as part of what made the program attainable. He stated: I like the price of schooling, personally. I don't think I can afford the university lifestyle, especially even if I were to get scholarships and stuff. My goal was to minimize the amount of debt I would owe in school, so I think what I like the most about this program is that it gives opportunities to students like me who can't afford to go into debt to seek higher levels of education and actually pursue the careers that they'd like to pursue. It provides a very good quality education, and I'm learning so much about what it is to be an educator at a really good price.

This theme addressed Research Question 1 by showing that students experienced the CCB pathway as attainable because the program structure fit their academic, work, financial, and

personal circumstances. Participants described online access, flexible course loads, familiar community college systems, advisor guidance, affordability, and the ability to continue working as supports that helped them navigate and persist in the program.

Students Built Confidence by Completing Difficult Academic Work

Participants described gaining confidence as they completed challenging coursework, managed heavier academic loads, and moved through unfamiliar material. Several students explained that their confidence developed through the process of facing difficult academic expectations and realizing they were capable of succeeding.

Vicky described gaining confidence after completing a full-time course schedule while working full time. She stated:

Last semester, I actually ended up taking a full-time schedule, so that was a little rough, just because I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to finish all my classes and pass them and do a good job with full-time school and full-time work. I was trying to graduate by this May, so I was making sure I at least tried. Luckily, I did pass my classes, and I'm back to three classes this semester. It's been really good. It's been consistent, so that's helped a lot.

Shelly described how completing her first semester helped her realize she could succeed in the program. She stated:

This semester, I would say I felt the most confident, just because I knew it was the final stretch. After I got through my very first semester, I knew I could do it. The first one, I'm not the best at math, and I was really hesitant. I didn't know if I'd be able to do this, the coursework, because I was like, there's actually not too much math involved. So what I

did was I took my math courses at the beginning in that first semester and then took all the IT classes for the rest of the semesters.

Heather described feeling accomplished after completing a difficult semester with strong grades. She stated:

Up until this past semester, it's been relatively easy. I found the classes easy to understand, and so I felt very accomplished with the grades I was getting. My GPA was trending upwards, which was a really good feeling. This past semester, I was doing a little more credit hours than usual, and so I found it a struggle to juggle everything all at once on top of the field experience hours that I was doing. It was a lot of late nights, and I definitely struggled mentally pushing past the stress of the classes. I also felt like these classes this past semester were significantly harder than the ones that I had originally been doing. But at the end of the day, I ended up passing all my classes with straight A's, so that was a really big moment for me, feeling accomplished.

Jane described continuing through grief, pregnancy, parenting, and academic challenges while maintaining strong grades. She stated:

In the last four years, it's been grief, pregnancies, and babies, and through it all, I've maintained a good grade point average. It's felt really good mentally. I think this last semester was the hardest, because now, with so many kids, having to do in-person hours and juggling that, and the pregnancy was a little unexpected, this last semester was the first time that I considered maybe mid-semester quitting. But I just pushed through, and mentally, that felt good, because in the end, I still ended up with three A's and a B.

Karen described entering bachelor's-level coursework with concern but finding the program more manageable than expected. She stated:

I was originally like, ‘Oh crud, it’s going to be bachelor’s-level courses, it’s going to kick my butt, and it’s going to be incredibly difficult,’ and it wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be. I expected it to be online, and you’d have weekly things to do, and you’d have field experiences, but my expectations were happily met. I expected it to be incredibly stressful, and it wasn’t half as bad as I was expecting it, because I tend to work myself up about things and be like, ‘Oh my gosh, it’s going to be so much different, change,’ and then it wasn’t. So I’d say it definitely met and exceeded my expectations, and it was not as difficult as I was anticipating or catastrophizing about.

Elias described how field experience and hands-on training changed how he viewed his ability to enter the profession. He stated:

I feel like in any career, you start off and you’re just like, ‘I don’t know if I can even do this.’ You know nothing, and I feel like navigating through the program, through the field experience we have to take and stuff, learning how to, when you see the hands-on training, when you’re in an actual classroom, it changes a lot of what you think about the career. You start to see what you learn in school, or what you’re learning in your course, applied in real time, so I think that has been very helpful toward me.

Josh described building capability by working through unfamiliar technical coursework. He stated:

There’s been a couple classes that I’m not as familiar with, such as the data analytics ones from these most recent semesters, and they involve R language for the data analytics and RStudio. I haven’t used those, so I’ve had to actually sit down and learn the material, and the professor’s been fantastic with going through that. His material has been focused, targeted, well-explained, and he’s been open and available for help. I did have to reach

out a couple times during some of the projects to be like, ‘I know PowerShell syntax, but R language is backwards, so I’m having trouble here.’ He’s been able to talk through it without giving the answers away.

Joe described how the program helped him build a foundation that made him feel more confident in his future work. He stated:

It actually has helped me get some skills, for sure, in what I do for work and scripting. Some of it has been good foundational ethical work, so that I know what I should be doing, the compliances, the regulations I have to follow. That helps a lot, especially studying for some cybersecurity stuff right now, but I feel like it’s built me a very strong foundation to be able to get into a career where I’m actually feeling confident enough to do the work and feel safe doing it, and not be wondering if I’m following the right rules and what I’m doing.

Deanna described how coursework pushed her into unfamiliar areas and helped her become more well-rounded. She stated:

I like the quality of the courses that I’m going through. I feel like I’m actually getting something out of them. I’m learning really cool new things every class that I take, and it’s gotten me out of my lane of technology that I already know. These classes are making me learn different lanes of technology that I wouldn’t have otherwise bothered to look into, or even consider, or learn about. I think that is making me a more well-rounded person, and that’s going to help me in both my career and just knowing stuff.

This theme addressed Research Question 2 by demonstrating students’ self-efficacy increased as they completed difficult academic work, managed unfamiliar content, and succeeded in challenging courses or semesters. Participants described confidence developing

through academic accomplishment, persistence through uncertainty, and the realization that they were capable of meeting bachelor's-level expectations.

Students Persisted by Managing Competing Demands

Participants described staying enrolled while managing multiple responsibilities outside of school. Students balanced coursework with full-time employment, parenting, field experience, student teaching, mental health challenges, financial concerns, and family responsibilities.

Mary described the challenge of completing required student teaching hours while working and parenting. She stated:

I had two classes that needed student teaching hours. I think it was a total of 50 hours, and I am a full-time student, full-time working, full-time mom. For those 50 hours, I did have to take 2 weeks off of work. Luckily, the school that I did it at paid me for my time there, so I didn't necessarily lose income, but it was still stressful not knowing if I was going to get paid or not for those hours when I rely on an income as well. That's the stressful part for me, just balancing work and student teaching hours in a way that I'm still able to afford a living.

Sam described staying on track by communicating with professors when work responsibilities affected schoolwork. They stated:

I've managed to stay on track typically by extending the due dates, or just being very upfront with my professors, being like, 'Hey, I'm having a rough week. Can I have more time on this assignment?' That has been the biggest help, because then I'm able to get that extra week, and I'm able to do both assignments, the one that's been passed and then the one that's upcoming. The schoolwork was very consistent. There were really no challenges. It was really challenges in my personal life or my work life. When we had

parent-teacher conferences come up, I was like, 'I'm going to get no schoolwork done, because I have to stay late and meet with parents and do all of these things.' So just being upfront with my professors and saying, 'Hey, I have a very busy week ahead. Can I please postpone this for another week?' And 100% of the time, they worked with me on it.

Vicky described how online coursework helped her manage full-time work and school.

She stated:

At the beginning of the program, I was going more in person to the classes, to the IT institute downtown. That was nice, although it did conflict with my work schedule. That was the period where I was more tired, and it was harder to concentrate. After that, most of the classes that I've enrolled in have been online, which actually has helped me be able to do them with full-time work and school. After that, it has gone better because I can manage my time better. I don't have to physically go somewhere or drive there. I ended up taking a full-time schedule, so that was a little rough because I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to finish all my classes and pass them and do a good job with full-time school, full-time work. Luckily, I did pass my classes.

Elias described balancing full-time school, field experience, coursework, and two jobs.

He stated:

A job and obviously being a full-time student at the same time, that can be very tricky. Especially this semester, it was very difficult to get my field experience, do all my coursework, and then work full-time between two jobs. So what I did a lot of to manage and keep up with my coursework was just a lot of communication between my teachers, explaining to them if I needed a work assignment postponed or delayed, or actively

making sure to revisit work that I wasn't too sure about when I could. Just time management, learning how to really focus on what I needed to get done, and understanding where I had to push myself and where maybe it would be too hard to push myself.

Phil described the importance of being transparent with his employer while completing a full-time bachelor's program. He stated:

Especially when it came to work, because I was juggling both a full-time, in-person position and a full-time bachelor's program. I came into my job just being 100% honest, like, 'Hey, I'm a student. If I need time off, I'm going to tell you guys, and I just want you guys to be okay with that.' And they agreed with that. I feel like that transparency at the beginning really helped me out, because there were times where I was a little overwhelmed trying to juggle five classes and a full-time job.

Jane described persisting through grief, pregnancy, parenting, and in-person requirements. She stated:

In the last 4 years, it's been grief, pregnancies, and babies, and through it all, I've maintained a good grade point average. It's felt really good mentally. I think this last semester was the hardest, because now, with so many kids, having to do in-person hours and juggling that, and the pregnancy was a little unexpected. This last semester was the first time that I considered maybe mid-semester quitting, but I just pushed through.

Mentally, that felt good, because in the end, I still ended up with 3 A's and a B.

Heather described the difficulty of balancing additional credit hours, field experience, and stress. She stated:

This past semester, I was doing a little more credit hours than usual, and so I found it a struggle to juggle everything all at once on top of the field experience hours that I was doing. It was a lot of late nights, and I definitely struggled mentally pushing past the stress of the classes. I also felt like these classes this past semester were significantly harder than the ones that I had originally been doing. But at the end of the day, I ended up passing all my classes with straight A's, so that was a really big moment for me, feeling accomplished.

Katie described mental health challenges as the biggest difficulty in keeping up with coursework. She stated:

I had mentioned earlier about my mental health struggles, and that was probably the biggest challenge throughout my degree program, just keeping up on my coursework. It was a struggle to even do simple tasks, let alone log on to a computer and do coursework. My mind was in 101 other different places, and so that was extremely difficult to sit there and just be like, 'Okay, I have to do my coursework,' because I couldn't even do very simple tasks.

Deanna described managing her course load around work and personal time. She stated: I balance how many classes I think I should take, what my work looks like, and still have free time to not be either working or studying. That's kind of more on me to figure that out, but the flexibility of being able to take two or three classes at a time, even one class at a time, is really helpful for me in that regard. There have been multiple times where I've had to ask for an extension on a due date for an assignment, and luckily it's always been granted. I try really hard to not miss deadlines, but it happens sometimes. I try to keep organized and manage my time. I'm a planner.

This theme addressed Research Question 2 by describing how students' progress toward degree completion was shaped by their ability to manage competing academic, work, family, financial, and personal responsibilities. Participants described persistence as an active process of balancing demands, communicating with faculty, using flexibility, managing time, and continuing forward despite stress, uncertainty, or personal challenges.

Hands-On and Work-Based Learning Helped Students Connect the Degree to Their Future Careers

Participants described hands-on and work-based learning as an important part of connecting coursework to future professional roles. Students in education programs discussed field experience, student teaching, classroom observations, and lesson planning, while students in IT programs described labs, simulations, coding, databases, hardware, and applied projects.

Mary described student teaching as valuable because it helped her understand what teaching looks like in practice. She stated:

I've learned a lot of things just because I'm in the classroom, seeing with my own eyes and hands-on what it entails to actually be a teacher in the classroom. I've learned a lot doing the student teaching hours. I've learned a lot of things that I can utilize in my own classroom, like behavioral management and classroom management, that I'll be able to use in the future in my own classroom.

Shelly described the value of both physical hands-on experience and online simulations in the IT program. She stated:

When I first went for this degree, I hadn't had any experience with IT, taking apart a computer, putting it back together, or creating cords in person. So having that kind of real-world physical touch, and having a teacher there to show you how to screw this in, or

say, ‘You did it wrong, redo it again,’ and going around looking at other classmates and how they did it, and collaborating with other people, that was nice. Even though I was online, there were a lot of simulation programs that we had that were really helpful. Obviously, a simulation is not the real thing, but it’s pretty close when you’re doing an online program.

Phil described how database coursework supported his work outside of school. He stated: “The database ones really helped me out in my real-world projects. Some of the experience I had building SQL databases in the community college district really helped.”

Katie described how repeated classroom experiences helped her move beyond coursework and understand classroom management. She stated:

I thought that I would just be doing classes, and then, okay, here’s your student teaching. With it being online, I didn’t know what to expect because you don’t get those hands-on experiences through online, so I was kind of expecting the worst and expecting just to do a bunch of classwork. But having that consistent experience, every semester I was in a classroom, was really helpful. I do think I learned so much classroom management-wise. It’s hard to really know what you do in situations if you’re not actually living through them.

Elias described field experience as useful in gaining hands-on training with students and schools. He stated:

All my classes have a field experience requirement that requires me to get a certain amount of hours before the semester ends, and they’ve had really good resources and official channels on getting those hours. It basically finds schools for you and teachers to get your foot in the door, and you can make contact with them and immediately get into

those schools. So, it's been really useful in seeking out experience and hands-on training with working with students, and getting a feel for the different kinds of grades, subjects, and even special ed.

Josh described how technical coursework connected to his current work in enterprise IT.

He stated:

Most of the material has been relevant. I am a cloud system network administrator. I do infrastructure stuff at work, so I've had to take a few database-related classes, either administration or security or data analytics. Though I don't use it too much at work, it's been helpful in my position because I can interface with the database team a little bit better, or run my own queries against some of the tables. It has had useful applications in my current job. The material's been helpful and applicable to my own experience at work in the enterprise IT world.

Karen described field experience as an opportunity to apply lessons in real classrooms.

She stated:

I think we do have a lot of field experience with our classes, and I think that's an incredible opportunity, because you get to connect your lessons and build lesson plans based on what you've been taught. You get to apply and teach them in an actual classroom. The hands-on experience is invaluable because it allows you to be prepared and actually see all aspects of the general and special education spectrum. There are ones where you have to do content-specific lessons, and then there are others where you're just observing the classroom behavior.

Joe described collaborative projects and hands-on coding as part of his online program experience. He stated:

A lot of the classes have been pretty good with trying to collaborate with students, even when online. It's not only discussions; they would have projects where you would actually collaborate with people and send them your work, and they'd send you theirs, and you work on it together. I like the fact that they were trying to bridge the gap between people being online and still having us know each other and work together. A lot of the work I've done has been ethics and regulation, and then others have been more actual hands-on, like coding.

Vicky described hands-on hardware work as part of her IT coursework. She stated: The one that I have done hands-on more has been for one of my classes regarding hardware. We actually got to get desktops and take them apart and put them back together, and diagnose and troubleshoot. That has been more of my experience. Most of everything has been online after that, and even though I was in person, it wasn't that much hands-on because of the type of class it was.

This theme addressed Research Question 2 by defining how hands-on and work-based learning shaped students' outcome expectations by helping them connect academic coursework to future professional roles. Participants described field experiences, student teaching, classroom observations, labs, simulations, coding, hardware activities, databases, and applied projects as opportunities to build practical skills, clarify career direction, and see how the degree could support their future work.

Career Goals, Degree Attainment, and Future Outcomes Kept Students

Moving Toward Completion

Participants described the bachelor's degree as being connected to their future employment, certification, promotion, increased pay, or long-term career mobility. For many

students, the degree was not only an academic goal but more importantly a pathway toward the career outcomes they wanted after graduation.

Mary described the bachelor's degree as necessary for becoming a certified teacher. She stated:

For me, being a teacher, you need to have a bachelor's degree in order to be a teacher, in order to be certified. Because for teaching, you have to be certified through the state, and to do that, you have to take state testing. They do vouchers for some of the testing, so I thought that was awesome, because some of those tests are like \$150. They actually give you the voucher so you can take the test and not be out of pocket.

Phil described seeing stronger employer response after listing his bachelor's degree as completed. He stated: "I've been recently interviewing with a couple of companies, and I noticed since I marked my degree as completed, I've gotten a lot more hits on my resume than I did initially, just having my associate's on there."

Vicky described the bachelor's degree as a way to stand out in the IT job market. She stated:

I think it would be really helpful, just because in the job market, a lot of the jobs require you to have a bachelor's, or to have experience. If you haven't been in the field, or you don't have that much experience, it's easier for you to be passed on for someone that does have a bachelor's degree. I think you do end up getting paid more, and they look at your resumes more when you have a bachelor's degree. Especially now with AI, drones, and cybersecurity, I feel like people pay attention more to IT, so I think it would really stand out in my resume and would help me with future jobs that I would want to apply to.

Shelly described specific career goals in the IT field after completing the program. She stated:

Personal goals? To have a job in the IT field by May, or sooner. Professional, I have a dream company that I want to work for. It's Lockheed Martin. My brother used to work there years ago, and I never forgot. I was in middle school when he used to work there, and it's been a dream of mine. I tried to do an internship there, but too many people applied prior to me, so that will be endgame, hopefully. I would love to work for Lockheed Martin. I love their benefits. I love how they kind of function like a government job, but they're not. And because you never just shoot for the moon, Raytheon. I would love to work for Raytheon, too, if I could never get on at Lockheed Martin. That's a professional goal I set for myself. The personal goal right now would be to just get a job. I will be thankful for any job within the IT field by May, or sooner.

Deanna described the degree as a credential that could help her move into jobs that previously required a bachelor's degree. She stated:

I think it's going to be huge, because there have been multiple jobs that I've wanted to apply for, that I have applied for, that required a bachelor's degree, and even though I know I'm perfectly capable of doing that job, that has been a huge factor in holding me back from getting jobs that I really wanted. The job that I have now, I'm doing pretty well, but having that degree behind me and having something tangible that says, 'Yes, I know how to do this. I know how to follow directions. I know how to follow through on a thing,' I think that's going to be huge for me.

Sam described the bachelor's degree as a pathway to teacher certification. They stated:

Teacher certification, because right now I have an emergency substitute certification that has to get renewed every year, and having a bachelor's will help me get that teacher certification that I can hold onto for way longer than just a year.

Joe described the degree as a way to strengthen his employment opportunities in a competitive IT field. He stated:

I think a degree is always the best foot in the door, besides having actual experience. As it's getting more and more competitive to find jobs, especially in IT, where you can get certifications and learn it online and have to prove all of your skill in an interview, I feel like having an actual bachelor's degree is going to help a lot with finding employment and having maybe a step above some other people who might be even more knowledgeable than myself, who have been working in it for longer, but don't have a degree. I feel like it's something to help separate yourself a bit in careers, and also to give you the knowledge and some resources to fall back on if needed. I know of a lot of really good professors I've had who are willing to help with resumes or job applications or recommendations, so I feel like all the resources that are offered from getting the degree really help in the long term of being able to actually find and secure a job.

Heather described the degree as opening multiple teaching pathways through dual certification. She stated:

The specific degree that I'm going for is actually a dual certification, which opens up a lot more avenues for me as a teacher. I can do special education or gen ed. As opposed to going to a university and paying double the tuition, I'm getting dual certified, so I can choose multiple paths. I have the option to get certified K-8, or I have the option to get

certified K-12 in special education and kind of change where I want to go as I learn more about the profession.

Jane described the bachelor's degree as part of both her immediate and long-term professional goals. She stated:

Professional goals is I'm going into this year knowing that I'm going to receive my bachelor's degree this year. Professionally, I want to be in a classroom within the first year or two after receiving my degree. But over time, I want to move more into a school psychologist or a school counselor's position. I want to grow in the field. I don't want to just go in and then remain a teacher. I want to get more education, which is why I was asking the advisors what else I could be doing to work toward that this semester. So while I want to be in the classroom, it's not where I want to be forever.

This theme addressed Research Question 2 by explaining how students' goals and outcome expectations played an important motivational role in their continued progress toward degree completion. Participants described the bachelor's degree as a pathway to certification, employment, advancement, increased earning potential, and long-term career mobility, which helped them remain focused on completing their programs.

Chapter 4 Summary

This chapter presented the findings from semi-structured interviews with 14 students enrolled in upper-division coursework within two community college baccalaureate programs in Arizona. The purpose of the chapter was to describe how students experienced institutional support systems and how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals influenced their progress toward degree completion. Eight primary themes emerged from the analysis.

The first four themes addressed students' experiences with college support systems. Participants consistently identified faculty as their primary source of support. Faculty helped students clarify assignments, manage stress, receive feedback, request flexibility, and continue progressing through academic and personal challenges. Students also described student support services as available and useful when needed, even though many did not use every service regularly. These services included advising, financial aid, tutoring, library resources, technology labs, career services, and veteran support. In addition, students explained that information resources helped them navigate the program. Websites, learning management systems, financial aid instructions, course modules, assignment expectations, and advisor guidance helped students understand program requirements and manage coursework, although some students also described difficulty locating or interpreting information.

The remaining themes addressed persistence, confidence, and career motivation in students progress toward degree attainment. Students built confidence by completing difficult academic work, managing unfamiliar content, and succeeding despite uncertainty. Participants also persisted by managing competing demands, including employment, parenting, field experience, student teaching, mental health, family responsibilities, and financial pressures. Hands-on and work-based learning helped students connect coursework to future careers through field experiences, student teaching, classroom observations, labs, simulations, coding, databases, hardware activities, and applied projects. Career goals and future outcomes also kept students moving toward completion, as participants connected the bachelor's degree to certification, employment, promotion, increased pay, or long-term professional mobility.

Chapter 5 - Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Chapter 5 interprets the findings from Chapter 4 and explores how institutional conditions and student agency interacted to influence navigation, engagement, and sustained progress. The chapter first discusses each of the eight themes identified in Chapter 4 in relation to the research question it addressed. The chapter then discusses the findings relative to the theoretical framework of Tinto's theory of institutional integration and the conceptual framework of Social Cognitive Career Theory, with attention to self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals. The chapter aligns these interpretations to existing literature and presents implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine how students in community college baccalaureate programs experience institutional support systems and how social cognitive variables influence their persistence toward degree attainment. The goal was to better understand how institutional design and student agency interact to shape persistence. Two research questions guided the study. Research Question 1 asked: How do students experience college support systems while enrolled in community college baccalaureate programs? Research Question 2 asked: What is the influence of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals in CCB students' progress toward degree attainment?

Four themes addressed Research Question 1. Students relied on faculty as their primary support system; student support services were available, useful, and accessed as needed; information resources helped students navigate the program; and flexibility and familiarity made the CCB pathway attainable. Four additional themes addressed Research Question 2. Students built confidence by completing difficult academic work; students persisted by managing

competing demands; hands-on and work-based learning helped students connect the degree to their future careers; and career goals, degree attainment, and future outcomes kept students moving toward completion.

Together, these findings demonstrate that persistence is shaped by the interaction between institutional conditions and student regulation. Institutional understanding influences how students engage with supports, while self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals influence how students navigate those systems, providing a foundation for the interpretations that follow.

Discussion of Findings Related to Research Questions

The following discussion interprets each theme in relation to the research question it addressed. Considered together, the themes related to Research Question 1 indicate that institutional support systems were experienced as essential but conditional, requiring active navigation by students. The themes related to Research Question 2 demonstrate that persistence was driven by self-efficacy expressed through intentional and regulated behavior, sustained by career-focused outcome expectations and clearly defined goals.

Research Question 1: How Do Students Experience College Support Systems While Enrolled in Community College Baccalaureate Programs?

Faculty Were Students' Primary Support System

Students experienced institutional support first and most consistently through their relationships with faculty. Rather than evaluating support systems in isolation, participants assessed the institution through the responsiveness and accessibility of their instructors. Faculty who provided timely feedback, granted flexibility during difficult periods, clarified expectations, and proactively reached out when performance slipped functioned as the primary mechanism

through which the institution became usable and understandable. These interactions, often occurring through email or the learning management system, provided the clarity and reassurance students needed to maintain progress, particularly in online courses where faculty were frequently the only consistent point of institutional contact.

Relative to Research Question 1, this theme suggests that institutional support was experienced less as a system of services and more as a set of accessible relationships. Because most participants balanced coursework with employment and family responsibilities, faculty willingness to accommodate competing demands converted institutional policy into personal, actionable support. Faculty served as interpreters of the institution, helping students understand requirements, manage setbacks, and continue moving forward. This finding indicates that in upper-division CCB programs, the quality of the student experience with support systems was largely determined by the quality of faculty engagement. This interpretation aligns with prior research: Esparza et al. (2025) found that perceived support from instructors predicted increases in students' self-efficacy and persistence intentions, and Madamanchi et al. (2019) reported that students relied almost exclusively on faculty guidance when navigating program content and career-related skills.

Student Support Services Were Available, Useful, and Accessed as Needed

Participants experienced formal support services as conditional resources that were engaged episodically rather than continuously. Students described financial aid offices, advising, libraries, tutoring, technology labs, career services, and veteran services as available and effective when a specific need arose, even though many did not use these services regularly. Importantly, awareness of these services appeared to function as a form of support in itself. Knowing that tutoring, technology access, or enrollment assistance could be reached quickly

reduced uncertainty and reinforced students' sense that the institution would respond if a problem emerged. The importance of service awareness is consistent with Cheche (2024), who found that students who remained enrolled were more likely than students who stopped out to be aware of and engaged with institutional support services. When students did activate these services, timely and effective resolution strengthened their perception of institutional reliability.

In relation to Research Question 1, this theme demonstrates that support systems were not perceived as automatically guiding progress, but rather as resources students used to identify, interpret, and engage at the right moments. Persistence required not only access to support, but the ability to recognize when support was needed and to act on that recognition. The effectiveness of student services was therefore judged less by frequency of use and more by responsiveness at the point of need, underscoring that availability alone did not constitute support until students could successfully convert it into assistance. This distinction between availability and engagement parallels Goemans and Kapinos (2024), who found that community college students who met with advisors more frequently persisted at substantially higher rates than students who did not use advising.

Information Resources Helped Students Navigate the Program

Clarity and communication emerged as central factors shaping how support systems were experienced. Students' perceptions of institutional competence were directly tied to the consistency, transparency, and timeliness of information available through websites, learning management systems, degree plans, assignment instructions, and advisor communication. When expectations were clearly articulated and information was accessible, students reported confidence and stability; several described the ability to view an entire semester's requirements in advance as a planning tool that allowed them to work ahead and organize competing

responsibilities. When information was delayed, unclear, or difficult to locate, as occurred with technical submission requirements and early program guidance, students experienced increased uncertainty and were required to expend additional effort to stay on track. Similar navigational difficulties are documented in prior CCB research; Martinez and Elue (2020) found that advising for CCB students was often inconsistent, with few mandatory advising policies and high student-to-advisor ratios that left some students without the guidance they needed.

This theme addresses Research Question 1 by showing that the quality of information itself functioned as a support system, or, when it failed, as a barrier. This interpretation is consistent with Robinson (2024), who found that students who believed their institution provided strong technical support reported greater engagement in their courses, whereas unresolved technical problems were associated with lowered self-efficacy and motivation. For upper-division CCB students, many of whom balance work and family responsibilities, ambiguity was disruptive in ways that extended beyond inconvenience, consuming time and energy those students had carefully budgeted. Information clarity therefore operated as a structural determinant of how much effort navigation required, shaping whether students experienced the institution as coherent and supportive or as an additional obstacle to be managed.

Flexibility and Familiarity Made the CCB Pathway Attainable

Participants experienced the design of the CCB pathway itself as a form of support. Online delivery, variable course loads, affordability, familiar institutional systems, and continuity from associate-level coursework allowed students to integrate the bachelor's degree into existing work and family structures rather than reorganizing their lives around school. These experiences align with research describing CCB students as older, frequently employed full-time, and balancing academic obligations with work and family responsibilities (Cuellar & Gándara,

2020). Familiarity with the community college environment reduced the navigational learning curve that often accompanies transfer; students already understood the learning management system, knew many of their instructors, and trusted the institution based on prior experience. Several participants explicitly contrasted this experience with the complexity and rigidity they associated with university settings.

Relative to Research Question 1, this theme extends the meaning of college support systems beyond services and relationships to the structural design of the program itself. For many participants, flexibility and affordability were not conveniences but preconditions of enrollment and persistence; the degree was attainable because the pathway fit their financial circumstances, work schedules, and family responsibilities. This finding suggests that students experienced the CCB model's accessibility as an intentional institutional support, one that lowered barriers before students ever needed to seek out a service or request assistance.

Research Question 2: What Is the Influence of Self-Efficacy, Outcome Expectations, and Goals in CCB Students' Progress Toward Degree Attainment?

Students Built Confidence by Completing Difficult Academic Work

Students did not describe confidence as a starting point, but as something developed through continued engagement with academic challenges. Many participants entered upper-division coursework with uncertainty, anticipating that bachelor's-level work would exceed their abilities, but built confidence by acting despite that uncertainty and successfully navigating difficulty. Completing a full-time course load while working, passing unfamiliar technical courses, and finishing demanding semesters with strong grades functioned as mastery experiences that reshaped how students viewed their own capability. A similar pattern appears in Marco-Bujosa et al. (2023), who found that first-generation college students described personal

success in difficult coursework as enhancing their belief in their ability to succeed. Confidence accumulated through performance, with each completed challenge providing evidence that the next challenge could also be met.

In relation to Research Question 2, this theme indicates that self-efficacy influenced degree progress as both an outcome and a driver of persistence. The forward-driving role of self-efficacy is consistent with George et al. (2022), whose longitudinal study found that students with higher initial self-efficacy were substantially more likely to sustain their career interests over time. Successful performance strengthened students' beliefs about their capability, and those strengthened beliefs supported willingness to take on heavier loads, unfamiliar content, and more demanding requirements. Persistence was therefore sustained through action, with students reinforcing their own efficacy beliefs through experience rather than waiting to feel ready before engaging.

Students Persisted by Managing Competing Demands

Persistence was expressed through intentional, regulated behavior. Participants balanced coursework with full-time employment, parenting, field experience requirements, financial pressures, grief, and mental health challenges, and they described specific strategies for doing so: planning course loads deliberately, managing time, communicating proactively with faculty, negotiating flexibility with employers, and requesting extensions before falling behind. Rather than disengaging when circumstances became difficult, students adapted, reframed obstacles as manageable, and continued forward. Several participants described moments when withdrawal seemed possible, yet they persisted by adjusting strategies and drawing on available flexibility.

This theme addresses Research Question 2 by demonstrating that self-efficacy operated behaviorally, not merely attitudinally. Students who believed they could finish organized their

behavior to make finishing possible, and self-regulation served as the buffer that sustained progress when institutional structures or personal circumstances were strained. Progress toward degree attainment was therefore not dependent on ideal conditions, but on students' capacity to regulate effort, seek accommodation, and maintain forward momentum despite those conditions.

Hands-On and Work-Based Learning Helped Students Connect the Degree to Their Future Careers

Applied learning experiences made the career relevance of the degree concrete. Education students described field experience, student teaching, classroom observations, and lesson planning as opportunities to see coursework applied in real classrooms, while IT students described labs, simulations, coding projects, databases, and hardware activities as directly transferable to current and future work. These experiences strengthened outcome expectations by demonstrating that academic effort translated into professional competence; students could observe themselves performing the work their degree was preparing them to do. The value participants placed on applied learning echoes Walker (2023), who found that community college students who participated in experiential learning completed and succeeded in their courses at higher rates than nonparticipants, although that study examined course outcomes rather than outcome expectations. Several participants also described applied experiences as confidence-building, noting that performing authentic professional tasks changed how they viewed their readiness for the field.

Relative to Research Question 2, this theme illustrates the interaction of all three social cognitive constructs. Successful performance in authentic settings contributed to self-efficacy; visible career relevance strengthened outcome expectations; and clarified professional pathways reinforced goals. Hands-on and work-based learning thus served as a bridge between present

effort and future identity, helping students interpret coursework not as an academic requirement but as preparation for the careers that motivated their enrollment.

Career Goals, Degree Attainment, and Future Outcomes Kept Students Moving Toward Completion

Outcome expectations and future goals strengthened persistence by providing direction and motivation. Students consistently connected degree completion to teacher certification, employment opportunities, promotion, increased pay, professional identity, and long-term career mobility, framing their efforts in pragmatic and future-oriented terms. These expectations helped sustain engagement even when students encountered competing responsibilities or academic challenges; the degree remained worth the strain because participants could articulate precisely what it would make possible. The motivational value of clear career connections complements Bradley (2023), who reported that effective career guidance helps students connect educational experiences with workforce outcomes, bolstering motivation and goal clarity. Some students described immediate evidence of this value, such as increased employer interest after listing the completed degree, which further reinforced their expectations.

In relation to Research Question 2, this theme demonstrates that clearly defined goals provided structure for persistence, allowing students to organize their time, monitor progress, and interpret short-term difficulties as part of a longer trajectory. Goals functioned as the mechanism that translated beliefs into sustained action, and outcome expectations functioned as stabilizing forces that supported continued effort. Progress toward degree attainment was strongest when students could connect daily academic work to a specific, valued future outcome.

Across both research questions, persistence emerged as the result of interaction between institutional conditions and student regulation. Institutional systems influenced how students

experienced clarity, support, and effort, while students' beliefs and goals shaped how they responded to those conditions. When systems were clear and responsive, they reinforced confidence and momentum; when they were fragmented, students relied more heavily on self-regulation to continue. These findings suggest that persistence in upper-division community college baccalaureate programs is both structurally influenced and internally driven, requiring alignment between institutional design and student agency to sustain progress.

Discussion of Findings Related to the Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The findings align with Tinto's theory of institutional integration by demonstrating that institutional structures play a central role in shaping persistence. However, integration for upper-division CCB students was not primarily social, but structural and relational. Students interpreted clear communication, accessible advising, and responsive faculty as indicators of institutional coherence. When these elements were present, students experienced a stronger sense of academic integration; when they were inconsistent, integration weakened. This extends Tinto's framework by showing that in commuter-based, workforce-oriented environments, integration is experienced through organizational effectiveness rather than social immersion.

Tinto's emphasis on institutional responsibility is reinforced, but with greater specificity. Students did not expect institutions to remove challenges; instead, they expected clarity, consistency, and reliability. Institutional competence was evaluated through communication quality and system transparency, aligning with literature on faculty engagement and structured advising as key drivers of persistence (Crawford, 2021; Findura, 2021; Madamanchi et al., 2019; Martinez & Elue, 2020; Meza & Love, 2023). These findings suggest that in upper-division

community college contexts, integration is achieved through coherent systems that reduce ambiguity and support navigation.

Social Cognitive Career Theory provides a conceptual explanation for how students operated within these institutional conditions. Persistence emerged as regulated behavior shaped by self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals within a given environment (Lent et al., 1994). Institutional supports functioned as contextual factors that either strengthened or strained these processes. When communication was clear and systems were predictable, students' confidence and engagement increased; when systems were fragmented, students relied more heavily on self-regulation to persist.

Self-efficacy in this study developed through action and prior mastery experiences rather than existing as a fixed trait. Students drew confidence from previous academic success, work experience, and life responsibilities, reinforcing Bandura's (1986) assertion that mastery experiences are the strongest source of efficacy. Outcome expectations were pragmatic and workforce-oriented, centered on career mobility, financial stability, and professional identity, which sustained effort over time. Goals functioned as the mechanism that translated beliefs into action, providing structure and direction for persistence.

Together, these findings demonstrate that persistence is shaped by the interaction between institutional design and social cognitive regulation. Institutional clarity and faculty engagement influenced how students experienced integration, while self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals determined how students responded to those conditions. Persistence therefore emerged from the alignment between coherent institutional systems and students' regulated beliefs and behaviors.

Findings Related to the Literature

The findings of this study largely align with the workforce-centered literature on community college baccalaureate expansion reviewed in Chapter 2. Scholars have argued that CCB programs expand access to bachelor's degrees while strengthening regional workforce alignment (Fulton, 2015, 2020; Levin, 2004; Meza & Love, 2023). Participants in this study confirmed that workforce mobility, career advancement, and regional access were central motivations for enrollment and persistence. Consistent with CCBA (2024) and Tripiccione and Love (2023), students described their programs as pathways to professional legitimacy and economic mobility. However, this study deepens the literature by illustrating not only why students enroll, but how workforce-oriented motivations sustain persistence when structural or personal barriers arise.

The findings also complement research emphasizing the importance of geographic proximity and access for nontraditional students (Cuellar & Gándara, 2020; Dones, 2021; Jaschik et al., 2019). Participants consistently valued the ability to remain within their communities while balancing employment and family responsibilities. Proximity functioned as a stabilizing environmental condition that reduced disruption and preserved existing support systems. The findings partially diverge from literature that positions affordability as an influential persistence factor (Martinez & Elue, 2020). While cost often influenced enrollment decisions, it did not emerge as a fundamental driver of continued engagement in upper-division coursework. Instead, career mobility and goal clarity appeared more influential in sustaining persistence.

Literature also emphasizes advising and institutional support services as central to student retention (Remenick, 2019; Swecker et al., 2013). The present study confirms the essential nature of structured support and extends to identifying communication clarity as a structural

determinant of support effectiveness. Supports were not perceived as universally beneficial simply because they existed. Rather, their effectiveness depended on transparency, consistency, and ease of navigation. This finding adds nuance suggesting that institutional design quality shapes how supports are experienced and interpreted.

Faculty engagement and student–faculty interaction were similarly reinforced in the findings. Literature highlights the role of mentorship, internships, and relational academic support in strengthening persistence (Madamanchi et al., 2019), as well as the influence of instructor engagement on student confidence and commitment (Crawford, 2021; Findura, 2021). Participants described faculty accessibility and structured feedback as central to their sense of competence and academic stability. These findings corroborate the literature while illustrating how faculty engagement functions not only as relational support but also as a mechanism of efficacy development in upper-division contexts.

The study’s findings further validate literature connecting academic support to self-efficacy and persistence (Marco-Bujosa et al., 2023; Esparza et al., 2025). Students reported that structured feedback and clear expectations strengthened confidence, whereas unclear systems increased stress and uncertainty. These findings align with Lent, Brown, and Hackett’s (1994) assertion that environmental supports influence persistence through cognitive mediators. At the same time, the present study operationalizes this relationship within the CCB context, demonstrating how communication clarity and institutional coherence influence efficacy beliefs in practice.

The findings diverge from policy-centered debates concerning mission creep and program quality (Russell, 2010; Chen, 2017; Soler, 2019). Participants did not express skepticism regarding academic rigor or institutional legitimacy. Instead, their concerns centered

on navigation, communication, and support access. This shift from policy discourse to student-level experience underscores a critical contribution of the study: while legislative discussions focus on structural expansion and affordability (Duda, 2021; Weissman, 2021a; Renfro, 2021), students focus on relational engagement, clarity, and forward momentum.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study indicate that persistence in community college baccalaureate programs is shaped by the interaction between institutional clarity and students' beliefs and behaviors. Upper-division CCB students demonstrated strong agency; however, their ability to sustain momentum was influenced by the coherence, transparency, and responsiveness of institutional systems. The implications that follow translate these findings into direct recommendations for institutional leaders, faculty, advising professionals, and program designers. Because persistence emerged as both structurally influenced and cognitively regulated, institutions should act deliberately on both environmental design and the development of students' self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal orientation.

Implications for Institutional Leadership

Institutional leaders should strongly consider treating clarity as a central condition for persistence rather than a peripheral administrative feature. Students interpreted consistent communication, accessible and understandable policies, and reliable advising structures as signals of institutional competence. Leaders should standardize communication channels, align program websites with advising materials, and clearly sequence upper-division milestones. In workforce-oriented programs, structural coherence reduces cognitive load and allows students to focus on academic performance rather than system navigation.

These recommendations align with guided pathways research, which emphasizes the importance of clearly structured academic and career pathways that help students get on a path, stay on a path, and complete a program aligned with their goals (Jenkins et al., 2025). Institutions that organize programs around transparent, structured pathways create environments where persistence is supported through design rather than left to student interpretation.

Implications for Faculty

Faculty engagement emerged as the most influential factor in how students experienced institutional support, and institutions should strongly consider formalizing this role rather than leaving it to individual initiative. Faculty were not simply instructors but functioned as the most reliable and accessible point of connection to the institution. Faculty should engage beyond course delivery by providing consistent and proactive communication, clarifying expectations, reaching out when student performance slips, and helping students interpret program requirements. Institutions should support and develop this work through professional development, workload consideration, and clear expectations for outreach, because faculty responsiveness directly sustains student momentum throughout upper-division coursework.

Faculty also play a critical role in connecting academic learning to career development, and programs should strongly consider embedding experiential learning, such as internships, capstone projects, and applied coursework, throughout the upper-division curriculum. These experiences strengthen students' understanding of how academic work translates to professional outcomes and align with research emphasizing the importance of integrating learning with real-world application and career pathways to increase student engagement and success (Jenkins et al., 2025). Through these practices, faculty contribute directly to the development of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and persistence.

Implications for Advising and Student Support

Institutions should replace transactional advising models with proactive, developmental advising. Students valued advising that clarified pathways, reinforced expectations, and aligned coursework with long-term goals; however, students should not be expected to initiate every interaction. Advisors should reach out at defined milestones, monitor progress indicators, and intervene before students fall behind. Institutions should implement structured milestone check-ins, provide clear program maps, maintain manageable advising caseloads, and integrate career planning into advising practice. These efforts help students understand not only what they need to do, but why those steps matter.

Career self-efficacy research suggests that advising should include structured opportunities for self-evaluation, career planning, and reflection on progress toward professional goals (Woodward et al., 2024). Advisors should deliberately build these opportunities into each advising cycle, encouraging students to assess their skills, identify gaps, and connect academic experiences to career outcomes. Doing so strengthens students' ability to make informed decisions and persist within their programs.

Promoting Self-Efficacy

Because self-efficacy emerged as a primary driver of persistence, institutions should strongly consider designing experiences that intentionally build students' confidence through action. Breaking complex tasks into manageable steps allows students to experience mastery and develop confidence through achievement. Faculty and advisors should provide feedback that emphasizes effort, strategy, and growth, reinforcing the belief that challenges can be successfully navigated.

Research on career self-efficacy highlights the importance of mastery experiences, vicarious learning, and structured reflection in building confidence and persistence (Woodward et al., 2024). Institutions should incorporate reflective practices, peer modeling, and opportunities for applied success that allow students to see their progress and capability over time.

Strengthening Outcome Expectations

Students in this study were motivated by pragmatic, workforce-oriented outcome expectations, including career mobility, financial stability, and professional identity. Institutions should explicitly connect coursework to career outcomes by integrating industry-relevant skills, providing labor market information, and clarifying pathways to employment and advancement. Program leaders should strongly consider making licensure requirements, job opportunities, and program value transparent at every stage, because this communication reinforces the perceived benefits of persistence.

These recommendations align with research emphasizing that students are more likely to persist when programs clearly lead to meaningful career outcomes or further education opportunities (Jenkins et al., 2025). When students understand the tangible value of their degree, they are more likely to sustain motivation even when facing challenges.

Supporting Goal Development

Goal orientation functioned as a key mechanism for maintaining persistence, and institutions should strongly consider integrating structured goal-setting practices into advising and coursework. Encouraging students to establish specific, measurable, and time-bound goals provides direction and helps organize academic behaviors. Milestone roadmaps that outline

program progression, experiential learning opportunities, and career benchmarks should be used to reinforce forward momentum.

Guided pathways research emphasizes the importance of helping students develop clear educational plans that map out their path to completion and career success (Jenkins et al., 2025). Institutions should schedule regular progress reviews and reflective practices that allow students to adjust their strategies while maintaining alignment with long-term goals.

Persistence in community college baccalaureate programs emerges from the interaction between institutional design and student agency. Institutions that prioritize clarity, structure, and workforce alignment while deliberately developing students' self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal clarity will be better positioned to sustain student success. Community college leaders should act on both fronts: strengthening the systems students navigate and cultivating the beliefs that guide how students navigate them.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides insight into how upper-division community college baccalaureate students experience institutional supports and regulate persistence through social cognitive processes, longitudinal research is needed to examine how these dynamics develop over time. A recommended study is a multi-year, mixed-method regional or national study tracking CCB students during their final two years, examining engagement with faculty and staff, advising interactions, participation in experiential learning, and academic performance trends. These institutional engagement indicators could be paired with periodic measures of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal clarity to observe how these variables evolve as students approach degree completion. Post-graduation interviews with completers and exit interviews with students who withdraw, framed through the study's research questions, would

provide additional insight into how institutional clarity, faculty engagement, and efficacy development influence persistence outcomes.

A second opportunity is the replication of this study with students in their first two years of college who intend to apply to or have been accepted into a community college baccalaureate programs. Comparing early-program students with upper-division students would allow researchers to examine how perceptions of institutional support and social cognitive regulation develop across academic stages. It would be particularly valuable to explore whether self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal clarity differ between students who are still navigating entry-level coursework and those who have already progressed into advanced study. Such comparative research could illuminate developmental shifts in persistence mechanisms and identify whether early intervention strategies should differ from those implemented in upper-division contexts.

A third recommendation concerns the pathway students take into the CCB program. As CCB programs attract more students, researchers should examine the supports and barriers experienced by students who continue into a CCB program at the institution where they began their coursework, compared with students who earned an associate degree elsewhere and transferred into a CCB program at another community college. Students who remain may carry forward established faculty relationships and familiarity with institutional processes, both of which participants in this study associated with confidence and willingness to seek help. Transfer students may encounter unfamiliar advising structures, questions about credit applicability, and the need to rebuild supportive relationships while entering upper-division coursework. Comparing these two entry pathways could clarify whether self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal clarity operate differently by point of entry and identify which onboarding, advising,

and faculty engagement practices matter most for each group. Together, these future directions would extend the present findings and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of persistence across the full CCB student trajectory.

Conclusion

This study examined how students enrolled in community college baccalaureate programs experience institutional support systems and how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals influence their progress toward degree attainment. Interviews with 14 upper-division students in two Arizona CCB programs revealed that support was experienced most powerfully through accessible, responsive faculty relationships, supplemented by services and information resources that students engaged as specific needs arose, and grounded in a program structure whose flexibility, affordability, and familiarity made the degree attainable in the first place. At the same time, students' progress was propelled from within: confidence built through the completion of difficult academic work, disciplined management of competing work, family, and personal demands, applied learning that connected coursework to professional practice, and clearly defined career goals that gave daily effort direction and meaning. Persistence emerged not from institutional structure or student agency alone, but from the continuous interaction between the two.

As Arizona and other states continue to expand baccalaureate offerings at community colleges, these findings offer leaders a student-centered account of what sustains progress in the final stages of degree completion. Institutions that invest in responsive faculty engagement, clear and consistent communication, navigable support services, and program structures designed around the realities of working adults create the conditions in which students' own confidence, expectations, and goals can carry them to completion. The community college baccalaureate

holds its promise when institutional design and student agency work in alignment. The students in this study demonstrated that when that alignment exists, the pathway does more than expand access to a degree; it enables students to complete one while sustaining the jobs, families, and communities that motivated them to enroll.

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Appendix A - Alignment Table

Problem Grounded in Literature: Community-college baccalaureate (CCB) students complete their degrees at much lower rates than students who start in four-year institutions; persistence appears closely tied to the availability of supportive campus environments, students' academic/social integration, and evolving self-efficacy (Bailey et al., 2015; Fink & Jenkins, 2020).

Research Questions:

RQ 1: How do students describe the college supports and challenges they experience while enrolled in community college baccalaureate programs?

RQ 2: What is the influence of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career goals in CCB students' progress towards degree attainment?

Guiding Frameworks:

Theoretical framework: Tinto's (1993) Model of Institutional Departure (academic & social integration, external commitments).

Conceptual framework: Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994) (self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals).

Methodology:

Qualitative inquiry employing individual, semi-structured interviews; reflexive thematic analysis

Data Sources & Interview Structure:

Demographic questionnaire and 30-40 minute Zoom interviews with 14-20 CCB students; probes address key supports, barriers, self-efficacy, and goals. Recordings are stored in a secure Google Drive and transcripts coded thematically in MAXQDA.

Appendix B - Request to Distribute Invitation to Participate in Dissertation Study Interview

Figure 4. Request to Distribute Invitation to Participate in Dissertation Study Interview

Subject: Request to Distribute Dissertation Study Interview Invitation to Students

Dear [Program Coordinator's Name],

My name is Calvin DeVoll, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Community College Leadership Program at Kansas State University. I am conducting a qualitative dissertation study focused on understanding the experiences of students enrolled in baccalaureate degree programs offered by Maricopa Community Colleges. This research aims to explore how students perceive institutional support activities, as well as how their career goals, outcome expectations, and self-efficacy influence their degree progress.

I am writing to request your assistance in sharing an invitation with students currently enrolled in your community college baccalaureate program to participate in a one-on-one interview. Each interview will be conducted via Zoom, will last 30-40 minutes, and will be audio-recorded with participants' consent. Participation is entirely voluntary, and the student's identity and responses will be kept confidential. To thank participants for their time, those who complete the interview will be given a \$20 Amazon gift card.

Your support in distributing this invitation would be instrumental in helping to ensure a diverse range of student voices are represented. The findings will contribute to research aimed at improving student support systems within community college baccalaureate pathways.

Please let me know if you are willing to assist with this request or if you have any questions about the study. I am happy to provide any additional materials or documentation needed.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Calvin DeVoll

Doctoral Student, Kansas State University

(480) 779-7274

calvin.devoll@riosalado.edu

Appendix C - Student Invitation Email to Participate in Dissertation

Study Interview

Figure 5. Student Invitation Email to Participate in Dissertation Study Interview

Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Research Interview: Share Your Experience as a Bachelor's Student

Dear [Student's Name],

My name is Calvin DeVoll, and I am a doctoral student in the Community College Leadership program at Kansas State University. As part of my dissertation research, I am conducting a study to understand how students currently enrolled in Community College Bachelor programs experience the college support services such as advising, financial aid, tutoring, and internships.

I would like to invite you to participate in a one-on-one interview via Zoom. The interview will last 30-40 minutes and will be audio-recorded with your consent. Participants that complete the interview will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card. Your participation is completely voluntary, and your identity will be kept confidential. You may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

If you are interested in participating or would like more information, please reply to this email or contact me at devollcj@ksu.edu. Your voice and insights are vital to this research and may help improve services for future students in community college bachelor programs.

Thank you for considering participation in this important study.

Sincerely,

Calvin DeVoll

Doctoral Student, Kansas State University

devollcj@ksu.edu

Appendix D - Student Interest Participation Form

Figure 6. Student Interest Participation Form

The form is titled "Research Interview Form" and includes a thank-you message for participation. It contains several required fields marked with an asterisk (*). The fields are: Email, First Name, Last Name, Phone Number, Your Bachelor Degree Program, Your College, How many credits have you completed?, and What time of day are you typically available? (with radio button options for Morning, Afternoon, and Evening). A legend indicates that an asterisk denotes a required question. At the bottom, there are "Submit" and "Clear form" buttons.

Research Interview Form

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. Once this form is filled out, you will be contacted with more information. This form, your identity, all communications, and the interview remain confidential.

* Indicates required question

Email *

Your email: _____

First Name *

Your answer: _____

Last Name *

Your answer: _____

Phone Number *

Your answer: _____

Your Bachelor Degree Program *

Your answer: _____

Your College *

Your answer: _____

How many credits have you completed? *

Your answer: _____

What time of day are you typically available? *

☐ Morning

☐ Afternoon

☐ Evening

Submit Clear form

Appendix E - Student Interview Questions

Figure 7. Student Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your experience with academic advising in your bachelor's program at _____ Community College?
2. How would you describe your experience using learning resources, like tutoring or the library, in your program?
3. What has your experience been like with career counseling or career services at _____ Community College?
4. How would you describe your experience with hands-on or real-world learning, like internships or work-based projects, in your program?
5. How would you describe your experience with financial aid while in your bachelor's program?
6. How has your experience been with mental health or wellness services offered at _____ Community College?
7. Tell me how you've experienced/navigated the CCB program so far?
(Probes: Inside and outside the classroom, when have they felt especially capable, or when they have doubted themselves)
8. How have you handled unplanned events or challenges in your courses, or at work, or in your personal life while you've been enrolled in this program?
9. Is this degree program what you expected?
(Probes: What do you like? What's missing?)
10. How do you think this bachelor's degree will give you opportunities for your career?
11. When did you know you wanted to be a " _____ "
(nurse, teacher, IT professional, professional in the area of the program)
12. What type of personal and professional goals have you set for yourself?
(Probe: How well do you stick to your goals? How are you doing on meeting them?)

Appendix F - AI Disclosure

Figure 8. AI Disclosure

AI Disclosure

The author utilized ChatGPT exclusively for editorial support, specifically for grammar checks and sentence refinement. At no point did the AI generate concepts, arguments, or conclusions. All ideas, interpretations, and scholarly contributions contained within this dissertation are entirely the author's own work, with AI use limited to improving clarity, readability, and adherence to academic writing standards.

Examples of Editorial Support Prompts:

1. *Grammar Check Prompt:* "Review this paragraph for grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure errors while keeping the meaning unchanged."
2. *Sentence Refinement Prompt:* "Rewrite this sentence to make it more concise and academically appropriate for a dissertation."

Appendix G - Student Consent Form

Figure 9. Student Consent Form

Kansas State University
Doctor of Education in Community College Leadership

STUDENT CONSENT LETTER

Principal Investigator:
Calvin DeVoll, Doctoral Candidate Kansas State University
Email: DeVollCJ@ksu.edu Phone: (480) 779-7274

Faculty Advisors:
Dr. Jennifer Spielvogel, Ph.D. Dr. Terry Calaway,
Ph.D. Kansas State University College of
Education

Purpose of the Study
You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the experiences of students enrolled in Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) degree programs within the Mancopa Community College District (MCCCD). The purpose of this study is to better understand how students experience institutional supports and barriers, and how these influence their confidence, career goals, and expectations as they progress toward completing their degree.

Risks: The risks of participating are minimal and are no greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily academic life. However, you may feel some discomfort when discussing personal experiences. You are free to skip any question you do not wish to answer.

Benefits: While there may be no direct benefit to you, your participation may help community colleges improve student support services and strengthen degree completion pathways for students in baccalaureate programs.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation is completely voluntary. You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and this will not affect your academic standing, relationship with MCCCD, or access to student services.

Confidentiality
Your identity will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any reports, presentations, or publications. Instead, coded identifiers will be used in all transcripts and research materials. Data will be stored on password-protected devices and secured files accessible only to the researcher. Audio recordings will be destroyed after transcription and verification.

Questions
If you have questions about this study, please contact:
Researcher: Calvin DeVoll, DeVollCJ@ksu.edu, (480) 779-7274
If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at comply@k-state.edu.

Consent Statement
By signing below, you acknowledge that you have read and understood the information provided above, have had the opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study.

Participant Name (print): _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____