

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Roger W. Cooper, Jr. for the degree of Doctor of Education presented on May 6, 1996. Title: Participant Perspectives of Program Success in a Community College-Based Short-Term Skill Training Program.

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Abstract approved:

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Evaluating the success or failure of work force training programs is most often accomplished through the reporting of "objective" data. Rarely are the students' views of their own success in such a training program formally solicited or applied in any useful way. But participant perceptions can be a critical barometer of quality and ought to be taken into account in any program which aims for continuous improvement. This research was undertaken to allow people to present *their* experiences and meanings in ways which can contribute to just such program improvement.

The study was guided by the following research questions: 1. How do student participants define success? 2. How did their Skill Center training program meet their definition of success? It was expected that information gathered from the study would provide information that could: (a) provide and clarify student participant perspectives in work force training and employment programs, and (b) help program operators who run this and similar programs make informed decisions based on participants' definitions of success and their perceptions of what successes they experienced from the Skill Center program.

The data were collected through in-depth interviews with fifteen graduates self-identified as successful. Grounded theory methodology was followed to develop the findings. Among all informants, the most often cited theme was that of “connecting” with instructors and fellow students. A second component of this central theme was a “cohort” feeling; a perception of warmth, support, and a sense of family that was common to all of the students interviewed. Many students were balancing feelings of anger, frustration, anxiety, and despair, and it was the human connections with the other members of the skill training center that enabled many, if not most, students to persist in training. For all of the interviewees, the affective value of their training was more intrinsic (e.g., helped them build their confidence and self-esteem) than extrinsic (e.g., helped them obtain and retain a job). This contributes to an inherent tension between individuals and agencies, since agency perspectives on success are based almost solely on extrinsic measures.

Participant Perspectives of Program Success in a Community College-
Based
Short-Term Skill Training Program

by

Roger W. Cooper, Jr.

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I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

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Roger William Cooper, Jr., Author

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Participant Perspectives of Program Success in a Community
College-Based Short-term Skill Training Program

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF STUDY

Does it really help to imagine that there is some one full, objective, true account of nature and that the proper measure of scientific achievement is the extent to which it brings us closer to the ultimate goal? If we can learn to substitute evolution-from-what-we-do-know for evolution-toward-what-we-wish-to-know, a number of vexing problems may vanish in the process.

—Thomas Kuhn

RATIONALE FOR THESIS

Evaluating the success or failure of work force training programs is most often accomplished through the reporting of “objective” data. Rarely are the students’ views of their own success in such a training program formally solicited or taken into account in any useful way. Instead, quantitative outcome measures, such as pre- and post training assessment tests (Morris, et al, 1988), and employment placement and post-program retention data (Rubin & Zornitsky, 1986) are most often used as success indicators. Understanding their own view of their success by learner participants involved in a work-readiness education/training program has received very little attention. But participant perceptions can be “critical barometers of quality” (Davis, 1992), and ought to be taken into account in any program which aims for continuous improvement in quality. This research has been undertaken to allow “people to present *their* experiences

and meanings" (Denzin, 1982, p. 18) in ways which can contribute to just such program improvement.

The research site was the Portland Community College (PCC) Skill Center, at the Cascade Campus in Portland, Oregon. PCC Cascade Campus is located in the heart of a State-designated Enterprise Zone. The Skill Center is self-described as a community-college partnership and as such involves more participating and funding agencies than do most kinds of educational programs. Included among the partners are The Private Industry Council (TPIC) which is funded by Joint Training Partnership Act (JTPA), Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) funding through the Steps to Success program (STEPS), and the Oregon State Employment Division (SED). Additionally, the local school district Alternative Learning Opportunities program (ALO) also referred a number of participants to the PCC Skill Center. Funds from the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Act (Perkins) have been used for some equipment and curriculum materials purchases. Further referring and participant organizations are scattered throughout the Enterprise Zone, and number more than fifteen.

While the partners provide various kinds of support, including some financial aid for students, the Skill Center itself is funded by a grant from the State of Oregon, administered by the State Office of Community College Services (OCCS). This mix of agencies generates differences in the

views and benchmarks of success held by the student learners and those of the participating and funding agencies. In fact, PCC Skill Center participant agencies' success criterions vary among themselves (for examples, see Table 1).

Table 1
Participating Agency Success Criteria

AGENCY	SUCCESS INDICATORS AND MEASURES
The Private Industry Council (JTPA)	Placement in a job; measured at 13 weeks after completion of training, as a "snapshot."
Portland Community College Skill Center (PCC Skill Center)	Placement in a family-wage job after completion of training or further education that will lead to family-wage employment.
Aid to Families with Dependant Children--Steps to Success (STEPS)	Placement in any job after completion of training and exit from the Welfare rolls
North/Northeast Workforce Center (NWC)	Placement and retention in a family-wage job, whether or not training program completed.
Oregon State Employment Department (SED)	Employment.

That the goals and expectations of the various participant agencies and those of the students might differ, and that, therefore, their perceptions of success might not be the same is not surprising. For example, many students may have perceived themselves as successful even though they did not meet the funding agencies' objective test of success in reaching employment within a specific period of time following their training, or

achieving an increase in test scores or continuing on to further study. In fact, one study of a vocational rehabilitation program showed that even those students who met the training program or referring agency criteria for success, and who were viewed as successful by their case managers, didn't always define themselves as successful (Murphy, 1988).

These Skill Center training programs were particularly interesting because College administrators had entered into a partnership with a community agency to do the student intake and exit evaluations. They were also challenging since that community-agency/college partnership did not develop a standard testing and follow-up procedure (*Final Evaluation Report*, 1994, p. 21). The only formal evaluation instruments that were in place during the first four years were a "progress checklist" that teacher/instructors had to complete for each student at the end of every training month and a "hires report". However, the progress checklist was grossly uneven in application. Due to a shortage of staff and resources, the progress reports were often late, inaccurate or missing altogether. And the hires report was characterized by the *Final Evaluation Report* (1994), as "outdated" and of "questionable accuracy and currency" (p. 21). It was, therefore, necessary to utilize a method of understanding and evaluating program success based on alternatives to testing and formal records keeping.

Understanding participant perspectives of success is certainly a subjective point of view. Therefore, it seemed most appropriate to use qualitative research methods for this inquiry. The flexibility to react to each of the informants and interact with them as well, in addition to being a participant observer seemed likely to reveal a better picture of what participants expected, and thought they had gained, from their training program. This information was was obtained and reported by giving them a chance to express their feelings in their own words (Armitage, 1983; Chesnaux, 1978). In this way, it was felt that much was learned about factors contributing to program success without the use of quantitative testing measures. The Skill Center, then, provided the opportunity to develop and present findings through a qualitative approach to learner perspectives of their own experiences.

THE STUDY

The desirability of educational and training programs that address the needs of under- and chronically unemployed residents of economically disadvantaged neighborhoods has been generally well accepted and documented, (Gardner, et al., 1983; Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990; Carnevale, 1991; Secretary's Commission on Acheiving Necessary Skills, 1992; Thurow, 1992) and many such programs are in place, funded by an array of state and federal agencies (National Assessment of Vocational Education, 1994). However, judging their

success has for the most part been limited to the use of assessment tests, job placement and retention ratios and other similar measures (Rubin, 1988). Rarely are the participant's direct views of success taken into account. No research pertaining to student perspectives on success in a similar skill center setting was found in an intensive search of the literature. This study, then, was developed in order to gain a better understanding of how student participants view the value *to them* of the training programs at the Skill Center, and their own view of their success. Student's views of how well their individual social, personal, and educational needs were met became the focus of the research to get as much perspective as possible on positive experiences as well as problems experienced by self-identified successful learners. Such a student participant-centered focus has support in the research literature. Stivers (1995), for example, claims ". . . each human being occupies a legitimate position from which to experience, interpret and constitute the world" (p. 411). Stanley & Wise, (1983) advocate for the active role of the participant in creating the research narrative. Anderson, (1989) claims . . . "ethnographers . . . share the view that the cultural informant's perceptions of social reality are themselves theoretical constructs" (p. 253), and Nielson (1990) says "To explain and understand human social behavior . . . we need to know the meaning attached to it by the participants themselves" (p. 96). These researchers and theorists all

expand on the issue of participant perspectives. Polkinghorne (1988), also addresses the issue, claiming that a personal narrative approach to understanding is not a distortion of reality, but a confirmation of it. People essentially define themselves in terms of stories about their lives (Chap 6).

Qualitative research methods were used as a means to understand the participant's perspectives on program success. Students were encouraged to present their own criteria for evaluating success based on their personal issues such as whether or not their training program had met their goals, whether or not students thought they had improved in educational skills, what obstacles were encountered, and how such challenges were resolved.

The study was guided by the following research questions: 1. How do student participants define success? 2. How did their Skill Center training program meet their definition of success? It was expected that information gathered from the study would provide information that could: (a) provide and clarify student participant perspectives in work force training and employment programs, and (b) help policy makers and program operators who run similar programs make informed decisions based on participants' definitions of success and their perceptions of what successes they experienced from the PCC Skill Center program. Information provided by this study can have a positive impact on the literature of workplace education in respect to considering workforce

training participant perspectives on program success as a design component. It is also hoped that the findings will encourage other researchers to study student perspectives on such issues in other work-readiness education sites.

TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT APPROACHES

In work-readiness training and technical literacy programs, a number of approaches have been used in teaching and assessment, but current approaches can be divided into two major areas. The first area includes approaches that are "skills based," that is, a set of structured, formal, learning objectives delivered without input from the internal customers: the students. The the second area relies largely on approaches that are "learner centered", eliciting continuous input from the learners themselves. The skills taught in either case may be the same; the extent of learners involvement in their own instruction differs. The manner in which training program developers and managers perceive learners and their motivation for learning affect the type of programs they develop. If these developers have a "top down" view of learning, then the program will likely reflect those beliefs. If there is a "participatory" philosophy, then the curriculum will likely follow along those lines (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, (1994) .

Adult training programs are seen by some educators as a set of "decontextualized" skills to be acquired independent of any specific social

or ideological context. This perspective reflects the system used in school for children where grade levels are indicated by performance on standardized tests. This model has survived since the turn of the century when educators began to rely on “scientific” and “objective” measures of individual learning. Despite criticism, this model is still widely used in schooling for both children and adults (Johnson, 1987; Sticht, 1990; Chall, 1990; Gowen, 1992).

Another philosophy holds that training is the acquisition of skills in reading, writing, and math which enable persons to master levels of literacy necessary to function in their group. Known as “functional literacy,” some define it as the ability to perform certain tasks representative of those in daily life, such as filling out forms (Nafziger, et al., 1975). Murphy (1988) stressed the role of persons and groups themselves in setting criteria for what counts as functional in their lives. In Nafziger, et al., (1975) there is the implication that all people have some degree of illiteracy depending upon the tasks and context involved. The functional approach determines the literacy skills required for specific jobs and develops a curriculum based on those skills, and taught within the context of those jobs. In order to determine what skills are required for the job, a skills and functional audit is usually done.

The learner centered approach is another method used to teach adults. It evolved from the ideas of whole language and participatory

education theorists (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989). The idea behind this approach is that students learn best when in control of the learning process. It works to develop learning strategies from within the students' cultural setting as opposed to imposing external strategies for acquiring and displaying knowledge. Contributors to this area include researchers in ethnographic and anthropological fields who examine literacy and language in terms of the context, what they mean to users, and how they are used by them. They note that families use literacy for a wide variety of purposes and in diverse situations. Some in this field use a model of education where family life experiences, community workforce, health care and parental concerns share a part in the process (Heath, 1983; Auerbach, 1989).

The PCC Skill Center had, during the period covered by the study, no clearly articulated, formal philosophy of education. The faculty for the most part, had their own personal ideologies, and, as a group, there were more similarities than differences between them. However, this lack of a clear, systematic, realized, and published "holistic" or integrated philosophy of education on the part of the Skill Center, points to a shortcoming which could have long term negative effects on the articulation between the various components of instruction.

EVALUATION APPROACHES

Standardized tests of reading, writing, and math skills are often used in adult workforce skill training programs. They are “norm referenced,” i.e., based on the learner's performance relative to the performance of others who have taken the test. Many are easy to use, generally requiring only minimal training, easy to administer to large groups, easy to score, and inexpensive.¹ Funding agency personnel often like looking at the results of these kinds of tests, since they believe they give a sense of how well a program is doing (Auerbach, 1990; Fingeret, 1989; Morris, et al., 1988; Taylor, et al., Eds., 1991).

According to some educators these norm referenced tests actually provide an indication of how well someone can deal with basic skills under a limited perspective, under limited circumstances, and with a limited set of resources. (Lytle, 1989; Drennan, 1980). Chall (1990) argues that these tests are useful within the context for which they were originally created. They are best used for survey information on groups of adults to determine degrees of literacy.

Some educators and practitioners are recognizing the need to find a more realistic, more accurate way of assessing programs and effectiveness in adult learning programs. Some methods of assessment that have developed as a result of the movement away from standardized testing are

¹ For a detailed listing and description of tests used by a variety of agencies in various service delivery areas, see Appendix A, in Morris, et al., 1988.

those used in “participant” assessment. This involves a process of collecting and analyzing data with the full involvement of the students, teachers, and other providers. It takes on different forms at different times, sometimes at the end of training, but often during. Participant assessment sometimes takes the form of tests, sometimes interviews, sometimes writing or work samples, writing personal journals, and frequently in final form is a portfolio assembled to accurately reflect the learner's progress and facility in acquiring workforce skills. This assessment is used for various purposes in a program: to give students a sense of progress, for teacher planning and delivery of instruction, for managers and staff to evaluate the impact of instruction on students, for accountability and as a success “benchmark” for funding agencies (Lytle, 1989; Morris, 1989).

Auerbach (1990) writing about English as a Second Language (ESL) summarizes the essence of this new focus in the following manner:

. . . indications of progress had to go beyond one-shot test or competency performance to include looking at on-going changes in literacy use in everyday life, both inside and outside the classroom. These may include changes in self-concept, attitudes or conceptions of literacy, diversification of reading and writing practices in everyday life, actions resulting from program participation as well as totally unexpected, unpredictable changes. Many of these are subjective, intangible changes which aren't amenable to quantification: what really matters can't be counted. (p. 210)

PERSPECTIVES ON WORKFORCE TRAINING AND SUCCESS

Traditionally, workforce training program success has been defined in terms of outcomes achieved, or by comparing pre- and post-test scores. Many programs base their assessments on external measures such as **BASIS** and **CASAS** (Basic Adult Skills Inventory System and Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System). These measures have been adopted from other areas of adult education, since standardized tests still do not exist that have been developed specifically for the workforce (Drennan, 1990; Lerche, 1985; Lytle, 1988; Taylor, 1991).

Many educators in the adult training field have become dissatisfied with these kinds of assessment and evaluation measures. This is reflected in the results of a study by Bolliro, (1989) who reported that educators found that the uses of standardized tests are typically inappropriate in adult training programs, and are generally useful neither to the student nor the instructor. One drawback in using most standardized tests in workforce training programs is the assumption that students come from an academic background. This is not always the case with many student participants. Some, for all practical purposes, have not ever been participants in a formal school setting. Others dropped out of school early because of familial responsibilities or for a wide variety of personal reasons. There are still others who have had unsuccessful educational experiences, and who are uncomfortable with, or frustrated by, tests.

Some people involved in workforce education, recognizing that success can be defined in other terms, began to look at success from the participants' perspective as opposed to that of those not directly involved in programs (Nash, 1989; Lytle, 1988). Important insights have been gained through this type of inquiry into participant views of success. For example, researchers found that most teachers saw success as the learner's ability to move through the "schooling hierarchy." Some learners on the other hand, attended training programs to achieve personal goals such as developing better family and work relationships and participating in civic duties (Lytle, 1989). Lytle also found that for other learners "... their ability to change the circumstances of their lives or to attempt such a change was how they measured success" (p. 6). Perhaps a result of the present study will be a contribution to articulating student desire to assume a place in a world in which, for many of them, they are "outsiders within" (Collins, 1986).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

eval•u•a•tion 1: to determine or fix the value of 2: to examine and judge the quality or degree of –Webster’s New Encyclopedic Dictionary.

In the traditional quantitative dissertation design, “chapter two” is most often devoted to a review of the literature available about the research questions and methodology. This enables the researcher not only to identify and evaluate previous research in an area of interest, but also to discover the gaps in such information. The design of a qualitative dissertation based on that positivist model requires some adjustments. One of these, is the writing of the literature review as a multi-step process. The first step is a thorough review of the “technical literature” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 48). However, there is no need to review all of the literature beforehand, as is usually done in quantitative research. The next step, after data collection and analysis is complete, is a return to the literature. “It is **only** after a category has emerged as pertinent that we might want to go back to the literature to determine if the category is there, and if so, what other researchers have said about it” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 51). The purpose of not steeping oneself in literature **specific** to the research question is to avoid the creation of preconceptions. The process of analyzing the data gives rise to theory *grounded in the data itself*, and should be allowed full voice, unhindered by what another researcher might have discovered. However, after discovery of themes or

categories, a return to the literature is in order. The process of qualitative research acknowledges that the exact circumstances of any event cannot be duplicated, and the act of observation itself changes the event.

That multi-step process was followed in this study. The review of literature was first confined primarily to the theoretical and philosophical material, which allowed the development of a research design or framework. After the data collection and analysis was completed, a search for and review of other studies with similar methodologies or populations was undertaken. As stated in chapter one, a thorough search revealed no study congruent with the population, setting, and methodology used in this study of the PCC Skill Center.

BACKGROUND

The literature addressed to questions centered around training and educational program evaluation is extensive. In 1991, the General Accounting Office (GAO), identified 125 separate federal programs or funding streams, administered by 12 different agencies, that provided employment training assistance to adults and out-of-school youth. Despite much discussion by Congress on the need to reduce the number of programs and reduce the replication of administrative and delivery costs, by 1995 the GAO review identified at least 163 programs administered by 15 different federal agencies that provide about \$25 billion in funding to such employment training programs (Crawford, 1995, p. 1). Without

doubt, issues of assessing student pre- and post-program skills, job placement and post-program retention, and pre- and post-training earnings or other student outcome measures are built into and reported on in some fashion by nearly every one of these workforce training programs.

Model program designs emphasizing interagency cooperation, coordination, support services, administration and evaluation, mandated by the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) began to appear. JTPA-funded State Education Coordination and Grants programs reported many of these models to have a mixed track record (National Commission for Employment Policy, 1995). However, these programs characterize an increasing share of the program landscape in the welfare system, JTPA, other federal and state-funded programs alike. Accountability and credibility are expected from employment training programs, whether based in a workplace or community college or some other site. Despite spending billions of dollars each year to provide employment training assistance, most agencies, according to the Crawford (1995), lack the basic information to manage their programs. Most especially, they lack a “customer-driven” orientation, (Crawford, p. 9) and effective evaluation of participant outcomes. Only 11 percent of the 163 programs above conducted effectiveness studies (Crawford, p. 29). No mention was made of the methodologies employed by this 11 percent to evaluate or measure effectiveness.

HISTORY OF EVALUATION

The literature of evaluation extends as far back as 2000 BC when Chinese officials conducted civil service examinations to measure proficiency of public officials (Worthen & Sanders, 1987, p. 12). Plato reported on the methods of evaluation practiced by Socrates (West, 1979), but formal evaluation in American educational practice had to wait until the middle of the nineteenth century. Horace Mann, along with Henry Barnard and later William Torrey, seems to have begun the practice of data collection for purposes of evaluation (Travers, 1983). By 1845, reports Travers, the Boston School Committee undertook the *Boston Survey*, the first use of printed tests for wide scale assessment of student achievement. Interestingly, though shocked at the poor performance levels reported, the Boston school committee ceased their testing in 1847 because no use was being made of the results. Another early advocate of testing for evaluation was Joseph Rice, who organized a testing program carried out in a number of large school districts across the United States (Travers, 1983). Edward Thorndike further persuaded educators that testing was a worthwhile procedure which could help measure and evaluate human change, and testing emerged by 1914 as the primary method of school evaluation (Travers 1983). These test results were used "for a variety of purposes: to diagnose specific system weaknesses, to standardize curricular practice, to evaluate experiments and to assess the overall performance of a system as

well as make decisions about individuals" (Madaus, Airasian, & Kelloghan, 1980, p. 6).

The "testing movement" gathered momentum into the first third of the twentieth century, with the New York Board of Regents Exam in 1927 and the Iowa Test in 1929. The military and industry began using tools of standard testing and the terms "testing" and "evaluation" were regarded as synonymous. In this era also, the ideas of John Dewey were beginning to impact curriculum and course development. Critics of this "progressive" movement created a controversy which prompted Ralph Tyler to conceptualize and develop objectives-based performance measures and evaluation. In reporting their work in the *Eight Year Study*, Smith & Tyler (1944) provided a handbook for educators which greatly influenced the evaluation of education for years to come.

The return of American troops after World War II, and the passage of the G.I. bill were to stimulate further progress in the methods of evaluation. With more than eight million adult students returning to educational institutions old and new, faults in evaluation methodology were sharply revealed. In 1957 the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, and also launched America into a frenzy of educational recriminations and renewal. The passage, in 1958, of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) made available some funds to evaluate the old and new curricula. "The relatively few evaluation studies that resulted revealed the

conceptual and methodological impoverishment of evaluation in that era” (Worthen & Sanders, 1987, p. 16). Theoretical work related to education evaluation as such was “virtually nonexistent” (Worthen & Sanders, p. 16).

Of even greater importance to emerging theoretical work was the passage in 1965 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Congress noted, during the debate over passage of ESEA, that previous educational funding had not produced much in the way of tangible results. Consequently, funding for expanded program research and evaluation was made part of the Act. Each of the hundreds of educational entities receiving grant money would be required to provide evidence of the effective use of the funds they received. This had the effect of spurring on the pursuit of new evaluation methodology. Among the first to study emerging needs for a new paradigm of evaluation was Egon Guba. He studied the criteria developed by grant evaluators and concluded that their evaluations would be of no greater value than had been the case of previous work—dubious, at best (Worthen & Sanders, 1987, p. 17).

Into this vacuum rushed a plethora of academic researchers, attempting to deal with the problem of exploring new ways to approach evaluation, and to begin to separate assessment and evaluation. Pitfalls in the positivist schemes of evaluation based in the natural sciences became painfully obvious, and in the years following passage of the ESEA, dozens

of different methodologies were postulated and proposed. The growth in theoretical writings has been accompanied by an increasing number of journals; the first to appear was *Evaluation News*. At last count, more than a dozen such journals and quarterly reports were available. The growth in feminist research, neo-Marxist, and “empowerment” methodology (Freire), can be expected to increase this number. As the methodology matures, more changes are to be expected in the purpose of scholarly journals and writing. As Federal aid to education and training at every level is under review, the value of sound evaluation practices is increasingly viewed by educators and funding entities as central to effective and efficient training practices.

THEORETICAL LITERATURE

The voluminous literature of evaluation methodology can probably be divided roughly into two areas: positivist theory and post-positivist theories or naturalistic inquiry. “As L.M. Smith (1992b) observed, the terms *ethnography, field methods, qualitative inquiry, participant observation, case study, naturalistic methods, and responsive evaluation* have become practically synonymous” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1). Positivism is typified by a grounding in empiricism, or “natural sciences” quantitative methodology; the post-positivist theories are generally lumped together under the rubric of qualitative data analysis. Not that the division is as neat as this taxonomy would indicate; far from it. Many

studies combine elements of both. "Some researchers gather data by means of interview and observation— techniques normally associated with qualitative methods. However, they then code that data in a way that allows them to be statistically analyzed" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 18). Equally, qualitative research may involve the use of statistical data—census data, test scores, demographic information—to help the researcher arrive at a conclusion.

A further division of qualitative literature, which is the focus here, might be made into another two categories: (a) theoretical and philosophical writings, and, (b) case study, and practice results and reports literature. Strauss & Corbin (1990) call these two instances "Technical Literature and Nontechnical Literature" (Chap. 4). Since the mid-sixties, the theoretical exploration of qualitative methods of evaluation has dramatically increased, with emergent philosophies coalescing around several theoretical points of view. While proponents of various viewpoints point to the unique qualities of their theories, a unifying element in naturalistic theories and methods is the notion of the human element, reflecting the human being enmeshed in the realities of everyday life and a particular social structure. Guba & Lincoln (1981) reviewed the major approaches used in educational evaluation and rejected all except the ideas of Stake (1967) with his focus on portrayal and processing the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and judgements of

participants. They combined Stake's ideas with their own thinking about naturalistic inquiry to create an alternative approach to evaluation. A large number of authors have addressed themselves to this concept of the inadequacy of positivist assumptions to address the complexities of human existence and experience (Cronbach, 1975; Freire 1963; Bernstein, 1976; Mischler, 1979; Giroux, 1981; Guba & Lincoln 1981; Patton, 1990; Harding, 1986; Nielson, 1994; Jaggar, 1983, and many others.)

Another subset of viewpoints addressed to qualitative research might be called situational evaluation. Such portrayals will frequently feature case studies of participants, drawing out feedback in the form of descriptions of the program being evaluated from small samples of the population being studied. A single theme is unlikely to emerge; recommendations and emergent theory are more likely to be conditional (Worthen & Sanders, 1987, p. 134). In other words, the answers given may depend entirely on the audience. This may be true to some degree for almost all forms of evaluation, but is especially true for naturalistic methods.

In chapter four, further discussion of the literature centered on qualitative research continues, as a theoretical framework and methodology is presented.

PRACTICE-DIRECTED LITERATURE

The term “practice-directed literature” as used here, is indicative of research that utilizes the theory or theories of naturalistic or post-positivist writers. In a so-called “grounded theory” approach to a qualitative research study, the theory is expected to arise from the research itself, not from a preconceived idea of what the researcher will find. The creation of a “theoretical framework,” based on a review of the theoretical literature is encouraged (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p. 49). After data collection and analysis, a comparison of the emergent theory with other similar studies reported in the literature is both desirable and valuable (Strauss & Corbin, p. 50). Such a revisiting of the literature may occur more than once, as new ideas and themes emerge from the data. Some of the studies examined in this way offered interesting correlations with the theories emerging from the interviews for this study at the PCC Skill Center.

One study of welfare programs in and around Cincinnati, Ohio concerned itself with the same objectives as this (PCC Skill Center) study. With funding from the State Education Coordination and Grants Advisory Council of Ohio, Innovative Consultants, Inc. (1990) presented findings from eight focus groups, each composed of eight to ten welfare mothers (Aid to Families with Dependant Children [AFDC]). The stated purpose of the study was “primarily to provide much-needed, in-depth qualitative

information and direction regarding the experiences, attitudes, value systems, and aspirations of various segments of AFDC recipients” (p. 4). The population was 100 percent female, although males do occasionally qualify for AFDC funds, and the method of sample selection combined purposive and stratified.

Some emergent themes from this Ohio study were similar to some of the findings of this study of the Skill Center. The Ohio study showed that the job-training experience for those who had participated in such training appeared to have more intrinsic than extrinsic value; a finding consistent with the findings of the study presented in this paper. The authors of the Ohio study concluded that job training may have value relative not only to the acquisition of job skills, but also as providing both encouragement and motivation.

Yet another study with a totally female sample and study population was a report on the findings of a national customer satisfaction survey of participants in displaced homemaker and single parent services (Lederer Qualitative Consultancy, Inc., 1995). This study, which purports to be the first national survey of its type (p. iv), used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The data were collected by questionnaires mailed to participants, with those responses presented in tabular form, on a state-by-state basis, with summary tables for the total data set.

The 1364 service delivery sites for displaced homemakers and single parent services have far more in common with the Skill Center site than those in the Ohio study, above. Virtually all training sites provide “comprehensive individualized vocational preparation, career counseling, training related and support services, combined with [job] information and referrals that are tailored to womens’ needs” (p. iii). It should be noted that the response rate and participation figures are very low and somewhat speculative. Of the more than 1300 sites invited to participate, only 235 (17%) chose to do so. Of the more than 30,000 student participants at those sites, 6,500 responses were received (22%). The actual response rates were calculated on the basis of the number of pre-addressed envelopes each of the participating programs requested; at best, a questionable data base. No form of control or verification was reported. Participant voice was not reported except as sidebars with comment from those respondents who included a letter with their returned questionnaire. The themes the researcher chose to ask about in the survey form included some questions centered around intrinsic values. A very high percentage (85%) of the responses rated their program as excellent or very good, which is a not unusual result for a self-selected survey sample, but what was surprising was that employment status had little effect on overall ratings: “87% of those in training; 87% of those employed; 81% of those who were looking for a job, and 81% of those who were unemployed and not looking for work,

rated their program as excellent or very good" (Lederer Qualitative Consultancy, Inc., 1995, p. 2). The finding that employment status had so little effect on student perceptions about their training and social services is significant as a comparison to the Skill Center findings that essentially reflect the same perception.

A study by Murphy, (1988) attempted to identify and compare the views of rehabilitation success and failure of counselors and clients. Seven rehabilitation counselors and 14 of their clients were asked to define rehabilitation success and failure. Of the 14 clients, seven were designated by their counselors as successful. It was Murphy's stated objective to "get inside" the rehabilitation process and study counselor and client conceptions of success and failure in relation to each other and to the "official" definitions (p. 185). He made a particular effort to explore with the participants how they acted on their definitions and managed any disagreements or obstacles that arose during the process. The conclusion is presented that even with a great deal of attention paid to this issue, controversy still surrounds even the most basic outcome issues, such as the proper definitions of rehabilitation success and failure.

A detailed methodology was presented including sampling methods and data collection and analysis. The data for the study were obtained through extended tape-recorded interviews of rehabilitation counselors and client "pairs" selected by each. Each participating counselor was

asked to select two severely disabled clients whose rehabilitation was complete. The counselors were asked to select a "successful" and an "unsuccessful" client with whom they had recently worked. The format of the interviews was semistructured and open-ended. In general, clients were asked to describe their rehabilitation experiences, their expectations, their overall impressions and so forth. Data analysis procedures involved the constant comparative methods outlined by Glazer & Strauss (1967). Liberal use of direct quotations was made in the article to convey accurately the content and tone of client and counselor reflections on the rehabilitation process. The author made an effort to select representative quotes that required minimal editing.

The results reported by Murphy in his study have some general similarities to the Skill Center research outcomes. Three of the 14 clients called themselves successful (seven were seen as successful by counselors) and all three were labeled successful by the rehabilitation agency as well. However, almost twice as many clients saw themselves (N=11) as unsuccessful as did counselors (N=7) or agencies (N=5). Unfortunately, compatible views of success were rarely found. In fact, the author states that only two participants had consonant views of successful outcomes.

In his conclusion, Murphy stated that his finding that counselors and clients viewed outcomes differently, should not be too surprising. What disturbed him was the amount and intensity of dissatisfaction

expressed by even counselor-selected "successful" clients. He says that such differences in the view of success and failure are not well-described in the literature. His study showed these incongruencies neither unusual nor disparitive, and clients found employment despite them. The process and methodology of this study of client and counselor views of success, provided support for the Skill Center study design. The finding that caseworker views of success were almost without exception extrinsic was somewhat surprising, however, given that the caseworker-client relationship might have been expected to have provided caseworkers some better insights into the intrinsic values of the clients.

All of these studies, though of different populations and in different settings, helped to serve as a check on the findings of the Skill Center study.

Views of evaluation and testing have matured greatly since the turn of the century, and much new insight is emerging in the literature. Recognition that the emotions and cultural background of learners have great bearing on the results of teaching, learning, and evaluation has been slow in arriving, but new studies are finding direct links between intelligence and emotion. Such work as that of Howard Gardner, Daniel Goleman and Antonio Damasio, to name but three, in identifying those linkages, may well serve to stimulate further research into the uneven and uncertain process of evaluating human learning and knowing.

DEMOGRAPHIC AND GEOGRAPHIC ENVIRONMENT

But when all is said and done, the fact remains that some teachers have a naturally inspiring presence and can make their exercises interesting, while others simply cannot. And psychology and general pedagogy here confess their failure, and hand things over to the deeper springs of human personality to conduct the task.—William James.

THE SETTING

The setting for the research was a community college workforce training and education center. The center is funded by grants from the Oregon State Economic Development Department, (so-called Lottery dollars) administered by the Oregon Office of Community College Services (OCCS). The administration of the Skill Center is overseen by a director who reports to the executive dean of the PCC Cascade Campus on which the Center is located. The director also coordinates reporting of student data and statistics to the Office of Community College Services, and is responsible for the credibility of the training. The primary curricular components of the Center are three job skills training programs, and a fourth component which concerns itself primarily with the education of students in preparation for taking their General Equivalency Diploma (GED) tests, and, for most, remedial education in preparation for one of the training programs. These programs are described in more detail later in this chapter.

The Skills Center and the Community College in which it is located are situated at the heart of a State-designated economic Enterprise Zone. The Portland Enterprise Zone is a public/private partnership program managed by the Portland Development Commission. Expanding businesses in N/NE Portland are provided the opportunity to qualify for up to a 100% property tax exemption on the new property taxes generated by their investment. (Portland Development Commission, 1996, p. 1). There are a number of other requirements, one of which is the hiring and retention of a specified percentage of the Zone population. That requirement was a strong driver for the creation of the PCC Skill Center.

Although located physically at Portland Community College, the Skill Center is not similar in organization to any other administrative unit in the college. It is an integrated group of occupational skill-specific training programs, rather than a series of courses. The PCC Skill Center has as its mission the following:

To assist unemployed and underemployed adults toward being self-sufficient through basic educational and vocational training that will lead to: a family wage job; and/or career ladder at a higher wage; and/or entry into other educational/training programs to meet and match labor market opportunities. (PCC Skill Center Mission Statement, 1990)

The PCC Skill Center is organized as a partnership between the community and the college. During the time covered in this study, partners included the N/NE Neighborhood Coalition represented by the

Northeast Workforce Center (NWC) working under contract to the Skill Center, the Private Industry Council (TPIC), State of Oregon Employment Division (SED), and Portland Community College–Cascade (PCC). All of the partners brought to the collaborative a broad range of responsibilities, outlined in detail later in this chapter, as well as considerable expertise. Each of the partner agencies was staffed by dedicated professionals proactive in seeking workable solutions to the array of problems faced by the served clientele.

Most of the problems experienced by the clientele of the Center, that one might identify as “key”, are not new ones in any sense. The Skill Center staff is very fortunate in one way, that is, they have had the freedom to design their training and educational programs to address perceived student needs relatively free from the traditional college rules and restrictions. That has allowed a greater flexibility in articulating solutions to the internal problems inherent in a “traditional” college program. As a result, aside from some constraints arising from funding shortfalls, the Skill Center has far fewer internal forces acting upon their abilities to serve students than could be expected in a more institutionalized program. Of course, the Center is not without some of the frustrations that accompany any program, innovative or not, that is set in a bureaucracy not accustomed to nonlinear or “non-conventional” instruction. The Skill Center still has to be responsive to the non-academic

systems of Portland Community College such as student records, payroll, purchasing, and personnel.

However, the major forces that impact the delivery of training, and in fact, are the drivers for most of the design of the curriculum within the various training programs, can be characterized as external.

North/Northeast Portland, the "target community," is the area of highest unemployment concentration in the Metropolitan Portland area (1990 Census Data). Finding jobs for able people is not the challenge. The challenge is to help the untrained and low skilled inner-city residents to become trained and productively employed. The educational, social, and economic needs of the target clientele are inextricably linked, and are also the major forces impacting the delivery of educational and training services. Each influences the others and cannot be considered in isolation; however, the following analysis may serve to highlight the needs in each area.

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Only 67.2 percent of individuals 25 and older have completed high school (1990 Census Data). Moreover, it is estimated that 25 percent of adults in North/Northeast Portland read below the fifth grade level (Hunter, 1990). Portland Community College's highest ABE/GED enrollment is in North/Northeast Portland according to Portland Community College, Institutional Research. With nearly one-third of the

population without a high school education and literacy a real issue, the need for basic skill development (adult basic education, GED programs) must be addressed before specific skill for employment can be learned effectively for many individuals. Career-specific skills must also be addressed in the form of short-term skill training programs (generally funding agencies specify a recommended length; six months or less is common) to enable people to become self-sufficient as quickly as possible. However, continued access to further education must be in place to enable individuals to advance to family-wage jobs and to gain additional skill as the work place changes and new jobs emerge. As David Allen of the Research and Statistics Department of the Oregon Employment Division, Human Resources Department, noted in a presentation to the Jobs Committee of the Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods, Inc, "Limited access to education and skill training is now making an education the great stratifier rather than the great equalizer in our society. By all measures, for labor force participation, unemployment, earnings, upward mobility, etc., education is the key to labor market success" (*Demographic profile: inner NE coalition of neighborhoods, City Of Portland, 1988, p. iv*).

SOCIAL NEEDS

Employers in North/Northeast Portland indicate that a serious shortcoming of the local workforce is their lack of social, or "life," skills (Employer Workforce Needs Survey, 1990). These are those skills that

make a workforce reliable: being on the job every day, on time, free of drug-related problems, and with family and personal issues sufficiently resolved to make the worker reliable. Substantial numbers of the potential and actual workforce are single heads of households—often mothers with child care needs and those with elderly parents who need assistance in living. Compounding these problems, individuals with family and personal issues generally do not know where to get help in resolving them or even that help is available. While several agencies are intended specifically to assist individuals in these areas, the very persons who need help the most often lack the skill to access the help. Many others are referred to help-giving agencies but are lost in the process.

In the *Demographic Profile: Inner NE Coalition of Neighborhoods, City of Portland*, the Jobs Committee of the Northeast Economic Development Forum states: "The social infrastructure of the neighborhoods is a critical part of chronic unemployment. It must be addressed right along with job training and job creation. Until barriers . . . are eliminated for individuals, unemployment cannot be eliminated" (1988, p. 2).

ECONOMIC NEEDS

Demographically, North/Northeast Portland is characterized by low and moderate income households and poverty. It is an area where substantial numbers (currently 24 percent, according to a Portland

Development Commission spokesman) of the residents live at or below the poverty level. The Bureau of Census defines "poverty level" for a family of four to be an income of \$12,674.00 per year, or less, according to a spokesperson for the Center for Population Research and Census. The 1990 census data show approximately 33 percent of all households in the North/Northeast area earn less than \$10,000.00 per year. Furthermore, skill levels of unemployed workers are 46 percent blue collar workers, 18 percent clerical, and only 10 percent professional. Of these unemployed, 47 percent are males (*Demographic, Housing and Socioeconomic Characteristics: Selected data from the 1990 Census*). An analysis of the labor force issues facing North/Northeast Portland and the opportunities for employment now and in the future indicates that the present skill level of the workforce will continue to create economic hardships for the population. Clearly, economic, social, and education needs of the North/Northeast Portland residents are well above the average in Oregon.

Eighty percent of Oregon's black population resides in the North/Northeast area (Hunter, 1990). The percentage of black residents averages 38 percent, the highest percentage in the city. The 1990 Census of Population showed that the area had a total resident civilian labor force of 28,456 residing in the North/Northeast Portland Enterprise Zone, of which 10 percent, or 2,941, were unemployed (1990 Census data). According to Duane Ackerson, employment economist with the State of

Oregon Employment Division, Research and Statistics, the 1990 Annual Average Population Survey shows that the unemployment rate for blacks 16 years and older throughout Oregon was 16.2 percent compared to 5.5 percent for the general population, a significant increase over the percentage ten years before in the Enterprise Zone of 10.6 percent. For Black youth, (16 to 19 years of age) the National unemployment figure was 35.1 percent in January 1989. There is little reason to think that the youth employment situation is much better in the Portland Enterprise Zone (Hunter, 1990).

The early 1980's recession in Oregon, with its sharp decline in unionized, industrial, family-wage scale jobs, hit the Black population disproportionately hard. A new economy, emphasizing information and higher education, in which jobs that pay family-scale wages most often require professional or technical skill, leaves many Blacks, as well as other working class people, at a growing competitive disadvantage.

From this brief analysis of economic and labor force issues, we can see some emerging patterns which strongly suggests a need for a multiple approach in training. While blue collar jobs are predicted to decline in the future, present opportunities still remain high (Swan Island and the North Portland industrial area). That these opportunities exist, is reinforced by a conversation with Tom Lynch, Labor Market Information Director for the Research and Statistics Department of the Oregon Employment Division,

who states: "Within five miles of the Cascade Campus, we have the highest concentration of manufacturing in Oregon." While increasing numbers of high-technology industries are locating in the Sunset Corridor, several miles to the West of the Cascade Campus, it still appears that a viable solution to enable North/Northeast residents to obtain family-wage employment now, and in the future, would be to provide retraining in the following:

- Basic skill in reading, writing, and mathematics
- Specific skills to enter current employment opportunities, including "blue collar" jobs.
- Life skills to ensure that people can maintain employment once hired.
- Ability to access continuing education to allow progress to family-wage employment and/or to meet the demands of employers in the future.

PERSONAL NEEDS

Before training can begin or be effective once the clients have been recruited, individuals must be assessed in terms of life needs. They almost always have critical needs in their personal lives which must be met before they can successfully enter and complete an educational program or before they can hold down a job successfully, such as: child care, transportation, living expenses, drug-related issues. Once an assessment of these needs is

made, referrals to appropriate agencies can be made to help resolve them. However, referrals are not enough. There must be ongoing case management, tracking of the individual to assure that issues are resolved and that he or she doesn't get lost in the "referral shuffle." Once life issues are resolved, the individual can begin the skill-building outlined above.

The narrative to this point has been an attempt to demonstrate not only the major challenges faced by the Skill Center training programs, but to show some of the societal forces that have served to drive those challenges. It would be far too simple to suggest that these are the only factors at work in this population. There are certainly far more complex and far-reaching implications to be found regarding social ills associated with capitalist economics, or wholesale movements of the labor force during World War II, or current racial prejudice at work. The net effects of some, or a combination of all of these factors and more are at work in the study population.

It needs to be made clear that these problems probably cannot be eliminated. Many of these same problems have been addressed by authors since Adam Smith, and are at least in some measure endemic to the basic economic structure of the United States. But given this, we need to recognize that over time and given the will to do so, we may ameliorate for many people the most egregious aspects of our current system. What is being tried at the Portland Community College Skill Center is to marshal

the strengths of community and agency partners and focus them upon the problems of the community.

PARTNER ROLES

The resources of the various partners were allocated as follows:

Northeast Workforce Center (NWC)

As a contractual partner in the North/Northeast Skill Center, the NWC will:

- Recruit participants into the Skill Center program.
- Assess the special needs of participants in terms of barriers to entering and completing the program or to obtaining employment.
- Provide counseling, information, and referral services to participants to eliminate the assessed barriers.
- Provide counseling, information, and referral services to participants to enter appropriate training programs, including those of the North/Northeast Skill Center and other providers in metropolitan Portland.
- Track and advocate for clients as they seek solutions to life problems which hinder their accomplishing education and job related goals: transportation, child care, care for the elderly, health care, living expenses, clothing appropriate for job interviews, alcohol and drug counseling, etc.

- Provide transition services for Skill Center program completers to enter other education and training programs, apprenticeship, on-the-job training, or employment.
- Track and advocate for clients as they participate in training and education and in their first year of employment.
- Identify gaps in the support systems residents need to attain economic self-sufficiency through employment.
- Collect data for PCC Skill Center to assess program viability.
- Participate in formative and summative evaluation and follow-up activities to determine the impact of the services provided and to improve the services to meet identified client needs.

The Private Industry Council (TPIC)

The Private Industry Council (TPIC), a JPTA-funded agency, has also joined forces with PCC as a partner at the Skill Center. A TPIC staff member is located on site at the Skill Center and provides linkage to TPIC services and training programs for those who are TPIC-eligible and whose initial contact is the NWC.

As a partner in the Skill Center, TPIC:

- Provides a full array of referral, follow-up and advocacy services at the Skill Center for TPIC clients to eliminate assessed barriers.

- Provides counseling, information, and referral services to clients to enter appropriate training programs, including those of the N/NE Skill Center.
- Provides transition services for TPIC's Skill Center program completers to enter other education and training programs apprenticeship, on-the-job-training, or employment.
- Tracks, and advocates for, clients as they participate in training and education and in their first year of employment in concert with the NWC.
- Links participants with mentors and role models in educational programs and/or business and industry.
- Collects data for PCC Skill Center to assess program viability.
- Participates in formative and summative evaluation and follow-up activities to determine the impact of the services provided and to improve the services to meet identified client needs.

The Oregon State Employment Division (SED)

The Oregon State Employment Division (SED):

- Refers clients to the N/NE Portland Skill Center through the NWC.
- Provides job placement services for Skill Center program completers.
- Collects data for N/NE Skill Center to assess program viability.

- Participates in information and summative evaluation and follow-up activities to determine the impact of the services provided and to improve the services to meet identified client needs.

Portland Community College (PCC)

Portland Community College (PCC):

- Provides translating services for non-English speakers.
- Works with the NWC to obtain federal financial aid for eligible clients when entering standard college programs.
- Assesses the interest, abilities, skill level, and experience of participants to assist the NWC in determining the appropriate placement: Skill Center, other educational providers and trainers, or employment.
- Provides guidance, counseling, and career-development advising which is designed to meet the needs of the participants.
- Provides English-as-a-second-language programs.
- Provides professional development training (life skill) to all participants.
- Provides basic skill development (academic) programs.
- Provides short-term vocational training in specific occupations which have present and future employment opportunities and which lead through a career ladder to jobs with a family wage and fringe benefits.

- Provides targeted training programs to meet the needs of program participants for employment with career paths and to meet the needs of Oregon's current and emerging industries.
- Provides long-term vocational training (one- and two-year certificate programs).
- Provides opportunities for cooperative education experiences and internships.
- Collects data for the PCC Skill Center to assess program viability.
- Participates in formative and summative evaluation and follow-up activities to determine the impact of the services provided and to improve services to meet client needs.

All of the above role descriptions and performance criteria are from the *Application for Funding for a Community Based Skill Center* (Portland Community College, 1989; 1991).

SKILL CENTER STUDENT POPULATION

A comparison of the student population of the Skill Center with that of the Enterprise Zone shows surprising correlation. Of the 711 students identified in the Skill Center database, 587(84%) were from Enterprise Zone Zip codes. Table 2 shows the raw numbers and percentages of students from each zone, with the Enterprise Zone Zip codes shaded for emphasis. The Enterprise Zone is not exactly congruent with the postal

Zip Codes, but the differences are slight, and occur primarily in Zip Codes where there are virtually no residents.

Table 2 ²
Student Population by Zip Codes

zip code	97203	97206	97211	97212	97217	97218	97266	97227	unknown/ others	totals
number	95	17	232	76	145	34	10	46	56	711
percent	14	3	33	11	20	5	1	7	6	100%

A breakdown of students by ethnicity results in the following profile:

Table 3 ³
Student Population By Ethnicity

ETHNIC GROUP	ASIAN	NATIVE AMERICAN	HISPANIC	CAUCASIAN	AFRICAN AMERICAN	TOTAL
PERCENT IN TRAINING	4	5	4	55	32	100%

The gender of participants is not evenly divided. There are nearly two females (61%) in the program for every male (39%). Gender by race data are not reliable; records were not available from the database (Multi-Agency Client Assessment System [MACAS], Schwab & Cooper, 1995) for the early program participants. Of the 711 students identified as program participants who met the research methods criteria, (five weeks of

² Enterprise Zone Zip Codes are shown shaded.

³ Self-identified.

attendance) 201 completed their training and received either a certificate of completion or a recognition of participation, or a high school or General Equivalency Diploma (GED).

SKILL CENTER TRAINING PROGRAMS

There are three primary training programs in the PCC Skill Center covered by the time period of this study (1990-1995). They are as follows:

Construction Technology

The construction technology program is an open-entry, open-exit competency-based program of training in the skills basic to all construction trades. It is designed to be a pre-apprenticeship training program allowing completers easier access to family wage apprenticeships in some thirty-two construction trades. Power and hand tool use and safety; methods and procedures for measuring, cutting, and fabrication; terms and jargon of the building trades; applied communications; blueprint reading and free-hand sketching; and hands-on field experiences are all part of the curriculum. The students spend the first hour of every day engaged in physical training, which is directed toward being physically fit before beginning work in what are physically challenging occupational areas.

The instructional approach is learner-centered and competency-based; the idea of teamwork is introduced early on in the training through

the use of peer mentoring: pairing up an entering student with a student having some experience in the program. This offers students both access to an experience base and continuing peer support. Also, since the building trades involve the use of teams on most work sites, it introduces the student to some of the variables involved in working with a partner. Each student develops in concert with the instructors, an individual instructional plan based on the student's previous experiences and current goals. The plan is revised monthly during training, and progress is tracked in a collaborative fashion which allows each student to clearly track his or her progress toward completion. Hands-on learning is emphasized to relate every concept to a process that can be physically experienced. Such experiences tie classroom instruction to practical experiential exercises. Most completers finish the program in about six months, although some have taken both less and more than the "average" of six months.⁴

Office Occupations and Technology

Originally called business clerical, this program is specifically addressed to helping participants in acquiring the basic skills for entry level employment in the office occupations, such as filing clerk, word processing, and general clerical. The curriculum is not self-paced, although allowances are made for those students who wish to do so, to proceed with

⁴ The median is about six months, however, the range is from two and one-half months to 22 months; the latter for a student in need of both a GED and extensive remediation before beginning a job skill training program.

additional learning opportunities. Skills in the use of word-processing, database, and spreadsheet computer programs are taught, as well as the use of ten-key adding machines, general office procedures, keyboarding, and business mathematics. Additionally, learners are instructed in office etiquette, appropriate dress, and applied communications skills, such as writing memos, using E-mail, giving and receiving written and verbal instructions, and more. The general length of training in the Office Occupations content area is approximately six months.

Principles of Technology

Principles of Technology (PT) is a more recent addition to the offerings of the PCC Skill Center. Based on a curriculum developed by the Center for Occupational Research and Development (CORD) in Waco, TX, it is a closed-entry program which endeavors to teach technical literacy to students in an intensive 22-week format. PT includes applied physics, computer applications, including computer-aided drafting, spreadsheet uses, and word processing. Other elements of the PT curriculum are applied hydraulics, applied pneumatics, applied physics, electronics, and applied mathematics. Applied communication, in the form of technical writing, is also part of the PT program. The program is a truly hands on, eight-hour per day learning situation.

Remediation: Adult Basic Education

Before any student enters one of the three training programs described above, she or he is assessed for competence in their knowledge of basic mathematics, reading, and writing. They are placed, if the need is demonstrated, in a Basic Skills class to allow them a forum in which to acquire the skills they will need to fully utilize their training and permit them the greatest possibility of success. The length of time they spend in the Basic Skills class depends to some degree on which job training program they enter. Occupation-specific math, reading, and communication skills are built into each of the three training programs, but PT requires a higher level of demonstrated competence than the others. The point at which a student is ready for job skills training is determined by discussions with all parties involved—student, ABE teacher, job training instructor, and case manager, if applicable. Usually, eighth-grade level work in math and reading skills is needed for best results from training, but exceptions are frequently made, especially for those students who have the educational background, but who are “rusty” and simply need some refreshing. For all Skill Center enrollees the average time spent in the remedial program is about five weeks, but some students are placed directly in training, while others spend two to three months or occasionally longer in ABE.

As part of the basic skills remediation, a very important social skills segment is offered to all participants in Skill Center programs. The Center has called this *Life Skills*. This training strand is designed for several purposes: it helps teach students the skills involved in teamwork; it helps to build a feeling of belonging to a group; a "cohort" feeling, if you will, and it serves to introduce the students to each other and the instructors in a teaching/learning style that allows a sort of "structured informality." This class is taught from curriculum developed by the Agency for Instructional Technology (AIT). It includes a multi-media approach to real-world workplace environments.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Consideration of personal issues affecting students is of particular importance in the Skill Center model. The program focuses considerable attention on the emotional and interpersonal needs of the students. Support from several social services agencies is a major part of insuring that each student has the support infrastructure to allow them to be successful in their educational experience and in their employment efforts. Not only is individual counseling assistance readily available, but personal and family problems are also recognized as affecting the quality of the training experience and success on the job after training. Transportation, child care, and other barriers to job placement and success are identified and addressed by the Skill Center.

A substantial majority of the population which the Center is addressing has long experienced chronic problems: under- and unemployment, a high crime rate, greater school drop out rates, gang violence, transient residency, substance abuse and traffic, and all of the myriad of other problems associated with chronic poverty and economic disadvantage. The Skill Center program is attempting to realize its potential to "mainstream" inhabitants in the community whose problems have more often been addressed by palliative measures, such as welfare, rather than empowering measures, such as education and training.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

*The flecked river
Which kept flowing and never the same way twice, flowing
Through many places, as if it stood still in one. –Wallace Stevens*

Research procedures bring theoretical perspectives, conceptual frameworks, and empirical data together. This study features the analysis of interview transcripts as empirical data from which to develop an understanding of student perspectives of success in the PCC Skill Center. The research took place in a community college skill center, a workforce education setting where this researcher taught for five years. This study was based on data gathered from interviews with former student participants who had completed one of the Skill Center training strands, and who identified the training program to have been a successful experience for them.

Data analysis is always embedded within a conceptual framework influenced by a research tradition. Descriptions of theoretical perspectives and concepts were introduced in previous chapters. Research procedures for this study combined grounded theory and ethnographic methodologies (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Fielding & Fielding, 1986; Lofland & Lofland, 1984). The goal was to combine a systematic descriptive and analytical approach to the interview data while remaining responsive to interpretive

and reflexive responsibility as participant/narrator representing the views of the respondents.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

For the interview data 15 students were interviewed. A master list of students which provided information on the training program attended, ethnicity, gender, completion status, and the approximate dates of attendance at the Skills Center, was used for sample selection (Multi-Agency Client Assessment System [MACAS], Schwab & Cooper, 1995). The procedures for purposive sampling in qualitative research as suggested by Patton (1990) and Bailey,(1987) were followed; that is, to assure diversity and variation in the sample, students were selected to reflect the various training programs represented in the Skill Center. In order to insure that students had good knowledge of the program, the sample was limited to those who had been in a skill center program for at least five weeks, and had completed that program. There were 201 individuals identified as meeting the requirements for inclusion in the study. The sample was chosen from among those individuals.

Students were given free choice whether to participate in the project. Initially, two students declined to participate, however, as word spread from those who had participated, those who had declined sought out the researcher and asked to help in the study. Had a student chosen not to participate, or hadn't been able to do so, another student from the

same training area would have been selected as a substitute. Interviews were scheduled and arranged for times convenient for the informants.

Table 4
Interview Sample by Race, Gender, and Training Program

RACE; GENDER	NUMBER	COMPLETION	TRAINING PROGRAM
Black Female	2	7/91; 8/93	Office Occupations
Black Female	1	11/93	Construction Technology
Black Male	2	2/92; 2/93	Construction Technology
Black Male	1	3/93	Office Occupations
White Female	2	2/93; 4/95	Office Occupations
White Male	1	5/92	Construction Technology
White Female	2	5/91;1/93	Construction Technology
Hispanic Male	1	6/94	Office Occupations
Asian Male	1	1/94	Construction Technology
White Male	1	4/95	Principles of Technology
Asian Female	1	11/93	ABE/GED

PILOT STUDY

In a pilot study done between December 1994, and February 1995, students from each of the training programs in the building were given a sample questionnaire as they completed their training, and results reviewed. The pilot study was helpful in shaping this thesis proposal and the rest of the study. The focus of the study was changed based on findings from the pilot study. The original focus of the project, (and thus the pilot

study) had been to gain understanding of participant perspectives of the program in general, as they exited the Skill Center. That is, how they felt about their training program, what they had expected from it, and whether or not their expectations were met. The study consisted of a simple questionnaire designed for ease of administration and analysis (Appendix A). The purpose was to devise a sort of customer satisfaction survey instrument. However, during the pilot study, in conversations with the students after the questions were answered, it became apparent that there was a rich source of data that was not being accessed in any meaningful way. When the students simply talked informally about their experiences during their training, they were animated and informative, and expressed, without prompting, their *feelings* about their experiences. During these *ad hoc* conversations, although sometimes critical of the program, participants often spoke of how “good” the program was, how much it had “helped” them, and how successful they would be. Given the nature of these responses, a different vision of the research parameters emerged from the pilot study. As a result, the focus of this study was narrowed to consider the participants' perspectives of program success: what was meant when they said the program was good, or that it had helped them, or that it contributed to their success, and just how they defined the concept of success.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research questions. 1. How do student participants define success? 2. How did their training program meet their definition of success? The study explores among other things, what participants perceive as indicators of success, how they see the program as succeeding, and what factors they believe effect success.

DATA COLLECTION

The study was designed as a qualitative investigation of participant perspectives on success in the skill center training programs. In order to understand what the participants thought about program success it was necessary to use an approach which would allow them to effectively present their views. Qualitative research is specifically designed for these kinds of inquiries (Brown & Tandom, 1978; Glaser, & Strauss, 1967; Kaplan, 1964). The research follows guidelines suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994), who described a “collaborative action research model,” in which the participant expertise is developed through the facilitation of the researcher (p. 48). Lofland & Lofland (1984), Strauss (1987), Hammersly & Atkinson (1983; Lather, 1986) all express variations on that same viewpoint.

The qualitative data used in the study was derived primarily from transcriptions of open-ended interviews with students, although some document review of student records as noted above, and informal

discussion with the faculty for suggestions of potential interviewees also contributed to the collection of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Fielding & Fielding, 1986). Research was done between September 1995, and March 1996.

INTERVIEWS

Fifteen interviews were done, each lasting between 25 minutes and an hour and a half. Students from each of the three major job training programs in the Skill Center (Construction Trades, Business Occupations, Principles of Technology), and the Adult Basic Education/General Equivalency Diploma classes were interviewed. Interviews took place at the college, in a quiet, private setting. No participant was interviewed more than once. All interviews were audio taped with permission, verified with an informed consent form previously approved by the university's Human Subjects Research Review Committee (Appendix C). The form disclosed the intended purpose of the data collection, the voluntary nature of participation, and protection of privacy for the students. The tapes were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist who had no previous knowledge of either the Skill Center or the participants to further protect the identity and privacy of those consenting to be interviewed (Hammersly and Atkinson, 1983; Patton, (1990).

A brief interview guide was used (Appendix B) which allowed the researcher to “. . . access the perspective of the person being interviewed”

(Patton, p. 278). The interview guide and “prompting” questions allowed the flexibility to cover the issues in the order and the manner most appropriate for the person being interviewed. The interview process must be flexible enough to accommodate unanticipated issues that need to be explored, a need that became apparent from the beginning of the interview process (Spradley, 1979; Hammersly & Atkinson, 1983). The interview data was supplemented by interviewer comments and notes made at the time of the interview, as well as during analysis of the transcripts. Before the interviews begin, the nature of the research was explained to the participants. Explained also was the fact that any quotations used from the interviews would be used in such a manner that anonymity will be preserved. Interviewees were assured that no one at the Skill Center or anywhere else will have access to the interview transcripts.

PRELIMINARY DATA MANAGEMENT DECISIONS

Qualitative data analysis is a complex, labor intensive, and time consuming process (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, a variety of computer-based data management software is available designed specifically to aid the researcher in the management, analysis, and documentation of collected data.⁵ The methods of sorting, compiling, and storing data developed from the interviews in this study used the computer program, *The Ethnograph*, V4.0, a set of interactive,

⁵ For a detailed discussion of several such programs, see Miles & Huberman, 1994.

menu-driven computer programs designed to assist the qualitative researcher in some of the mechanical aspects of data analysis (Seidel, 1988, 1994). These programs present an efficient alternative to the often cumbersome tasks of managing field notes, transcripts and other types of text data collected and analyzed in the process of qualitative research. By mechanizing the "cut and paste" aspects of organizing the data, the researcher is free to devote more time and attention to the critical interpretive aspects of qualitative data analysis.

Use of *The Ethnograph* requires that the transcript data be input to the computer files in the form of an ASCII text file. The core of the program is a set of procedures that allow the user to import data files, code a data file, and search for coded segments. As the ASCII text files are imported into *The Ethnograph*, they are converted into a format used by the program for further manipulation and analysis. This analysis of qualitative data is a progressive and iterative process that generally proceeds from a concrete to a more analytical or theoretical level. This process does not necessarily proceed in a straight line and may have a starting point that is more theoretical than it is concrete. The process begins when contact is made with the data, certain features and patterns are noted, and the identification and marking of those features begins. This process of marking and identification, called code mapping, allows the later retrieval and more extensive analysis of the data. Making sense

of the data gathered relies on some means of linking coded data together around relevant themes. *The Ethnograph* creates a directory of codes, allowing the researcher to locate all instances of any code and retrieve them, along with the segments of the transcript text which the codes define. This places them in a new context of similar segments. Now, the researcher is in a position to begin analyzing what is going on in those segments. Segments can be compared and contrasted, and a start can be made toward constructing a theory grounded in the collected data.

As part of the data collection process, notes were made soon after each interview. As the interviews were analyzed to identify categories and themes pertaining to participant thoughts and feelings about the program and its effects on them, the notes helped to refresh the context of the interview. The data were organized to assess the amount of support there was for each theme, and identify discrepant data, and alternative perspectives.

ANALYSIS AFTER DATA COLLECTION

Once data collection was completed, the final phase of the analytic process began. Data, codes, and coding categories developed in the collection phase were finalized (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss, 1987), themes emerging from the interviews were arranged into groups, and analysis developed (Agar, p. 23). This allowed recurring themes to be identified and defined. As previously discussed, data filing and storage

were done by computer. Interview transcripts were stored directly in the computer and *The Ethnograph* software used to group similar participant reactions once those themes were coded. Once coded, identified by theme, and linked together with other relevant thematic segments, sections were again stored in the computer. From the files developed as described, text was retrieved directly into the dissertation and linked by the narrative of the researcher. The files in the format used by *The Ethnograph* were converted manually by the researcher into an appropriate format for use by the word processing program.

VALIDITY

The primary concern of research should rest in the factual accuracy of the reported data. Wolcott states that “description is the foundation upon which qualitative research is built” (1990, p. 27). To that end, descriptive validity was the first concern. “The first concern of most qualitative researchers is with the factual accuracy of their account—that is, that they are not making up or distorting the things they saw and heard” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 285). The matter of descriptive accuracy is emphasized in almost all of the textbooks on qualitative research, and according to Maxwell, all other measures of validity are dependant on this primary aspect of validity. There are characteristics of descriptive validity that need emphasis. First, descriptive validity is concerned with specific events and occurrences. No issue of generalizability or representativeness

is involved. Second, they are all matters about which some agreement could be reached, given the proper data. For example, an audio tape of appropriate quality could be played for several listeners, and agreement could reasonably be expected about the contents.

Linked to the concept of descriptive validity, is interpretive validity. "Like descriptive validity . . . interpretive validity while not atheoretical, refers to aspects of accounts for which the terms of the account are not themselves problematic. Interpretive accounts are grounded in the language of the people studied and rely as much as possible on their own words and concepts" (Maxwell, p. 289). Interpretive validity, then, is never by direct access to the participants, but is always a construct by the researcher from the accounts of informants; a matter of linkage between participant and researcher.

The researcher was an instructor in the Skills Center for five years, and in the field of adult learning for more than ten years; he is aware that there are certain assumptions that the researcher may bring to the research. Reflexivity is an important tool for qualitative research, so every effort was made to examine personal assumptions and biases as the research progressed. It was assumed before beginning the pilot study that students wanted to learn skills that would help them outside of the home; that is, in job search and, later, the workplace. While that remains an important element of student motivation, in the course of informal

conversations during the pilot study many students articulated some entirely different reasons for their participation in the training at the Center. As an example, a comment heard more than once, was the informants' desire to "be someone my children can be proud of."

The author is aware of validity threats inherent to qualitative research in general, as outlined above, as well as threats specific to this research. To insure as much as possible the validity of information received (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Lather, 1986), the focus of the research was narrowed to gathering participant perspectives of their own training program. The research model continued to address the issues of validity and reflexivity during the data analysis. Patton,(1990), points out that the task for the interviewer is to make it possible for the person being interviewed to bring the interviewer into her or his own world. To facilitate that end, the informants comments were checked by the interviewer by summarizing at frequent intervals, and asking informants to verify what they had been heard to say. A process of "member checking" was used; some informants were given copies of the findings, and asked to reflect on the comments reported in an attempt to identify discrepant interpretation (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 263). Also, all sessions were tape recorded in their entirety and transcribed by a professional typist.

Being part of the research setting proved to be an advantage as well as a disadvantage. Being a part of the research setting gave the advantage

of familiarity with the setting, the people, and their external needs. It helped with negotiating access, focusing the research and developing interview questions. Familiarity with the site and the students also decreased the likelihood that information might be misinterpreted or that incorrect conclusions might be drawn. Sitting down with the respondents face to face, asking them for their opinions and listening with respect may give a far richer data base than any questionnaire or even interviews done by a stranger. On the other hand, the people being interviewed may well be influenced by the fact that a former teacher is doing the research; they may be more inclined to give answers that they think flattering to the researcher, or that might be considered "good" for the Skill Center. "The point is . . . that researchers, notwithstanding their use of quantitative or qualitative methods, their research problem, or their reputation for personal integrity, should systematically identify their own subjectivity throughout the course of their research" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). This concept recognizes that the researcher inevitably interacts with the setting; the goal is to be aware of and understand, to the extent possible, that interaction (Hammersly and Atkinson, 1983).

To seek out possible negative judgements, informants were prompted for suggestions for improving the training, and they were asked if there was anything they thought the Skill Center was not doing that it should have been. They were reminded that whatever they said could be

used to help the Skill Center training programs, and that both negative and positive input were important in achieving that objective. That seems to have been clearly understood by students during the interviews, and most students made one or more suggestions for program improvement.

FINDINGS

*Of course the entire effort is to put oneself
Outside the ordinary range
Of what are called statistics.*

—Stephen Spender

OVERVIEW

This study was guided by the following research questions: 1. How do student participants define success? 2. How did their Skill Center training program meet their definition of success? In order to discover the extent to which the participant views of success in general were similar, that is, how individuals defined success personally, the first research question asked informants to define in their own words what success meant *to them*.

This is a very difficult concept to define, that of success. So difficult in fact, that Webster's (1993) presents us with what is, in essence, a circular definition: **Suc•cess** *n* 1a: degree or measure of succeeding b: a favorable completion of something c: the gaining of wealth, favor or prestige (p. 1033). Just above that definition, in the same dictionary, *succeed* is defined as "to turn out well; be successful" (p. 1033). For most members of the majority culture, issues of wealth, status, and power are the most salient outward indicators of success (Cooper, p. 6).

SUCCESS DEFINED

Small wonder, then, that the student definitions are not always congruent with the expectations of the partner agencies in the Skill Center. Or, that agencies differ among themselves on what success may be. Or even that there were several strands in the participant definitions. The surprise may be that the definitions the students articulate are very clear. The responses to the question: How do you (participant) define success? grouped around four major themes. Those were:

- Education and the acquisition of skills and knowledge as success *in themselves* without any other conditional aspects.
- Happiness or contentment, that is, simply feeling positive and upbeat, as more than one respondent put it, more than “50% of the time.”
- Being an exemplar, or “role model” for children, friends, family, and others in the community.
- Being able to help others; to extend a “helping hand” to others in the community in the same way they themselves “were helped.”

In some cases, the definitions of the participants are similar to Webster’s, for example: “a favorable completion of something.” Even for those attributes of success articulated by the informants which are not obviously congruent with the dictionary definition, one can find some connections. However, with one exception, markedly absent from the

student responses was the wealth or money component. Almost none of the informants even mentioned money in connection with success, and when they did, it was almost uniformly exclusionary and negative. "Success isn't about money" "money won't bring happiness" were common responses to prompts about money or wealth as a measure of success.

Clearly, the majority of the informants felt a strong sense of ownership in their training program. Not surprising, considering their self-identification with success. For some of the informants, simply being in school and completing a program of study was a strong indicator of success.⁶

Success, well for here, is going to school. I was able to take the information that I didn't know anything about. The math that I had [before] was a little bit of algebra; [here] we went all the way to trig. But I was able to take that, and store it, and use it at this job I have now part time at the machine shop.

That is success to me—getting an education and being able to utilize it to better yourself. And go forward, you know, as far as getting more stable, and feeling better about yourself because of [your] accomplishments. It was exactly what I needed—exactly. Because I had just gone through a divorce, and with that comes questions about oneself, and all that stuff—[like] where am I going.

I think success is probably getting into a field that you like and that you enjoy being in. And, uh, being able to perform in that field adequately, you know. And, uh, and enjoying it and continuing to get better at it - different aspects of it as well. Like, for instance, the carpentry end of it, but then all of the other ends of it too. And maybe even moving up in it eventually.

⁶ To assure confidentiality, no identifiers were used. Text from individual informants is kept together in one block. Quotes from different informants are separated by double spaces.

I'd say [success is] finding something [you like] and striving to further yourself and be successful in it. Help you to benefit yourself. You know, like, if you had a goal, like, for instance the Skill Center, I went over there, and you all taught me . . . about [the building trades].

Yeah. That's the way I define it. If there is something I have successfully completed, that makes me feel good. That's success. If there's a goal in mind and I have completed it, that's success to me.

So as I said, it [success] is something you commit [to], set a goal, and follow through. And have patience with.

Education is seen as "success" in itself, and for some respondents, the Skill Center allowed them the opportunity to succeed in an academic setting which they hadn't been able to do before.

Back in San Jose I went to school, but I'm like, nah, I can do okay without going to school. But now I'm positive that finally I get myself something good step by step. It's not like: Oh, I quit. I don't drop out. I just keep going until I get to where I want to go. So that's what I want to do, graduate this summer; this June 1st. And then get my Associate Degree.

So the Skill Center afforded me a place that I could get a leg up so that, because I was able to get education, I could get a job, get money, which would allow me to further my education, which for me is very important. That's part of how I define success, is education. I see education as a way out of poverty. If you don't have it, you're kind of stuck.

And for me, you know, formal education, I'm trying to be learn more so that I may, some day, be what I want to be and be successful at what I want to do.

For me, *education* is success. See, you can lose a job, have your money stolen and wreck your car. But, education, skills, they are yours, like, forever. No one can take away your knowledge. Unless they shoot you. But that's the only way.

But for others, their views center more around the concept of happiness as success; several informants linked happiness with success and one or more of the other themes.

To me success is doing what you're happy to be doing and being able to take care of yourself and your family doing it. And ultimately just feeling good about yourself. Feeling good about where you are in life and where you're going. That's really it. The ultimate feeling of you've got it all together. Confident. Confident, definitely. Confident, full of self-esteem.

[Having a job] isn't the goal. No, not at all. I mean, like they taught us, you know, you're going for a career. You're not looking for a job. When you find your career and you're happy in it, and even after, well I've been doing this for four years now, and I'm still content.

[Money] is what you can achieve, but not happiness. Happiness is up to how you feel about yourself and all this thing. It's not wealth [that] brings happiness. Some people are very [rich] and they're not happy.

Success I think is happiness. Contentment. Not necessarily to think you're going to stay where you're at for the rest of your life and this is where you're going to be forever and ever, amen. But knowing that you're here right now and you have options. Success can be lots of things. It can be money, it can be [material] things, it can be a good family situation. Before I came to the Skill Center I didn't have any education. I had high school and that was it. I was married . . . three kids. If something had happened to my husband, I would have been a case for welfare. And I didn't like that.

Money doesn't bring happiness. Success has to have other things too. Success is what you can achieve, but not happiness. Happiness is up to how you communicate with yourself and all this thing. It's not success [that] brings happiness. Some people are very successful and they're not happy.

[Success is] being able to cover my own responsibilities. Self-sufficiency. I never believed that a million dollars made me successful. I don't know that I'll ever see a million dollars. I don't know that I ever care truly to ever really care to see money. So I don't think I measure success by money, or lots of money, but by being healthy. By being productive. By being fifty percent happy. And by having some friends. Now whether that's one good friend or ten, or whatever, but having friends in my life. People who care about me. That's my idea of success.

In several interviews the notion surfaced that success was centered around modeling behavior for others, most often, the informants' children, friends or family.

I don't know exactly [what success is], but it means like, I make a promise to myself, I want the better life and the better education for my kids in the long run. So I promise I will work hard and don't want to lose my self-esteem and don't want to lose my hope. Because I know there is hope out there so I want to be a success like other people so one day my kids can look up: Hey, my mom went to school. And she's a success, so follow in [her] footsteps. And so I do. . . show them the ropes, that they can do it too, even that, you don't have to be young, I mean old [people] still can do it. But I want them to do it. When they get to that time.

I see myself as a role model for my children. [And] for some of my other friends. I have three friends right now who are poverty level mothers with welfare for their income. No child support. And going: Oh gee, what am I going to do. And I say: Well, you know, it's not easy, but this is life and if you want to get into an

apprenticeship, this is how you do it. And so far, nobody's taken my bait, but I say, you know: It's hard, yes, but the rewards are self-sufficiency. I pay my own way. I just went and bought a new car. Not a brand new car, but new to me. I couldn't have done that three years ago.

I would say I think it's being able to help others with skills that I learned from the Skill Center. I was able to take that and not apply it [just] to me, but apply it to my kids. And I think that's where the success part comes in. This life to me is so many parts of success. Not only did it make me feel skillful, now, when I go for jobs or situations like that, I don't have any fears about interviews, or meeting people. That's a lot of things that I got off the Skill Center. That to me is success, and [it's] being able to spread it. Not only with my wife, but to my kids and other kids, so that what's it's all about.

I don't know exactly the answer for that, (what is success to you?) but it means like, I make a promise to myself, I want the better life and the better education for my kids in the long run. So I promise I will work hard and don't want to lose my self-esteem and don't want to lose my hope. Because I know there is hope out there so I want to be a success like other people so one day my kids can look up: Hey, my mom went to school. And she's a success, so they follow in my footsteps. And so I do what I do.

It [the program] helped a lot. It helped plenty because they [the children] was proud of me. You know, they enjoyed the little ceremonies that we had and everything. And, you know, coming up here seeing you. At that time my son got in trouble [at school] and I had to bring him up here. And just, you know, he had to go school with me. He really enjoyed it. That's what he knows, seeing that I was studying, that I was going to school too. So, you know, it made it a difference with him seeing me study and, [he knew], he had to go to school and do the same thing.

Helping others, or rather, being able to help others, was mentioned less than the first three themes above, but it was a theme woven into the fabric of informant discussion in more than half the interviews. Clearly, the informants feel a sense of social responsibility to their community and their larger world as well.

But, like, in the [background] where I came from it doesn't really take a lot to be successful. Anything you accomplish at all is generated to being successful. So a greater part for me is to give back. So, success to me is giving back. If you can take what you learned and give it back to where you came from, I think that's what success is.

Um, success to me is being able to take care of myself. And being able to help others. Success isn't always driving a Lexus or a brand new Cadillac, etc., etc. It's being able to take care of me, without always having to go to the government for a handout.

PROGRAM SUCCESS THEMES

The second question, that of program success (How did their [Skill Center] training program meet their definition of success?) had many answers. The answers grouped into six major themes, many of which addressed the personal needs and learning styles of the participants. In no particular order, they are:

- Connectivity to fellow students, staff, and faculty. A feeling of a “family” or cohort.
- Enhanced self-esteem and confidences developing from the training experience.

- Increase in level of personal basic skills, especially mathematics.
- “Hands-on” training, or an internship in a business or industry, especially off-campus.
- Attention to and help with barriers to employment, social support.
- For some, a feeling of connection to a continuously available community resource center; the idea of continuing access to the Skill Center resources after graduating.

As a group, all fifteen of the informants mentioned a feeling of connectivity to fellow students, staff, and faculty. This feeling of comfort, some described as “a second family” clearly contributed to successful completion of the training programs. Many informants describe very real fears they had on entering into an educational setting as an “older” student, or a student that hadn’t had successful educational experiences before. Clearly, the atmosphere of the Skill Center setting generated a positive group dynamic and interaction between participants. It was sometimes contrasted with high school experiences.

It was a time in my life where I (pause) was confused. I've always wanted to continue education, but an early family and all that became an obstacle. And I came up here, I got to the Skill Center and I noticed it was, I guess I felt the atmosphere was like being at home, like being with a family. Anything could be done. Anything could be accomplished without the fear. The fear I had, what if I started school and I went to school and I took a training class and I didn't succeed or I couldn't go through it, I couldn't accomplish it. That was a lot of the fear I had before. When I came to the Skill Center, it sort of, well, I just dropped into an

environment where I could let go. And it helped me be able to communicate with everybody without having a barrier. The instructors from [all the training programs]. You could talk to them without having to wait your turn actually. (Laughing) Or holding your hand up and wait there and by the time the teacher gets to you or calls on you, you forgot what you were going to ask. Their attention [to students] is just marvelous. The contact with the staff was great.

I think the instructors. Without a doubt. I think you guys just reflected so much confidence. When you get around people that are successful and they carry themselves successfully, I think it just rubs off on you. You have to want to be successful for it to, for you to get anything out of it. So I think just being around you guys. Honestly from the heart, I think that was most of it. I think the other 10% was just our showing up every day. If you show up every day and apply yourself, I think that contributes to the other 10%. But you can't fail just being around successful people.

It was much easier than high school. The environment was so relaxed that it was easy to learn. It was easy to talk to everybody in the class, classmates, and to talk to all the instructors. The close knitness. It was like a family. A home away from home. I called it my second home. So it was just a great atmosphere to be in. And I feel that if the atmosphere is right, then, you know, you're going to be more willing to learn. If you're in a messed up atmosphere with [people] with attitudes and, you know, whatever, you're not going to be as eager to learn. You're going to be ready to go home. You're not going to concentrate on the work at hand. But if you're happy in the environment, then the rest of it is just going to follow through.

The instructors made it possible to ask questions and not being shy about asking anything. They always encouraged. If you need help, don't worry about it, ask. Not being afraid to ask, that was a big help to me. I mean, it's more of a one-on-one basis at the Skill Center.

Where in high school, they have so many students, you know, they really don't have the time to give to individual students unless you like came after class or, you know, everything. But during class, there really wasn't a whole lot of attention to one particular student on a one-on-one basis. At the Skill Center, it wasn't that way. I mean, the instructors always had time to answer your questions and help you to understand. They paid more attention to you. It was just a totally different environment. In high school, I hardly ever talked to anybody. I was really shy and I didn't talk to nobody. I started off that way at the Skill Center. But they wouldn't let me stay that way. By the time I graduated, you know, I was just as rambunctious as everybody else. It was just easy to talk to, easy to get along with everybody.

I liked the size of the group. There were, I don't remember how many, but there was never more, I don't think, than a dozen a dozen students at one time. And I felt that the, uh, the student-teacher ratio was really good. Uh, another thing, it just seemed like if, uh, there was pretty good flow to the whole program. And most people were there, were there to be there. And, a few people who had trouble, it seems like everybody went out of their way to try to keep them going in the program and work with them for whatever, you know, whatever they were going through. Help them, trying to keep them in the program and get through whatever they were doing.

I got help from everyone. Caring, listening, the will and [passion] to teach. I think that was a big part of my success. That helped me think that I can do this right now. And with them [staff] believing in me and saying: Yes you can. And taking the time with me to go over maybe a problem I may have had, or problems with my children. You know, they would listen and let me know that I'm not the only one with this problem. So that gave me the strength to go on and finish.

Yes, and the teachers'] accessibility. Your open-door policy and your, got-a-problem, lets fix it, if I need to show you something, I'll show you. You want me to show you again, I'll show you again.

Oh, you need to see that again, well, smile on my face, I'll show you yet again. There wasn't any, "I don't have time for you now", attitude. There was a lot of acceptance and support from everyone.

I can get help out of it. I can get help if I have a problem. I can talk to especially [instructors]. They have the ear open. [ABE instructor] sometime didn't have that much time but she really helped. If she home I just call her.

The teamwork, cause I like teamwork. And the well, learning opportunities. The feeling of everyone working together like a family.

Many informants were near tears when they described the "cohort" or family feeling of the setting. Possibly, for some, the Skill Center was more functional than any other setting they had encountered before. One of the themes closely linked to this feeling of family arose most often from the discussions centered around a feeling of connection, and that was enhanced confidence and self-esteem. These were often cited as contributors to success. Several of the respondents, more than half, talked about self-esteem and confidence as key elements of their own success.

I went there for the confidence. I knew it would give me more confidence to increase my math skills and writing and that. I knew going there I wouldn't come out being able to run for Congress or nothing like that, but I knew that I would have more . . . I would leave with more than I went there with. So that's what I was looking for. More the confidence. Being able to apply it to my life after that. I know for a fact, this is a fact, that four or five people I personally know went there and got good jobs after they graduated, like [____], he's setting up for the Olympics in Atlanta. And I know a [graduate] that works for a judge. I also think the Skill

Center could be a lot bigger than what it is. If they just realize that they're giving more than just knowledge. You leave with more than just knowledge and doing facts. Knowledge of building of a house. Or working in an office. So it's just way bigger than just a learning skills.

[Everyone gave me] a sense of belonging. I mean I hadn't been to school for 17 years, so that was kind of tough at first. [But] everyone was on the same level. And the instructors, they never gave up on me. They always knew that I could do it. And at one point, I thought wow, maybe I can do this.

Also, the relationships I made there. . . the friends I made gave me the confidence to go out there and do the best I can and be the best I can be, no matter what. The teachers there. . . they were understanding. They listened to you when you had a problem.

I gained the confidence to go back to school and actually learn something, and really get it. You know, I mean going through high school, sometimes you would learn it but you couldn't retain it. Or didn't use it. But with the Skill Center, they helped you to connect things together, you know, to be able to use what you learned.

Maybe it was the encouragement. What's the word I'm looking for, that you can do it, think better about yourself. I got a lot of that from the Skill Center. The **mental** conditioning was important too. Okay, so you bent the nail, well get another one. Try again. Try, keep trying.

But at the Skill Center I feel pretty much confident. I'm very curious, and, you know, I ask all the time questions. I do, I ask and nobody bother to answer, why I ask. They just answer question. So that make me feel pretty good.

One very common theme was the emphasis on remediation, especially in mathematics. For the participants in all three of the focused

training strands, the refresher courses in the Adult Basic Skills classes and the in-program vocation-specific course work in math and reading were mentioned as both needed and helpful. The increase in the level of personal skills was important to students in all training strands.

[The Skill Center Program] was good for me because it kind of had a good review of most all of construction, you know, all aspects of construction. It helped me learn how to figure out to read blue prints a little bit. Something that I really didn't know how to do. It was good to have the math refresher course too, just to remember how to do a lot of the simple, basic math, which was really good for me. That was - and it was good the program had that option, you know, the, [basic skills] classes you could take to brush-up on. The teacher was really good, [_____], I think was her name. That was real important to me. Feeling that I've always been a math idiot, I mean it did me some real good.

Well a lot of the programs offered are what we're using in the workforce and basically a little of the future. And I thought it [the training] was very strong there. Because they're teaching you what to expect.

The knowledge. I'm finding that in my job, in the trade I'm in, there are people who would not necessarily be forthcoming with their tricks, with their little gimmicks. The things they do to make their job easier, quicker, faster, more efficient. [The instructors] shared their knowledge willingly in the training.

So [the Skill Center training] that is the first ticket for me into the dental department. That's how I get into the dental. And then [the ABE teacher] prepare me for all the tests that take before you get in the dental department. You have to take a test to get in to see if you pass the test or not. If you pass the test, you can get in. So she prepared me for all those things. Reading, writing, math, all sorts of things, you name it.

First step, basic into the real life. For example, I need math, basic math, writing, spelling. Because I study a Construction Trades, so I working with wood stuff and nailing technique, and measurement. That is very critical because every day we use it on my job.

One of the themes most often repeated was the concept of "hands-on" experiences. For most of the participants interviewed from the three training strands, having the opportunity to actually work at the trade, skill, or subject area was revealed as a key element to their learning experience, both from the viewpoint of the acquisition of skills, and especially for the construction trades students, a feeling of ownership and pride; of having made a positive contribution to the community and to themselves. But for all of the learners, "hands-on" was a key experience:

We were fixing up drug houses in the community. I mean, that really gives you a chance [for hands-on training]. I think that was a good deal, too. And maybe I would do something like that. You're, you're fixing up a community that's in need of, need of being fixed up. You're also improving it for the neighborhood. And you're creating housing that is needed. I thought that was another really good thing. And occasionally I drive through the neighborhood just to see how things are going. And it's a lot better place than it was, just because of the work that was done there by our group. So you feel really good about that, too. Kind of a pride thing, too.

The hands-on training where we got to go to some of the houses and work on them. Use some of the tools and equipment which we'll be using for the job field today. And just the test and the reading, you know, the math. Everything they had us do over there. You know, it benefits us for when we get our jobs, you know, that we understand what's expected of us and what it means to

work in the rain and bad conditions. Because I've been doing all that, so it already paid off.

And then all the hands-on stuff. The program was way accelerated comparatively. We were doing third and fourth term apprenticeship work on the jobs at the school. But the fact that we had done so much stuff really made it easier [when I got a job], because, um, you didn't to work as hard, I guess, in the beginning, as far as the apprenticeship program, which was nice.

See things, read the textbook, do the hands-on, and everybody work the best.

Participants stressed that for many of them, the skills they learned were relevant to the work that they would later find themselves doing on the job. They acknowledged that the design of the training had value in other ways, as well.

[The Skill Center program]. . . . really made the transition [to a job] a lot easier for you. And it made you more desirable because you had skills. [Employers] are looking for somebody who has done a few things instead of just someone. . . . totally green. That was a big plus for the program. And, the teachers were really good. [They] were real thorough and explained everything. Or, in the classes, things that we didn't know or wanted to know, you were always right there with the correct information and that was real important, too, for me. Um, just the way the whole program was run, it was organized and [the teachers] were lenient as far as helping people out. At the same time [they] were pretty strict about trying to instill good work ethics - being on time, that kind of thing. Which is, it sounds so trivial, but as you all know, it's, it's one of the biggest things there is. [In a job], if you don't show up for work or call in, you're gone. (Pause) Just the responsibility, things like that. Just the general day-to-day stuff. I hadn't been in the work force for a while. It was a good refresher course as far as kind of getting my shit back together.

The physical training component was important for the building trade students, each of whom mentioned it during their interviews. At the time, (during training) many of the participants, and it seemed like all of them, complained about having to have a strength and endurance building component. After experience in the workplace, they all had changed their minds about the value of that component.

The physical training was good too. Because often you're not doing all that you can do. And here we were running and lifting weights and doing all these different things that really - that I think are probably smart to do throughout your life anyway. Help prevent injuries when you're working in a physical trade. So that was a major part of my later, you know, success in the job.

What comes to mind was the stress on improving your physical ability. For myself, for my own personal experience, from the time I stepped foot into the Skill Center, I lost nearly 80 pounds. And I've taken off lots of inches. And I could not do my job today if I hadn't had gotten during the job training about important it was to take care of myself physically.

The physical training, that was wonderful. I mean instead of me trying, you know, on my own to improve my [physical conditioning], I could be in that I really miss that part of it, you know, because that was helping a lot. It got my day started. You know, I mean lifting those bundles of studs right now I'm really glad I had the [physical training]. And then my foreman out there, you know, he tells me, he says Well, you got to work out, because those 16 gauge metal studs, they're pretty heavy. And I was like, man, they also long and awkward.

Yeah, I mean the knowledge is very important, but exercise is also important too. And out there, we do the work, we don't use just

our knowledge. Yes, some time we need our strength and that, endurance? Endurance, yes.

Another important dimension to the Skill Center model, was the inclusion of social support services that were intended to remove barriers to both training and employability. It appears from the data, that the decision to include social support in the training design was critical to the success of most of the students. And, it was critical for their success in the working environment, as well. There were several students who continued on to classes at the College in specialized training areas. The support helped many of them continue their education. Also, the job referral and support after employment assisted several informants to access and keep jobs after completion of their job skills training.

And then I, I found out, actually through the Skill Center, that there was a, they were looking for an apprentice at [remodeling] Company. And went there and I've been working there ever since, and I'm well along in my apprenticeship; nearly done.

The support and help with life problems. I think that's something that's really needed there. [Students] need to feel comfortable talking to their instructors if they have a problem. Because [instructors] they do care. Even the [client advocates], you know, everyone, was kind of sensitive to my needs.

They paid my tuition and my books all two years [of my apprenticeship]. I never paid a dime. That was a big, big break for me. I'd go to them, I'd say I need this amount of money, and they cut me a check. I just wanted the money. Oh please give me the money so I can go to school. And they never said no.

[The support service agency] helped with the money for child care and some classes. So if I want to drop a class, because they've been hoping for me to finish I can't. If I drop the class, then it's like I can't face them.

When it came time for me to get my license back, [a staff member] helped me, sent me some checks, you know, they helped me pay my fines. Yeah, so [the staff member] really helped me a lot. And she checked on my license and, you know, everything. She helped me with it, pretty much did it all.

Once I had a car, I could go [where the jobs are]. I'm already in a union apprenticeship at Local [0000] in [City]. I was supposed to be at [1111], the one over here. But they wanted, had a waiting period and then you had to give them the money and wait. But over there it was just like I was working. I mean before I was in the union they just, you know, they knew it so they submitted the papers. So I mean that's why I joined that one because they had their act together. You know they let me work and then, you know, bring some money in. [Over here at 111], instead I'd had to be on a waiting list and, you know. [My new employer] wanted me to start work that Monday. And I couldn't, you know, be on the waiting list. So, it was like, there's more than one Union Hall.

A few of the informants had positive feelings about the access to follow-up services at the Skill Center, but most graduates didn't mention it at first. As a response to prompting questions about improvements to the program, it was the most frequent subject. Continued access is viewed by a substantial majority of the informants as something the Center should do better, others had more positive feelings.

That open-door stuff [really helped]. Especially after I graduated from the program. I know other people who did it, but I myself came in time and time again for that pat on the back, you're

doing okay. Remember the lunch that we had, [the instructors and I]? I was ready to quit the apprenticeship then. But you helped me past that bad experience.

I still keep in touch at the Skill Center. Yeah, I do. That's why every time I need something, someday I call [instructor]. She gave me her phone number. And [my caseworker] is still in touch with me. She's not working at TPIC, but, she's still in touch.

Group size and the group dynamic was, for the researcher, the most interesting subject to come up during the interviews. These are more classroom management, or teaching style issues, but they made sense to the participants as contributing in a positive fashion to the training. These responses were to the prompting "blue sky" question: What did you like best about your training program?"

I liked the size of the group. There were, I don't remember how many, but there was never more, I don't think, than a dozen students at one time. And I felt that the, uh, the student-teacher ratio was really good. Another thing that I would definitely continue was every so often you'd have different speakers come in and speak about different trades? I thought that was really a wonderful window into different trades

The way the information was taught was really good. It was fast paced, but as long as you apply yourself, and I am able to use the information in the job, and it is not just the machine shop, the physics/engineering information, knowledge of computers with Lotus and Dos, that sort of thing, understanding how computers work. I want to get into more depth with that because I am going to go on to more school in September. I want to go for Novell, Novell networking. Sylvania, PCC, yeah. And again I will be able to use that information and better myself.

And the well, learning how to figure out diameters, radius, angles, all that sort of things, because they apply, and discipline—because I hadn't been to school in 20 years. It helps with just going to the classes and being sure that I have assignments in. The work load was heavy, but it was actually good that it was heavy, because it teaches one to buckle down, and from that I really grew a lot. Because I was kind of known to be a procrastinator, and you can't procrastinate at the pace it goes. [The intensive pace] was very helpful, and getting a chance to do that last lab [public presentation]. Which was interesting. To get up in front of people and do that, and feel very comfortable with it. That is a very hard thing for me to do, but I overcame it, and I want to do more of it so that I get better at it.

The program was successful because it added to my knowledge base and it helped raise my awareness of what I knew; absolutely. I was able to connect things I had learned in the past and grow with what information I got from there. It was very helpful. And that was a good thing for my self-esteem.

You could always find a good level and work at it, consistently, without [feeling] really super pressured, which sometimes is not a good thing, you know, for, for some of us. We don't operate well under pressure. It just seemed like if, uh, there was pretty good flow to the whole program. And most people were there to be there. And, a few people who had trouble, it seems like everybody went out of their way to try to keep them going in the program and work with them for whatever, you know, whatever they were going through. Help them, trying to keep them in the program and get through whatever they were doing.

The teamwork, cause I like teamwork.

I think when I look back on it - the training was great. I went through this program, it took me 6 months to go through it, and when I first left here I thought, I could just build a house and everything like that. But no, that wasn't the case, you definitely need some more hands-on experience, you know. But, I, I left here

feeling really pumped. But the reason I give you guys credit for your training to be great is because some of the students that came through here and some of the things you guys went through, not only were you guys teaching people about carpentry, but you were also referee to the Friday night fights.

Okay (laughing). We had Caucasian females and males, we had African American males and females, and I think a couple of Hispanics every now and again thrown in, and a couple of Native Americans or whatever. And each of these people had come from, from different backgrounds. You know what I'm saying, living different lifestyles. Some of 'em really were - especially with the Caucasian males and females, was their first time ever actually being around African American males. And so, you know, there was a lot to deal with there. So, by dealing with that and teaching somebody carpentry, I mean teaching them to where they don't bust up their hand with the hammer or hit their toe with the sledge hammer (laughing), or take an electric saw and cut up something that you just repaired and you did it right. While you're teaching this person over here something, this person come along - hey - and start cutting up something you did right. (laughs) You guys did great, man. Seriously (laughs).

And the thing also, too, you gotta, if you remember. When I was going through your program, you had not one, not two, but three, and we won't say why, because each person's reason was different. We're talking about adults. But you had three males at one time in this program that were homeless. But, they were determined enough to not let their homelessness stop them from the program. Which I think is good, because to be truthful, homelessness is a very big deterrent at times, you know (laughs). I mean, you know, it's like, hey. something ain't right. So anyway, I, I think you guys did really good

That was, I mean there was some incredible people that came in. And a lot of what that related was just that through the thick and thin of it, people that had questions and things that were bugging them, or whatever, they could ask. And then everybody felt pretty comfortable in the group. So you really could, if you had

things that were bugging you, or whatever, or just the fact that you realize that you weren't the only one that was going through different things. You know, I really thought that program was top notch. Uh, pretty much the whole atmosphere of the Skill Center, I thought, was really good. You know, I think, I'm pretty biased, but I think that the whole program was really pretty good. I thought that while I was there that my time was used well. And I also felt that I had a pretty good attitude when I went into it. I kind of knew that I was just going to do it, you know. And, I was, I was happy with my performance when I was there. I felt like I did what I set out to do, and tried to get the most out of it. So I think that, you know, I didn't have the same background as everybody else there, but I felt the doors were certainly open and anybody could take advantage of it, you know. And it wasn't hard to do. All you had to do was get your ass there in the morning and just participate. It was perfect really.

I also liked the shop. We had a good shop. We worked on things. It was organized, uh, as far as, you know, having the toolroom, learning the different tools. That was real important, too. That makes a lot of difference when you go out - preparing anyone. Even if you think you know a lot of stuff, there's always things you don't know. 'Cause that was another thing, was the identification of tools. The work book along with the textbook - I also thought that was probably a good way to go. I, I carry that book around with me in my truck all the time and refer to it often. I mean, if you have any questions about anything, almost everything is in there, and if it's not, usually - it'll help you out.

When I went through it, it was self-paced. You know, you could work at your own pace. So I was able to complete the 6-month program in about 3½ months. And I liked that. I didn't have to wait for everybody else, like in a traditional environment. I know the "go at your own pace" doesn't work for a lot of people, but it works very well for me. So I was able to get in there, do what I needed to do, and move on. Very supportive environment. I think at the time that I went through it, there was a lot of emphasis on

going to work after you do your training rather than maybe continuing on your education. Building on to the education that you got at the Skill Center. The Skill Center education is all well and good, but I think it's only a foundation. And I think that needs to [be emphasized], and I think that's changing now. I don't know, maybe it's just because I emphasize it. But it needs to be: Yes this is good to get your a job, but don't let it stop there. You know, because with the education that you get at the Skill Center, you're only going to able to go so far. And it's really encouraging for me that, you know, I see people that have gone through the Skill Center, not too many, but every once in a while I'll see a couple floating around on the campus and they're taking [PCC] classes. And that's kind of neat (Pause) [from] a participant kind of angle.

I think the instructors are very supportive. They strive to get the best out of students. And I think that's very important. . . it's great. And so to strive to pull out the best in the student, I see that a lot. Very encouraging. And I see that a lot in the students. Sometimes they're surprised that they do so well. So that I think is a good thing.

I would say that this is a pretty good program. And I would say, you know, I just don't really see a lot of things to change about the program. I think that the only thing that maybe I would change is to develop, if possible, some sort of video library on the side maybe. That could have trade specialties and tricks and things that you could actually watch craftsmen do. Other than, I mean the instructors were great for demonstrating whatever. But sometimes its nice if you have the option to maybe go into a cubicle, or maybe something that even coincides with the chapters in the book and the work study. And then again that would be, it could be anyway you wanted it. But it might be just as an additional thing that you might want to study. . . to have that available. A lot of times a lot can be learned from watching, uh, a journeyman or master craftsman performing different tricks with the tools.

I thought then that it was a good program, and I still think it's a good program. You have people that they are in a position in life that they don't see options. And I think once they get into the Skill Center, however they get to the Skill Center, options open up for them and they can be very surprised by the options that are there. And that's another thing that the instructors, I know work very hard at it, and I've seen other instructors work very hard at it, is to emphasize the positive. You know, okay, yes, you're flat broke and, you know, you're living with three kids in a little dinky danky one bedroom apartment. But, you know, you get through this program, and, no, you're not going to make \$10.00 an hour unless you have experience before, but you know, if all you have is this program, you're probably looking at more \$7.00 an hour. And sometimes they're discouraged by that. I've heard many times: I do better on Welfare. But the encouragement I think needs to be there because if you're on Welfare and you never take a step to get off of it, you're going to be on Welfare for the rest of your life. And you've got to at some point, take that step out there. And it can be a very scary step, especially if you're a single parent. And I think single parents need a lot of support. Because they don't have somebody at home that can, you know, work opposite shifts, or support, or whatever. I mean, they are the sole support of their family. And that's a hard cycle to break.

You know, I'm not one that likes a lot of government handout programs. I think they're really easily abused. I think the whole system gets to be kind of a dependency kind of thing. You know, you have the government's giving you money so they think they can run your life and tell you how to raise your kids, how to keep your house, how do to this and that. And it doesn't foster an independent spirit. That being said, I really like the premise of the Skill Center because it has the potential to develop that independence in people. To make them self-sufficient, have that self-pride when you bring home a paycheck. Okay, granted, it may only be a \$150.00 or \$200.00 a week. It's yours, you earned it. Nobody can tell you how to spend it. Except if you have kids . . . [laughs]. But, you know, you have the option to tell that child: No. There's no social worker

hanging over your head saying: Thou shalt feed your family five servings of fruits and vegetables a day. You can say: No way, we're going to live solely on meat. Or whatever. That's what I like about it. You know, it's not perfect, but it does have the potential to develop that in people, and I like that. So it's always been a very big thing to, you know, well I now have the help. I have a husband. But it's very important to me to know that if something were to happen to him, I would not be a lost cause. So yeh, freedom and independence are very driving forces in my life. Sometimes my husband says I'm too independent [laughs].

It was good to meet new people that came from all different backgrounds, cultures. But I think the program is a total success because it offers diversity. You can pick what you want and enhance that and take it and go on into work or to school and better yourself. I mean, with this program, when you're done, you can definitely get a job. And not just in one area. You have a better understanding, you know, machine shop, mechanic shop, basic data entry in an office, you know, besides the program that I did. You know, the other programs, clerical, construction. So, I mean, you can come in here with no knowledge at all about anything and still come out with a good understanding of those things that we talked about.

Many students spontaneously contributed stories of their own life journeys after graduation. This was, in part, in answer to the question: How have you been doing since you graduated? Originally, this was not part of the interview protocol, but the first informant volunteered that information, and his story was so interesting, that it became a part of the interview guide. The stories told were rich and offer a glimpse into the lives of the respondents that no written questionnaire would be likely to elicit.

Well, since I left the Skill Center, I, uh, I had a couple months, maybe, in between, where I was not employed by anyone in particular but I kept myself busy with side jobs. Little jobs for people. And then I, I found out, actually through the Skill Center, that they were looking for an apprentice at [a remodeling company] Company. And went there and applied for the job and was interviewed a couple different times. I was the third Skill Center student to be hired at [the company]. And was brought in as an apprentice. And since I've been there this is my third year. I'm working through the apprenticeship program. I'm over halfway done. And, uh, sort of coming up through the ranks. I'm acquiring tools and learning lots of skills. And, uh, um, just doing the carpenter thing. It's working out good.

I've also been able to buy a house with my partner. We've been able to get house together. And then we're remodeling it with some of those skills that I learned at the Skill Center. And, uh, I've been able to buy a newer vehicle. I've just paid it off, and uh, been able to have some dental work done with my new benefits. And uh, keep pretty busy.

So I feel like I'm doing pretty good. I feel like I'm successful in going through the apprenticeship program. I gave myself 5 years to get through it, because I understand in the construction trades that things take time. Because of slow times you don't always get things done in a perfect time frame. So I'm working at getting through, getting through my apprenticeship and um, at that point I'll either, I'll reevaluate where I'm at and what I've learned and what my options are. And I'll either stay at [the remodeling company], or eventually I may strike out on my own.

Yep. And the apprenticeship, the schooling part of it was a drag. I mean on a typical day I'd get up at 5:00 in the morning. I get them up at 6:00. We're out the door by 6:30. I drop [___] off to day care. I drop [the other children] off to school. The soonest I can drop them off is 7:00. There's a day care before and after school. And I get down the road. And from wherever I'm at, on a school day, sometimes it was in Tualatin, sometimes it was in Sandy,

sometimes it was in Longview. You know, wherever. I'd have to race into Beaverton, pick up [the children]. Come home. Throw food at them. Take them to the babysitter. And get to 42nd and Killingsworth by 6:30 at night. Stay there for three hours. Eat a chocolate bar, have a cigarette, drink my coke or my coffee. That was my dinner. And then get in the car, go get the kids, go home, go to bed and get up at 5:00. That was my life for two years. And God Almighty, I'm going to do it again. In September I'm going into the 2 + 2 program for my commercial license.

I got a lot of support from people though. I didn't do it all on my own. For me to say that I did it by myself is not true. My mother helped me. My sister. Other babysitters. The teachers at school. Let's see, the other students, yeh.

My Washington journey level license, whether I get that or not, which there's not a doubt in my mind that I won't, I can also apply for the supervisor's license in Washington, and that will enable me to sign permits for Washington. And my brother built 22 houses last year in Spokane. And I didn't get to wire one of them. But this year will be different.

I love school [student who continued on at PCC]. I look forward to go every day. Sometime it's like frustrating, because you cannot get the right contour and make it nice and all those things. The first thing you look at the person and the smile is the teeth. That's what I do now. I look at people's teeth. That's what I do. I can't help it.

Anyway, uh, the program. You know how they say good intentions pave the road to hell, or whatever. Whatever started this is very good intentions, very good. Because, I'm going to tell you something. Just give you a little quick personal history on this building in which you're in right now. Ten years ago I used to live across the street. It used to be a club called the Tip'n Inn, and I stayed right above it. Those apartments, that's right above it, okay. This used to be a second-hand store, you know. Well, the guy who was here used to have, they weren't real nice but they were okay TVs. And ten years ago I was also looking for work, I couldn't get

work etc., etc. And that was one of the many things that led me to crime. Because, hey, I'm not one to just say, Hey, well I'm gonna lay down and die. If I can work I will work, but I'm not, I don't want to starve. You understand what I'm saying, no one wants to. Years ago I used to look at this building very hard and look at that man's television sets and I used to think, Hey, me and another guy at night, what we'll do, we'll break the windows and we'll come in here and we'll get those TVs and etc., etc. You know.

It's funny how time changes things. Because, alright, that was 1985. Ten years after. Now I've completed the program, I'm a licensed contractor, etc., etc., all out of this building. So, you know. It just goes to show you that, you know. That was right on, that was right on. Yeah, you know, I, I don't know how to say it. I'm not trying to be rude, but in a way in which you would understand. You know what I'm trying to say. So I'm saying right on, 'cause that's an old term of the 70's to say, That was great, you know. Yeah. Because, you know, I got something of real value out of this old building without breaking in and stealing. And, uh, now it's just taking it and not letting it lay, and doing something with it. And that's what I'm working towards.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Trials never end, of course. Unhappiness and misfortune are bound to occur as long as people live, but there is a feeling now, that was not here before, and is not just on the surface of things, but penetrates all the way through: We've won it. It's going to get better now. You can sort of tell these things.

—Robert Pirsig

OVERVIEW

One of the great strengths of qualitative research is its ability to allow informants to publicly express their own values and goals. It is precisely these publicly expressed values and goals that are the source of motivation for informant and researcher alike. This study has sought out the opinions, goals, values, definitions, and judgements of selected informants, in order to gain insight into a particular cultural milieu. Such insight was sought, in part, in order to help articulate and reveal some of the inherent tension between the values and motivation of individuals and those of agencies. The use of relatively loosely-structured open-ended interviews generated a large body of information, and allowed insight into the “culture of poverty,” which is the one common element shared by all of the informants. That culture of poverty transcends all ethnic, age, religious, and gender roles and rites. The interview format also allowed the informants access to an audience with the power and authority to alter some of the social conditions in which the informants operate.

If agencies better understand those conditions which contribute to individual feelings of success, they may well be able to enhance and improve the design of training programs toward the goal of allowing participants to succeed to a greater degree both during and after program participation. Both student and agency win at such a chance. Those extrinsic success indicators which benchmark program and agency success or failure may well be a mirror of the intrinsic values expressed by all of the study participants.

Based on the findings of the research as well as the observations and reflections of the participant observer, and opinions from those informants who shared in reviewing the findings, following are the conclusions, recommendations, and implications.

CONCLUSIONS

The interviews with the fifteen respondents resulted in a large quantity of data from which emerged several strong common themes. From these themes, coupled with the interviewers observations, the following conclusions appeared evident and strong:

- Overall, there were far more similarities than differences between the perceptions of the informants. While there were differences in those program components singled out for comment, they were differences in the training strand design. Within each strand (Construction Technology, Office Occupations and Technology, and

Principles of Technology) there was surprising agreement about the areas contributing to participant success. For example, the Construction Trades completers, to a person, credited physical training and “hands-on” experience in the field as critical to their job successes. In the Office Occupations training, every respondent mentioned the relevance and currency of the program curriculum as critical success factors (computer training and office practices).

- All students included in this study had very strong and clearly expressed opinions about how they defined success.
- Each participant in this study was able to identify, with firm conviction, what facets (actions, services, structural processes, etc.) of the program positively impacted them the most.
- Several of the participants, by implication, found a strength of the program (for them) to be in the diversity of the population who attended the Skill Center.
- Several participants drew comparisons between their experiences in the Skill Center with the schooling they had in high school. They saw the Skill Center experiences as more relaxed, more relevant, more focused, and more of an opportunity to learn basic and work skills in the context of what was really experienced on the job—relevant and contextual.

- Across all training programs and among all informants, the strongest theme was that of “connecting” with instructors and fellow students, during and, in most cases, after the training. Everyone interviewed expressed the feeling that instructors were not only knowledgeable and accessible, but empathic and understanding as well. In interview after interview, instructors were mentioned by name, and singled out for praise for their personal commitment to the students.
- Some participants seemed pleasantly surprised and quite proud of their achievements in mathematics once they were able to learn and practice it in the context of the work world.
- Participants expressed, some with great depth of emotion, a perception of warmth, support, and a sense of family that was common to all of the students interviewed; a “cohort” feeling. Informants described the Skill Center as being an extremely supportive, caring environment. Based on the nature and intensity of their responses, it was clear that while at the Center, many students were balancing feelings of anger, frustration, anxiety, and despair, and it was the human connections with the other members of the Skill Center that enabled many, if not most, students to persist and succeed in training.

- Many respondents equated ease of learning with what they perceived as a non-threatening atmosphere, small groups, and the encouragement and reinforcement of staff and fellow students.
- Some informants valued education as something which, once obtained, could not be taken from them (stolen, repossessed, lost, or broken). This value may well have deeper meaning for those who have suffered much in the way of loss, whether by theft or repossession or the action of agencies, such as Welfare and Childrens Services Division.
- For all of the interviewees, the value of their training was seen as more intrinsic (e.g., helped them build their confidence and self-esteem) than extrinsic (e.g., helped them obtain and retain a job). This contributes to an inherent tension between individuals and agencies, since agency perspectives on success are based almost solely on extrinsic measures.
- A number of informants expressed a great sense of fulfillment in setting some personal educational goals and feeling highly successful when they attained or completed those goals.
- For some participants, modeling (or serving as a model) of success, particularly for children and significant other adults, was a source of considerable pride.

- For many participants, inclusion of social support services was critical to their success both during training and after graduation while in transition from the Skill Center to a job.
- Informants clearly appreciated the competency-based nature of the instruction. The willingness of the staff to listen and respond, repeat and demonstrate until the student succeeded was critical; students experienced the feeling and reality of “teamwork.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

The themes that developed from the interviews were identified in the findings. From these interviews, and those themes, and resulting conclusions, come the following recommendations:

- Linkage with other students, and peer support should be established very early in the training process. For those students entering remediation, the Life Skills segment of the training classes could utilize current and former students as guest speakers and discussion participants to help build a bridge into the rest of the student population. This would help create a feeling of community and family earlier in the training time frame, and allow fuller participation by all members of the Skill Center community. Perhaps, new students could have a “partner” student who has more experience in the Center.

- Former student participants who have successfully completed the program, could act as “mentors” to students at different levels of development or progress, from the initial introductory orientation sessions through program completion. Receiving one-on-one support from someone who has “been there” could have tremendous impact on getting and keeping more students involved in their own development and education.
- Some type of “outreach” program could be developed with churches, community organizations, and other service providers. “Outreach ambassadors” could be former students (during the interviews, several informants indicated that they would be eager to help others) staff or faculty who could act as speakers, seminar-presenters, and even visit one-on-one in conversation with people who might benefit from Skill Center services. A key ingredient might be to take a more dynamic and pro-active approach to communication and dissemination of information about the extent and variety of skills training offerings at the Center, so that more people can become aware of and have access to the wide range of services available.
- Establish or help facilitate the establishment of a support group or network among the training recipients. After meeting with the interviewer, three of the successful completers were planning to

have an "alumni" get-together to re-establish old relationships and keep in touch. Such a concept has manifold implications. It may serve in the long run as a means to establish job linkages, and it could be extended to include present students to enhance motivation and increase the visibility of successful completers.

- The Skill Center should make more and better use of public relations and public service opportunities to present and explain the range of training opportunities available at the Center. Such exposure could also help stabilize the Centers' image within the community and the legislature. Such activities as acting as telephone volunteers for the Oregon Public Broadcasting fund-raising campaign, and connecting with Rose Festival events are among the suggestions.
- The Construction Trades program should move toward a greater participation in community-based "hands-on" projects in cooperation with neighborhood associations and non-profit housing rehabilitation agencies. Such projects could be used as image-building and public awareness forums as well as for their obvious value as training sites. Informants from Office Occupations and Technology, and Principles of Technology also advocated strongly for community and "for-profit" internships, allowing practical skills

applications in a training format. One graduate received employment as a direct result of an internship with a public agency.

- Because even those participants who maneuver their way successfully through the training programs remain, for a time, very vulnerable, the Skill Center should remain completely accessible to all students, especially program completers, both for specific skills upgrades and social support. Informal sessions and group discussion could help facilitate retention among enrolled participants. More “user friendly” procedures allowing former and present students, to readily access counselors, teachers and social support agencies could be helpful. A few informants said calling the Center had been sometimes frustrating.
- Appropriate follow-up at regular intervals, not just for data collection, but for the purpose of providing the graduates with continuing support services and a sense of connection to the Center, needs to be an integral part of the program landscape. Comments by some interviewees suggested feelings of abandonment upon completion of training. The original contract with the North/Northeast Workforce Center (NWC) called for formal follow-up at regular intervals, which was never satisfactorily done. With the departure of the NWC, the Skill Center should develop a

strategy to pick up that strand of the training program, and strengthen it.

- Informants implied that they could and would be very willing to provide feedback on how well the curriculum met their current needs on the job. Several of the Construction Technology completers said that they were ahead of other entering apprentices, and could have applied for advanced standing. If the Construction Technology instructors had known that, they might well have addressed the problem of “testing up” in apprenticeship, for example. The program completers are a resource that the Skill Center should utilize to insure continued validity to the training programs. One way to do that might be an exit interview for graduates, and “early exit” program leavers.

IMPLICATIONS

Overall, informants offered a number of extremely positive and constructive comments and suggestions to both improve the way job training and social support services are delivered and affirm the worth of much of the training as designed and currently delivered. Many implications for improving recruitment and retention were revealed as part of the interview process as former students talked about how the occupational training program in which they participated was successful for them.

More might be done to address the tension between a college-community partnership, versus a college-community *agency* partnership. The needs, both social and educational, of the students cannot be met without the existence of both types of relationships. However, agency success criteria are more likely to be met if individuals feel successful. Therefore, the college in its approach to program design, needs to address itself to the need to create conditions that allow and encourage participants to experience intrinsic success.

Above all, the tensions between individuals, agencies, and the college must not be allowed to be so pervasive that help is denied to people who need it. The relationships between the partner agencies in the Center must become and remain transparent; no small task. The very elements that helped the informants perceive themselves as successful, the mostly "human touch" aspects, must be retained, and agencies should become more interested in how the students feel about their own success, since students' feelings of intrinsic success values often translate into extrinsics that can enhance agency "success." A solid, humane, College and *student* partnership must be established from the beginning, and maintained throughout and beyond the training. Participants should be involved in the continuous improvement of instructional and social support service delivery, as well as in the design of their own individual training plan.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As probably most inquiries do, this research raised far more questions than answers. This study underscores the need to study the large population of what are rather euphemistically called "early leavers." We know little about their perceptions, barriers, and prospects. As educators, we should be concerned about the large number of dissatisfied stakeholders, customers in a very real sense, who have "voted with their feet." From the interviews, and from anecdotal sources, it is known that many of these former students are working. Did they leave because they had acquired enough skills to get a job? Did they leave for financial reasons? What other factors contributed to their departures? Do they define themselves as successful, despite having left early? Do they think the training program was successful, even though they didn't complete? Are there graduates who found work who would not define themselves as successful, or that the program was a success? About 500 people from the period covered by this study left the program before completion. This is a potentially rich source of data for a study of retention strategies.

Gaining insight into the perceptions of instructors and agency personnel could be a solid contribution to the literature of training program design. How do the perceptions of these actors parallel those of the graduates and other participants in the Center programs?

Better information about the training program effectiveness and efficiency depends in large measure on establishing and maintaining an effective follow-up design, not just for data collection, but for the creation of a feeling of connection to the Skill Center. Mapping of such a follow-up plan, implementing it and gathering initial data on its effectiveness could be a very practical and helpful study.

SUMMARY AND FINAL COMMENT

This dissertation used the tools of qualitative research to probe into the lives of informants in a very open way. As a member of the Skill Center start-up team, the co-developer of the competency-based Construction Technology curriculum, and the program designer of the Principles of Technology training strand, this researcher was in a unique position to gain entry into the world of the graduates from the Center. The voices of the informants reveal a very real world of highly motivated people trying to make their way through a social structure filled with dangers and snares that few of the majority culture can fully comprehend. The hope is that the trust these folks placed in the researcher has been validated; that the culture of the inner North and Northeast neighborhoods has been revealed, if only as a glimpse, in a way that will allow the reader to share in the values, hopes, fears, and motivations of people, who, like us all, want a better way of life and happiness for themselves and their children.

For agencies and the community, there are clear implications from these stories. Given a helping hand, and a share in the shaping of their own destiny, these “subordinate people” can and will share in the Dream.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

STUDENT RATING OF SKILL CENTER TRAINING

Statement	Rating				
The instructors explained and/or provided a handout which explained the objectives for this training program	Poor 1	2	Average 3	4	Good 5
The instructors explained the criteria for progress early in the training	Poor 1	2	Average 3	4	Good 5
The instructors were well prepared for each class.	Poor 1	2	Average 3	4	Good 5
The instructors used a variety of teaching methods: lecture, handouts, films, hands-on, etc.	Poor 1	2	Average 3	4	Good 5
Students were allowed to freely express their questions and opinions.	Poor 1	2	Average 3	4	Good 5
The instructors stimulated interest in the subject.	Poor 1	2	Average 3	4	Good 5
The instructors were available to individual students.	Poor 1	2	Average 3	4	Good 5
The instructors subject area knowledge is?	Poor 1	2	Average 3	4	Good 5
Would you recommend this training to other students?	No 1	2	Probably 3	4	Yes 5
Would you recommend these instructors to other students?	No 1	2	Probably 3	4	Yes 5
Did you think this training program was difficult?	No 1	2	Average 3	4	Very 5
Did you learn what you had hoped to from this program?	No 1	2	Yes 3	4	More 5

Appendix B

Interview Guide

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do student participants define success?

Prompt for clarification; ask informant to define terms if they are unclear. Listen carefully for cueing words to build on.

2. How did their training program meet their definition of success?

Again, guide the informant toward discussions of terms that are unclear; listen for themes and strands of thought. LISTEN WITH RESPECT. Ask for analogous examples if thoughts seem unclear.

Check for understanding by summarizing and repeating what you think you are hearing. Explore among other things, what participants perceive as indicators of success, how they see the program as succeeding, and what factors they believe effect success. Allow the thoughts of the informant full run.

3. Follow-up question: What did you like best about your training program?

4. How have things been for you since you graduated?

Appendix C

Consent for Study Participation

(please print clearly)

agree to take part in this research project about participant perspectives about success in the Skill Center training program I attended. This research is being conducted by Roger W. Cooper under the supervision of Dr. Ronald Daugherty, and the information collected from me will be used as a data source for Roger's dissertation in the Community College Leadership Program at Oregon State University.

I understand that the study makes a request for demographic information and also involves an oral interview of approximately one hour. The questions during the interview will ask me for my own feelings about the training I received from the Skill Center, and will also ask me to identify those parts of the training which contributed to my success. These questions are not expected to be embarrassing to me, or to cause me undue stress.

Roger has told me that the purpose of the study is to learn more about the feelings of the participants in the training programs. There are no potential risks associated with my participation in this study. The interview will take no more than one hour to complete.

I understand that I may not receive any direct benefit from this study, but the study may help to increase the knowledge that the Skill Center administrators and teachers have about the thoughts and feelings of the students enrolled in the Center.

Roger Cooper has offered to answer any questions I may have about the study, and what I am expected to do. He has promised that all information I give will be kept confidential, and that the names of all persons participating in the study will also be kept confidential. In addition, consent forms will be kept completely separate from the interview transcripts, and no identifying information will be kept regarding my responses. In addition, Roger has explained that no identifying characteristics or descriptions will be used in the transcripts, so that my identity will be completely hidden.

I understand that I do NOT have to participate in this study, and this will not affect my relationship with the Skill Center, Roger Cooper or Oregon State University or any institution facilitating the collection of this data.

I have read and understood the above information and agree to take part in this study. I may withdraw my participation at any time or skip any questions that I do not want to answer.

Date: _____

Signature: _____

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Dr. Ron Daugherty at (541) 737-4189, or the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Oregon State University, (541) 737-0670.