

**Graduates' Perceptions on the Reasons for the Enrollment Uptrends of Vocational-
Technical Education: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study**

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Graduates' Perceptions on the Reasons for the Enrollment Uptrends of Vocational Technical Education: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

The problem addressed in this qualitative phenomenological study is that, due to increased demand for county-run vocational-technical high schools in New Jersey, there are limited enrollment opportunities in these schools. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of County X Vocational (a pseudonym) graduates with regard to their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment and how they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased at County X Vocational. This study was grounded in Steuart's law of supply and demand, because there is an increased number of students (high demand) desiring to attend vo-tech high school (the service), resulting in limited county-run vo-tech enrollment opportunities (low supply). A qualitative phenomenological research design was used, where data were collected via semi-structured, in-depth interviews from a purposive sampling of 11 graduates. One central question and two sub-questions guided the study. Data were transcribed and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis and In-Vivo coding, followed by interpretation using thick written descriptions to explain the findings. The results indicated that by strategically creating student schedules that allowed all graduation and employment certifications to be satisfied by the end of junior year, vo-tech educational leaders will be able to increase enrollment opportunities at the county-run vo-tech high schools. These findings can guide educators to create individual graduation road maps that summarize credits, skills and certifications earned at the end of junior year. Students' completed road map would serve as a passport to either off-campus college classes or program-based employment in the final year of high school. A future study analyzing the success rate of vo-tech high school graduates vis-a-vis types of vo-tech instructional schedules, is recommended to provide needed insight on the future of vo-tech high schools regarding creating more enrollment opportunities.

Acknowledgements

It is often said that “setting a goal is the first step in turning the invisible into the visible.” Another well-known quote is “a goal without a plan is just a wish.” These two sayings have guided my personal and professional journey with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ at the center of that goal and plan. This incredible journey of obtaining my doctoral degree would not have been possible without the majestic strength of my Lord. Therefore, I want to first give all praise, glory, and thanks to Jesus for taking me through this process and for seeing me to the end, despite significant health and emotional challenges. Thank you Lord!

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Section 1: Foundation

Society's increasing pressures on students to get a *good education* to secure a well-paying job has traditionally been the mantra around the world. Years ago, a *good education* simply meant graduating from high school (Moss, 2017). However, since 1983, with the publication of "A Nation At Risk", policymakers, politicians, and educators have actively worked to transform the definition from graduating high school and college, to producing graduates with learned skills who are competitive in the employment market (Burgaz, 2008; Moss, 2017). The epiphany that not all students have the cognitive abilities or stamina to endure the rigorous college academic journey, coupled with the mounting college tuition costs, have yet again, quickly shifted the meaning of a *good education*. According to Lim et al. (2016), a *good education* is not considered profitable if the expenses to acquire that education surpass the financial returns. Harris and Clayton (2020) determined that participants valued vocational education because they believe that it lowers unemployment, strengthens the economy, and creates a younger group of skilled workers. This premise has stirred an ongoing national debate that examines the labor market needs and whether there is a better way for students to acquire industry-valued skills to secure high-paying jobs without incurring mountains of debt (Zamir, 2022).

Once viewed as a less attractive learning option for students who were deemed not cognitively adequate for college, vocational-technical (vo-tech) high schools have been rebranded into highly competitive, high-sought-after schools that increase graduates' employability (Harris & Clayton, 2020; Oglesby, 2019). Studies have indicated that taking career and technical education (CTE) courses in vo-tech high schools, will vastly contribute to the post-secondary success of vo-tech high school students (Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020;

Dougherty et al., 2019). Scholars such as Briede and Drelinga (2020) and Calero Lopez and Rodriguez-Lopez (2020) explored students' vocational education and their learned transversal competencies, as predictors of future sustainable gainful employment. However, critics of vo-tech education proposed that such a stance on education diminished students' potential, that such schools are guided by the socioeconomic status of students, and are viewed to only serve non-academic students (Sage-Advices, 2021). Yet the overwhelming argument continues to persist – vo-tech high schools that provide rigorous academic coursework combined with practical industry-related skills, create a sustainable school-to-career pipeline which strengthens the economy (Aw, 2019; Dougherty et al., 2019; Harris & Clayton, 2020; Krafft, 2018; Li & Seeberg, 2022; Nofiantoro & Affandi, 2018; Ozer, 2022).

Increasing labor market demands have forced lawmakers and vo-tech educators in New Jersey to reverse the traditional rhetoric of vocational schools, by integrating practical industry-valued skills with robust academic courses (Burney, 2022). According to the director of the New Jersey Council of County Vo-Tech Schools, this rebranding has created a high demand for these top-tiered high schools which is quickly outpacing the state's capacity (Burney, 2022). New Jersey boasts of a vo-tech high school model that provides students with specialized skills from CTE courses, thus providing alternative pathways to careers (New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.). New Jersey vo-tech high schools equip graduates with skills to satisfy the needs of the labor market (Oglesby, 2019).

During the 2020-2021 school year, only 13% of New Jersey's public high schools were vocational schools, with 21 county-run vo-tech high schools (The State of New Jersey – Department of Education, 2022). According to the New Jersey Department of Education (n.d.), 70% of students who apply to county-run vo-tech schools are not accepted due to the limited

number of county-run vo-tech high schools in communities. In 2017, the annual vo-tech high school application in New Jersey exceeded 30,000 with only 13,000 acceptances statewide (Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019). As one of the 21 county-run vocational high schools, the entry seats at County X Vocational (CXV) (a pseudo name) are highly competitive, with an average of 1,200 applicants for the 400 ninth grade seats (Burney, 2022; The State of New Jersey - Department of Education, 2022). Although the enrollment class size at CXV increased from 375 in 2019 to 429 in 2022, only 28.6% of the applicants were offered a seat (The State of New Jersey – Department of Education, 2022.) As the limited county-run vo-tech high school enrollment opportunities crisis balloons out of proportion, studies conducted by Dougherty et al. (2019), indicated the need for further research on graduates’ perceptions of the perceived benefits of vo-tech high schools and graduates’ source of motivation to enroll. This gap in research fueled this study to examine a microcosm in County X, New Jersey – the perceptions of CXV graduates to understand the source of motivation to enroll in a vo-tech high school which results in limited enrollment opportunities at county-run vo-tech high school, such as CXV.

Guided by concise research questions, the lived experiences of CXV graduates were examined to explore their perceptions of the reasons for the increased desire of students to enroll at county-run vocational high schools and their perception on how enrollment opportunities can be increased at CXV. Through the lens of CXV graduates, lawmakers and vo-tech high school leaders will explore the driving forces behind the increasing demands for county-run vocational high schools such as CXV. Using findings from this study, policymakers and school leaders will strategize and develop policies to improve the enrollment opportunities at the county-run vo-tech high school in County X. Amid increasing pleas to county officials and politicians to grant more students access to vocational education by expanding the vo-tech high school initiative in County

X, through the lived experiences of CXV graduates, the study findings provided insight on graduates' perceived reasons for the increased demand for county-run vo-tech high schools. This study further provided a determination as to whether a county-run vo-tech high school expansion is warranted in County X. Additionally, based on participants' lived experiences, school leaders were afforded the opportunity to discover the factors that influence students' motivation to enroll in CXV, and whether these reasons contributed to the limited enrollment opportunities at the county-run vo-tech high schools.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this research study is due to the increased number of students desiring to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high schools in New Jersey, there are limited enrollment opportunities in these schools, according to Burney (2022) and Gonser (2019), causing prospective students the missed opportunity to pursue their career pathway in high school. County X youngsters are afflicted with stress and emotional trauma because their dream of attending a vo-tech high school is diminished by the realization that CXV is unable to meet the enrollment demands of the county (Oglesby, 2019). As vo-tech enrollment demands increase resulting in limited enrollment opportunities, graduates' motivation to enroll is unclear, since the problem has not been explored from their perspective. Failure to address the limited enrollment opportunities of county-run vo-tech high schools in New Jersey will negatively impact prospective students who aspire to attend a county-run vo-tech high school in New Jersey.

Over the years, scholars such as Harris and Clayton (2020), Li and Seeberg (2022), Nofiantoro and Affandi (2018), and Ozer (2022), examined the economic value of vo-tech schools. Yet, Dougherty et al. (2019), Krafft (2018), and Kreisman and Stange (2019) indicated the need for further research on graduates' perceptions of their motivation to enroll in a vo-tech

school. The gap in the research and the problem of increased demands for county-run vo-tech high schools resulting in limited enrollment opportunities at these schools in New Jersey, prove that further research is warranted. Bridging this research gap will provide valuable insight to inform future vo-tech high school policies to address the limited enrollment opportunities at the county-run vo-tech high school in County X, New Jersey. Failure to increase enrollment opportunities in CXV would mean that the local vo-tech high school will be unable to satisfy County X's growing labor market demands, thus rendering an unsustainable high school-to-industry labor pipeline.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of CXV graduates with regard to their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at CXV and how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased at CXV. According to the New Jersey Department of Education (n. d.), with a graduation rate of 99%, the annual enrollment demands at CXV continue to increase, resulting in a reduced number of applicants who are offered enrollment at the county's lone vo-tech high school. The acceptance rate of CXV decreased from 31% in 2019 to 28.6% in 2022, as the number of applicants increased (The State of New Jersey – Department of Education, 2022). Educational and county leaders yearn to hone on the driving forces behind the uptrends in the enrollment of county-run vo-tech high schools, which results in the problem of limited enrollment opportunities at CXV, thus failing to meet the demands of the county (Burney, 2022). Purposive sampling was used to select 11 CXV graduates as study participants, as data saturation was achieved (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data saturation was achieved with 11 participants because there was no variety in their responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Directed by the

research questions, the data collected from in-depth interviews using semi-structured questions, was analyzed to explore participants' motivation to enroll, and their perceptions on how to increase enrollment opportunities for county-run vo-tech high schools such as CXV. Using a thorough process to categorize the data and analyze themes, the study provided insight from the perspective of the graduates on the impactful influences that motivated them to enroll at CXV and ways to increase enrollment opportunities at the vo-tech high school in County X. Findings and recommendations will be presented to school leaders and county officials to determine the factors that influence students' motivation to enroll in CXV and explore the ways of increasing the enrollment opportunities at the county-run vo-tech high school based on graduates' perceptions. Additionally, the study findings will assist county and education leaders in strategizing solutions to alleviate the problem of limited enrollment opportunities at the county-run vo-tech high school in County X.

Research Questions

RQ1

Based on the lived experiences of attending and graduating from CXV, what were graduates' sources of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school?

RQ2

Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, what are their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment in the county-run vo-tech high schools?

RQ3

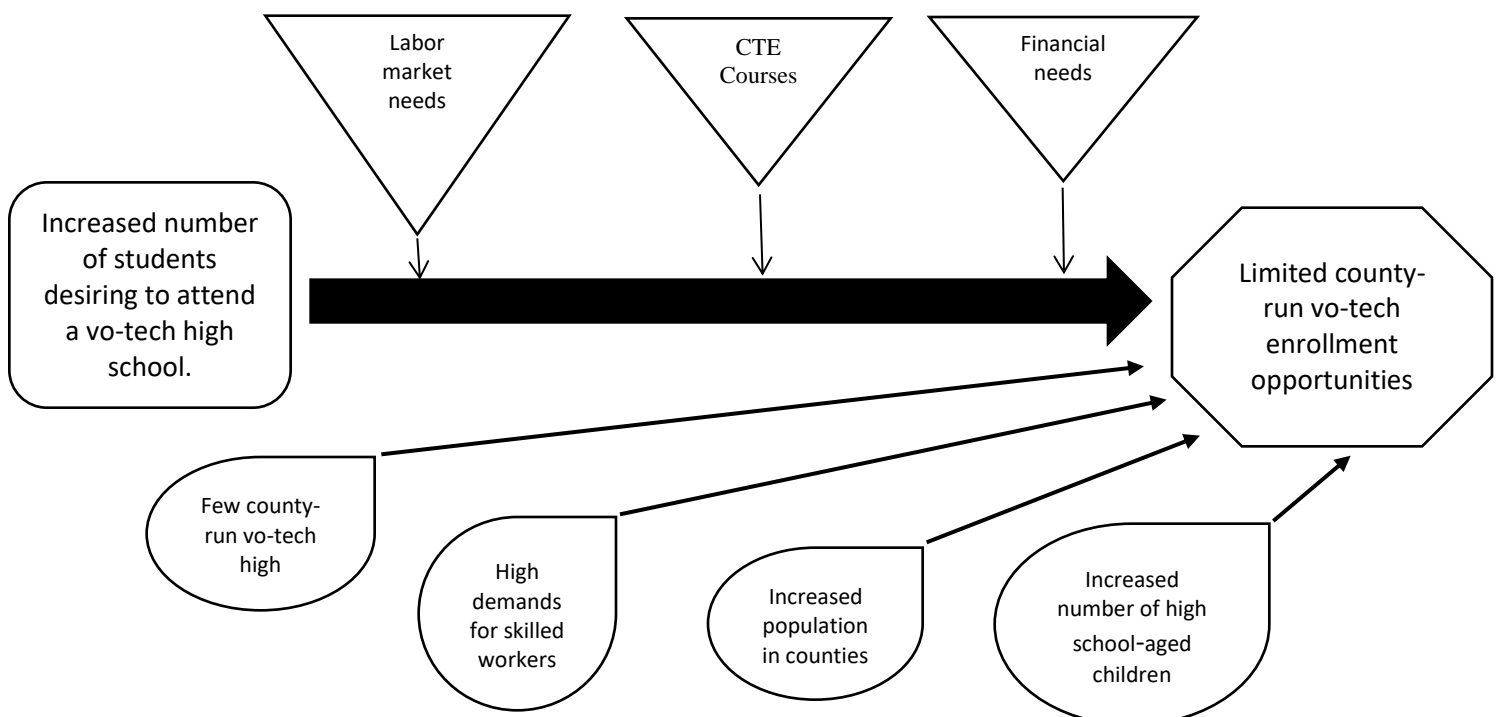
Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased or improved at CXV?

Conceptual Framework

As seen in figure 1 below, there are many mediating factors that influence the number of vo-tech enrollment opportunities. First, the current number of county-run vo-tech high schools available in New Jersey. There are 21 county-run vo-tech high schools in New Jersey (Burney, 2022). According to the United States Census Bureau (2021), from 2010 to 2020 there was a 5.7% increase in the state's population in New Jersey. However, the number of county-run vo-tech high schools has not proportionally increased to match this uptrend in the state's population. As vocational education continues to be touted by educators and politicians with increased popularity, students and their parents view these institutions as a sustainable employment ticket for high school graduates (Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019; Oglesby, 2019). The increased population in the counties results in an increased number of high school-aged youths who are seeking a vo-tech high school placement. The result is a demand for these highly sought-after schools that exceeds the availability (Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019). Thus, exacerbating the supply and demand problem of county-run vo-tech high schools in New Jersey.

Figure 1

Factors that Impact Limited County-run Vo-tech High School Enrollment



The basis of this study was grounded in the law of supply and demand (Steuart, 1796). Although an economic model, the supply and demand theory can be used to explain the educational problem of this study. While there are many philosophers who referenced the concept of the law of supply and demand in their works, the term was first coined by Sir James Steuart (Steuart, 1796). Earlier, philosopher John Locke, although he did not use the term “supply and demand” in his economic theory in 1691, he described the concept in regard to interest rates in the 17th century (Fuller, 2020). Other theorists who explored the law of supply and demand within their economic publications included Adam Smith in 1776 and Alfred Marshall in 1890 (Investopedia Team, 2021).

In the economic realm, supply and demand is referred to as the relationship between the price of a product and the willingness of individuals to either buy or sell it (Brewer et al., 2002). Alfred Marshall expanded on the theory in his 1890 publication of “Principles of Economics” where he developed a graphical representation to explain the relationship between the price of goods or services and demand over time (Investopedia Team, 2021). More recently, scholars described the theory of supply and demand as: if the demand for a service or product is in excess of the supply, then the service becomes a rare commodity (Petrova et al., 2019).

In this study relating to vo-tech high schools, there is an increased number of students (high demand) desiring to attend vo-tech high school (the service) which results in limited county-run vo-tech enrollment opportunities (vo-tech high schools become a rare commodity). According to the law of supply and demand, the driving force that makes a commodity or service scarce is when the increased demand fails to be directly proportional to the supply (Allais, 2022). Therefore, the aim of an efficient economic system, according to Alfred Marshall, is to reach the point of equilibrium – the point where the demand for the goods or services equals to the supply,

thus preventing the service or good from becoming a rare commodity (Investopedia Team, 2021). Applying this concept to the study's problem, the goal of vo-tech administrators and policymakers was to ensure that as the demand for vo-tech high schools increases, the vo-tech enrollment opportunities also increase to reach that point of equilibrium.

Upon accessing the website for the New Jersey Council of County Vocational Technical Schools, individuals are greeted with the slogan "New Jersey's County Vocational-Technical Schools – Get more out of high school and jump-start your career" (New Jersey Council of Vocational Technical Schools, 2023). This promise by the county-run vo-tech high schools is fueled by state data, which shows a significant deficit in entry-level skilled workers in the employment market (The State of New Jersey - Department of Labor and Workforce Development, 2022). The focus of the Department of Labor and Workforce Development is to form partnerships with vo-tech high schools to provide apprenticeships to students in various industries, thus affording employers the opportunity to offer apprenticeships and trainings to students, whereby a direct and sustainable school-to-career-pipeline is developed (The State of New Jersey - Department of Labor and Workforce Development, 2022). The hope is that this apprenticeship model will drive economic development through practical skills, training, and educational attainment – the same mission of the county-run vo-tech high schools (The State of New Jersey - Department of Education, n.d.). Therefore, with alignment of the missions of employers and vo-tech high schools, students are urged to become an apprentice to learn specialized skills, on-the-job training, and possibly earn a stipend (The State of New Jersey - Department of Labor and Workforce Development, 2022). Additionally, state legislators have made available grants, such as the Perkins V Grant, to expand the number of specialized

programs that are offered at the county-run vo-tech high schools to match the industry specialized skills deficit in the state (The State of New Jersey - Department of Education, 2020).

As the labor market needs continue to dictate the career pathways of high school students, administrators of vo-tech high schools are increasingly creative in their instructional programming and the CTE courses that are offered to their students (Bordean, 2018; Shin & Bills, 2021). The goal is to ensure direct alignment between the labor market needs and the educational and training programs offered at the county-run vo-tech high schools (The State of New Jersey - Department of Education, n.d.). Thus, counties form partnerships with industries and labor unions, where employers meet continuously with vo-tech high school administrators and policymakers to discuss and evaluate the needs of the labor market and how these needs can be met by entry-level skilled workers who have undergone academic, training, and apprenticeships at the county-run vo-tech high schools (The State of New Jersey - Department of Labor and Workforce Development, 2022).

The recent inflation in the country has also adversely impacted the problem of limited county-run vo-tech high school enrollment opportunities in New Jersey (The State of New Jersey - Department of Labor and Workforce Development, 2022). More families are thrust to the brink of survival as the cost of food, housing, and other basic needs increase. Families with children who are within the minimum employment age are compelled to seek work to assist their parents (The State of New Jersey - Department of Labor and Workforce Development, 2022). Therefore, the increased financial needs of families are also a moderating variable in the problem of this study. Students with some specialized skills are more likely to get better paying jobs even while in high school and definitely upon graduation, compared to their peers with limited specialized skills (The State of New Jersey - Department of Education, n.d.). Consequently, the demand for

high schools that provide specialized skills training are more desirable to students who are seeking ways to start their career paths while in high school and secure earnings that will subsidize their families' household income (Oglesby, 2019).

Definitions of Key Terms

Career and Technical Education (CTE)

Career and technical education (CTE) is the type of education that integrates specialized practical skills with academic course work, which prepares students for a wide range of high-skill, high-demand careers (Dougherty et al., 2019).

Competence

Competence refers to the ability to complete a task effectively as a result of learned attributes (Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020).

County-run Vocational-Technical (vo-tech) High School

County-run vocational-technical (vo-tech) high schools are vocational schools managed and have oversight by elected County Commissioners (Burney, 2022; Oglesby, 2019).

Employability

Employability is one's ability to gain employment, maintain one's job, and if desired, seek and gain better employment (Budgell, 2022; Burgaz, 2008).

Industry-Valued Skills

Industry-valued skills refer to the abilities and attributes of employees that are esteemed in various careers, trades, or businesses (Kreisman & Stange, 2019).

Vocational-Technical (vo-tech) High Schools

Vocational-technical (vo-tech) high schools refer to education institutions that offer students in grades 9-12 specialized training in skilled trades, applied sciences, technology, and

Career and technical education (CTE) courses for the purposes of career preparation (Gonser, 2019; Oglesby, 2019).

Review of the Literature

Vocational education plays a vital role in the development of society's human resources by creating skilled workers, increasing employees' productivity, strengthening the economy, and enhancing citizens' quality of life (Webb, 2022). Vo-tech education encompasses a wide range of programs from mechanics, culinary arts, cosmetology, commerce, engineering, to medicine. These varied programs are studied in career and technical courses that are intended to simultaneously offer students industry-valued skills while preparing them for the demands of the labor market in the respective technical fields (Briede & Drelinga, 2020; Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020; Dougherty et al., 2019). In addition to career-oriented learning experiences, vocational education affords students with practical skills and other competencies such as problem solving, teamwork, and perseverance, which promote a likely sustainable post-secondary career (Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020). Therefore, vocational-technical education cultivates technicians for all types of businesses which propels the trajectory of a nation's progress (Aw, 2019; Dougherty et al., 2019; Harris & Clayton, 2020; Krafft, 2018; Li & Seeberg, 2022; Nofiantoro & Affandi, 2018; Ozer, 2022).

Over the years, the citizens of County X in New Jersey have recognized the importance of vocational education to maintain a flourishing economy and improve the quality of life of its citizens (Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019; Olesby, 2019; Turner, 2016). As a result, there has been a steady uptrend in the number of students desiring enrollment at vo-tech high schools (Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019; Olesby, 2019; Turner, 2016). The traditional belief that vo-tech high schools were designed for non-college-bound students has been upended, and a resurgence in

interest in vo-tech high schools has become the norm for County X youths – academic and non-academic alike (Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019; Jacob, 2017; Webb, 2022). An increasing number of County X youths are finding that their dream to pursue their desired career in a vo-tech high school is a rare commodity in their county (Gonser, 2019). In recent years, career opportunities that require technical skills are multiplying, while the enrollment opportunities for students to attend high schools that prepare them with industry-valued skills are rapidly dwindling (Jacob, 2017; Lambert, n.d.; Webb, 2022). Similar to many states, New Jersey is faced with a looming shortage of skilled workers which economists believe will be detrimental to the state’s economy if policies are not introduced that would improve the economic forecast (Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019; Olesby, 2019; Turner, 2016).

The problem addressed in this research study is that due to the increased number of students desiring to enroll in the county-run vo-tech high schools in New Jersey, there are limited enrollment opportunities in these schools, according to Burney (2022) and Gonser (2019), causing prospective students the missed opportunity to pursue their career pathway in high school. Vo-tech high schools expose students to various career pathways from mechanic to medicine, and studies reveal substantial economic benefits for attending such institutions (Harris & Clayton, 2020; Li & Seeberg, 2022; Nofiantoro & Affandi, 2018; Ozer, 2022). However, since the resurgence of vocational schools, there is a gap in the literature which shows that graduates’ perceptions on the reasons for selecting a vo-tech high school, have not been explored in recent studies (Dougherty et al., 2019; Krafft, 2018; Kreisman & Stange, 2019). Each year, although the enrollment numbers at the local vo-tech high school in County X (CXV) increase, the number of students who are denied enrollment is directly proportional to the large numbers accepted, due to the increased demands (Burney, 2022; Oglesby, 2019; The State of New Jersey – Department of

Education, 2022). New Jersey was among the 39 states that instituted new laws regarding career technical education and fueled state funding for improvements to vocational education (Jacob, 2017; The State of New Jersey – Department of Education, 2022). These laws and policies only exacerbated the problem in County X, as families and politicians touted prior non-experimental evidence that vo-tech high school graduates have higher earnings and are more likely to acquire sustainable employment directly after high school (Burgaz, 2008). By examining the lived experiences of CXV graduates, this phenomenological study explored the reasons for their motivation to attend CXV which created the increased demand for these schools and the problem of limited vo-tech enrollment opportunities in County X.

This section highlights literature that explores the thematic benefits of vocational education as presented by different scholars. The literature was primarily discovered through multiple searches of databases at the Northcentral University Library which includes ProQuest, Education Research Complete, Educational Resource and Information Center, and Elton B. Stephens Company (EBSCO). Additionally, Google Scholar and Google searches were utilized to gather prior studies and seminal literature on vocational education. During the initial searches, the broad key words used were “vocational education”, “career and technical education”, “reasons for vocational education”, “vocational-technical high schools”, “vocational-technical high schools in New Jersey”, “benefits of vocational-technical education”, and “the value of vocational high schools in the US.” During later searches, in an effort to refine the search, limits were added to include results for the last five years, peer-reviewed journals, articles, and studies that were limited to the United States. Filtering by subject, additional limits were placed on the searches to include secondary education, vocational high schools, and high school graduates. The main articles and journals reviewed for this study ranged from 2018 – 2022. The literature

reviewed covered the themes discovered on the value of vocational education – a) create skilled workers b) increases employability c) the economic value – lowers unemployment d) contributes to post-secondary success.

Create Skilled Workers

In an effort to bridge the gap between education and employment, educators and policymakers actively consider different education models to train skilled workers (Bahçelerli, 2018). Amid growing global economic concerns of deficient skilled workers to meet the labor market demands and the perceived low regard for vocational training, Cedefod (2020) conducted surveys to gather European views about vocational education. The results of these surveys revealed that 46% to 91% of the European citizens interviewed had a good understanding of the meaning of vocational education and training (VET) (Cedefod, 2020). More specifically, the surveys discovered that citizens had a positive attitude towards VET because they believed it created skilled workers who could easily find jobs thus meeting the labor market needs (Cedefod, 2020). Despite this perception, survey respondents believed that society still considers VET as second-class education and is often ostracized by scholars (Cedefod, 2020).

Other studies focused on adult vocational learning and training, which revealed the value of vocational education (Harris & Clayton, 2020). A qualitative study that utilized random sampling disclosed that the enhanced personal development and increased skills that promoted career progressions were added benefits of vocational education (Harris & Clayton, 2020). Study participants encouraged government agencies to prioritize vocational education investments in their citizens (Harris & Clayton, 2020). The positive image of vocational education shared by participants, was believed to provide policymakers with irrefutable evidence to strengthen vocational education programs and expand VET programs to increase the diversity of training

programs for skilled workers (Cedefod, 2020). Prior research revealed that vocational education is mostly popular among disadvantaged youths as it acts as a gateway to sustainable employment due to the acquired industry-valued skills (Kreisman & Stange, 2019). Other studies show that students who are not enrolled in a vocational program in the first and second year of high school, actively seek vocational training during their 11th and 12th grade years to boost their skills in various industries (Budgell, 2022, Kreisman & Stange, 2019).

Due to the shortage in the workforce, agile learners who are also skilled workers are critical to fulfill the increasing employment demands (MIT Open Learning, 2021). Vocational training programs must adapt to keep up with the volatile industry needs. Therefore, vocational education and training programs that provide apprenticeships and credentialing opportunities are most desirable to students who yearn to enhance their industry-valued skills (Dougherty et al., 2019). Scholars suggest that vocational schools that afford students with critical thinking, problem solving, digital literacy coupled with hands-on training are best suited to meet the employment demands of the future (Briede & Drelinga, 2020; Burgaz, 2008; Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020; MIT Open Learning, 2021). However, other competences such as effort, teamwork, perseverance, and curiosity are also considered vital skills learned at vocational institutions (Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020).

Calero Lopez and Rodriguez-Lopez (2020) and Dougherty et al. (2019) have extensive evidence on practical and character skills acquired at vocational schools, however, these findings are solely from the perspectives of educators, policymakers, employers, or citizens. However, the literature lacks the perceptions of graduates who have experienced vocational education and fails to outline the skills acquired at vo-tech schools from the students' perspectives. While it is necessary to consider the perspectives of these stakeholders of the vocational education system,

critical to the success to vocational training is the perceptions of graduates to determine whether they believe that they have efficiently acquired valuable skills while in a vocational institution to become skilled workers.

Increases Employability

According to Cheng et al. (2021), employability is defined as a set of achievements which encompasses skills, understandings, personal attributes, and intrinsic characteristics that are sought after by employers. Employability is also described as an individual's capabilities to gain new employment or enhance their existing employment (Burgaz, 2008). While employment is the mere acquisition of a job, employability measures one's ability to obtain and successfully function at the job (Cheng et al., 2021). Vocational education aims to build a strong labor force by preparing students to learn valuable skills for a specific career or occupation, thus improving the labor market (Jacob, 2017; Lambert, n.d.; Webb, 2022). Hence, due to the nature of the courses and the practical skills taught, vocational and technical training programs are known to be an asset to individuals' employability (Cheng et al., 2021).

Statewide data from Arkansas was presented in the literature, which revealed that students who are exposed to career and technical education (CTE) courses in high school are likely to have favorable future academic and employment outcomes due to the learned skills from the vocational programs (Dougherty et al., 2019). Therefore, vocational education, especially during high school, is considered a public investment in graduates' postsecondary plans (Dougherty et al., 2019). Not only do the CTE courses that are synonymous with vo-tech high schools result in numerous benefits – timely graduation, higher probability of postsecondary education, and a potential for higher earnings – vo-tech high schools also enhance sustainable employment and provide opportunities for work advancements (Burgaz, 2008; Calero López &

Rodríguez-López, 2020; Dougherty et al., 2019). According to the study conducted by Dougherty et al. (2019), 90% of the students in Arkansas who took CTE courses, took them in vocational high schools where students also earn industry-recognized credentials and participate in apprenticeships, all of which increase their employability upon graduation. Further examination of the data revealed that although all students examined by the study were enrolled in a vocational high school, 30% of the students were CTE concentrators. Students who were classified as CTE concentrators studied at least three CTE courses per year during each high school enrollment year (Dougherty et al., 2019). The literature discussed that the employability of CTE concentrators increased by 80% more than their non-concentrator peers – students who studied less than three CTE courses each year of high school (Dougherty et al., 2019).

Other studies explored the views of vo-tech principals, teachers, and employers on the skills necessary to increase employability of vo-tech graduates (Burgaz, 2008; Calero López & Rodríguez-López, 2020; Harris & Clayton, 2020). However, there was a gap on the perspectives of vo-tech high school graduates on their source of motivation to select a vo-tech program. While practical, industry-valued skills were viewed as essential to increasing employability, additional skills and character traits – skills such as communication, interpersonal relationships, eagerness to learn, problem solving, flexibility, teamwork, and adaptability – were regarded as equally important, and were developed at vocational training institutions (Briede & Drelinga, 2020; Burgaz, 2008; Calero López & Rodríguez-López, 2020; Harris & Clayton, 2020). The study findings suggested that vo-tech high school principals, teachers, and employers expected vo-tech graduates to acquire specific skills in order to gain, sustain, and advance in their employment, thus increasing their employability (Calero López & Rodríguez-López, 2020). Scholars also attributed the diverse student populations at vo-tech high schools as another reason that

graduates have increased employability after graduation (Calero López & Rodríguez-López, 2020; Dougherty et al., 2019; Harris & Clayton, 2020; Turner, 2016). Additionally, The State of New Jersey - Department of Labor and Workforce Development (2022) credited the diverse student populations at county-run vo-tech high schools for teaching students how to build cultural competencies, broaden their perspectives, and learn skills to foster an inclusive workplace – traits that promote graduates’ employability.

However, while the studies presented an extensive list of competencies acquired at vo-tech high schools that increase graduates’ employability, it was notable that other competencies such as decision-making, critical thinking, and creativity while working under stressful conditions, were not discussed in the literature reviewed. Additionally, as suggested by Dougherty et al. (2019), in addition to other stakeholders, it is critical that researchers also explore the views of vo-tech high school graduates. Vo-tech high school graduates’ perceptions are considered central to determining the impact that vocational education has on graduates’ employability (Dougherty et al., 2019).

The Economic Value – Lowers Unemployment

In the increasing global community, the youth population (age 18 – 24 years) accounts for 16% of the global population (1.2 billion youths), and by the year 2030 it is projected to grow to nearly 1.3 billion (United Nations, 2022). There is a simultaneous increase in unemployment among the youths as the youth population increases (United Nations, 2022). The International Labor Organization estimated that due to the increased in the number of youths and the scarcity of their skills, youth unemployment is projected to be nearly three times greater than adult unemployment (International Labor Organization, 2012). Youth unemployment is detrimental to the global and local economies since young people make up a sizable portion of the working-age

population. Therefore, to protect or enhance future economic growth, youth unemployment deserves urgent attention (Benifei, 2017). The result is a renewed urgency by local and global governments to take all possible measures to restore the faith the local and global economies (United Nations, 2022).

Due to prior studies, scholars, economists, and politicians have widely acknowledged that vocational education is critical to addressing youth unemployment and boosting the economy (Aw, 2019; Dougherty et al., 2019; Harris & Clayton, 2020; Krafft, 2018). Vocational education and technical training programs are geared towards skills acquisition to enhance employability and promote a smooth transition of school-to-work which has traditionally been lacking due to lagging skills that are essential to employment (UNEVO-UNESCO International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, 2013). To avoid employability frustrations brought about by a mismatch between skills and work, researchers suggested that one way to address the youth unemployment crisis is to create programs that afford students with basic employment skills and practical industry credentials needed to confidently acquire sustainable jobs (Aw, 2019; Dougherty et al., 2019; Harris & Clayton, 2020; Krafft, 2018; Li & Seeberg, 2022; Nofiantoro & Affandi, 2018; Ozer, 2022). Vocational education and training programs are vital to equipping young people with the appropriate skills to meet the labor market demands and subsequently reduce unemployment (Aw, 2019; Dougherty et al., 2019; Harris & Clayton, 2020; Krafft, 2018; Li & Seeberg, 2022; Nofiantoro & Affandi, 2018; Ozer, 2022). Vo-tech high schools are the perfect blend of rigorous academic courses, CTE courses, and practical industry-related apprentices and skills to create a sustainable school-to-career pipeline which strengthens the economy (Calero López & Rodríguez-López, 2020; Krafft, 2018; Li & Seeberg, 2022; Nofiantoro & Affandi, 2018).

There is an extensive discussion in the literature on how vocational education and training can reduce the economic threat that unemployment presents. Views of practitioners, employers, and policymakers were discussed, however, the studies reviewed failed to address vo-tech graduates' perceptions on how they perceive that vocational education lowers unemployment. Consequently, the study explored this gap in the literature and collected graduates' perspectives based on their lived experiences in a vo-tech high school.

Contributes to Post-Secondary Success

The traditional benchmark to measure students' post-secondary success included performance on standardized tests, aptitude, and academic abilities (Moss, 2017). Although these factors are important to forecast students' future levels of achievements, researchers cite other non-cognitive traits that predict the ability of students to seamlessly transition from high school to their post-secondary plans (Briede & Drelinga, 2020; Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020). Post-secondary success is defined as one's path after high school (whether it is educational or career path) that brings monetary and/or emotional satisfaction as a result of that plan or pathway (Krafft, 2018; MIT Open Learning; Nofiantoro & Affandi, 2018). Whether it is education or career beyond high school, studies indicated that graduates need essential basic skills to reach their threshold of post-secondary satisfaction (Burgaz, 2008; Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020). In addition to the academic and non-cognitive skills, high school graduates are more likely to succeed in their post-secondary plans if they possess additional industry-related skills and credentials or vocational readiness that are aligned to their future plans (Dougherty et al., 2019; Kreisman & Stange, 2019; Ozer, 2022). Additionally, scholars such as Dougherty et al. (2019) and Turner (2016) explained that not only do vocational high school teachers transfer industry-valued skills to vo-tech high school students, but they also transfer

effective interpersonal skills to be successful in a vocational industry once they graduate. Turner (2016) further explained that vo-tech high schools represent a microcosm of the various industries and the diverse student population at vo-tech high schools (as a result of the varied programs offered) allow students to form relationships with different peers and learn cultural competence to be successful in their industries upon their graduation, thus contributing to their post-secondary success.

Vocational education uses specific labor market preparatory courses to prepare students with the required skills to enter a particular occupational field after high school (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Webb, 2022). In an effort to promote vocational and training programs among the youth, the United States federal government provide vo-tech high schools with monetary incentives, such as the Perkins Grant, to increase students' access to high quality CTE programs, expand their vocational programs to offer a wider diversity of occupational programs to meet the state's labor market demands, increase the post-secondary workforce, and improve economic development (The State of New Jersey - Department of Education, 2020).

Studies indicated that students who attended vocational high schools are more likely to get a higher paying job immediately after graduating from high school (Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020; Dougherty et al., 2019). Consequently, an increasing number of students desire to attend vocational high schools, creating a high demand for vo-tech high schools in local communities (Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019). While the literature reviewed discussed the post-secondary benefits of vocational education, notable limitations included how local communities are addressing the rapid decline in the availability of vocational programs, and the perceptions of vo-tech high school graduates on whether their post-secondary success is as a

result of their enrollment in a vo-tech high school (Briede & Drelinga, 2020; Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020; Dougherty et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The literature review indicated that there is extensive research on the value and benefits of vocational education and these advantages can be categorized into four main themes – creates skilled workers, increase employability, lowers unemployment, and contributes to post-secondary success. The studies utilized various methodologies to explore the advantages of vocational education and provided sufficient justifications and evidence to support the findings. Some of the research reviewed included bibliometric studies which span over 10 years to provide insight and prior research on the topic of study – vocational education. Additional studies reviewed examined the perspectives of school administrators, teachers, employers, and students who are currently enrolled in vocational schools. The findings of these studies indicated the need to improve students' skills in order to meet the labor demands and promote their post-secondary success (Burgaz, 2008; Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020; Dougherty et al., 2019).

Over the last few years, studies in the field of vocational education, touted the gains that both students and local economies will reap with expansions of vocational education and training programs (Harris & Clayton, 2020; Li & Seeberg, 2022; Nofiantoro & Affandi, 2018; Ozer, 2022). This resurgence of vocational education and the urgency for local governments to invest in the expansion of such programs, have reversed the rhetoric that vocational education is primarily for students who are deemed not college ready (Lambert, n.d.; Zamir, 2022). The result is a heightened interest in vocational programs causing limited availability of these institutions – an issue of low supply and high demand (Kreisman & Stange, 2019). However, prior studies failed to address this supply and demand issue and even more importantly, failed to account for

the perceptions of graduates who have lived experiences of vocational education, to determine whether the benefits of vocational education outlined in the studies are aligned to their individual experiences and their thoughts on how to address the problem of limited enrollment of vo-tech high school (Dougherty et al., 2019). This gap in the literature fueled this study.

Ethical Assurances

As required by National University's rules and guidelines when conducting research involving human subjects, this study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to recruiting participants and collecting data. Once the IRB approval was provided, recruitment of study participants occurred via the email distribution of a flyer (Appendix A). Founded on the principle of respect for persons of the Belmont Report, each study participant provided their consent to participate in the study (Appendix B) prior to data collection. The informed consent document explained the study's intended purpose, procedures, prospects, and how I intended to protect the security and privacy of study participants, thus affording prospective participants with the opportunity to make an informed decision without undue influence (Sanchini et al., 2014). The consent letter was emailed to prospective participants and the data collection for the study occurred via online video calls. All consent documents and study information were presented in simple language that could be understood by prospective participants.

In the consent letter, participants were informed that the interviews will be recorded virtually. Participants also provided written consent to participate in the study. Similarly, participants were informed in the consent letter that there are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. Participants were advised that at any time during the research, they were free to skip any question that they do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or withdraw

their participation. In compliance with conditions established by the IRB of National University, participants' privacy and confidentiality were achieved by using pseudonyms for the vo-tech high school and study participants.

Since this study did not require the collection of participants' identifying information, participants' confidentiality was achieved via anonymity. Anonymity was attained by using pseudonyms to refer to participants. Additional confidentiality was accomplished by storing data collected in an encrypted file on a password protected personal computer that was located in my private residence. As per the recruitment flyer (Appendix A), participants received a \$25 Amazon gift card as an appreciation for their contribution to the study.

This study qualitative research method was used primarily to gain deeper understanding of individuals' experiences of vo-tech high school; therefore, I was the *data collection instrument* and directly interact with participants through interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). I was charged with the task of creating a safe conversational environment that lends participants the chance to candidly share their lived experiences throughout the research process (Pezall et al., 2012). Central to a qualitative study, it is recommended that the researcher establishes trust with the readership (Stahl & King, 2020). Therefore, in this study I created a robust eligibility criteria for recruiting participants and employed a sampling method that allowed participants to articulate their experiences and significantly contribute to the study (Cope, 2014). Additionally, I ensured transparency throughout the research process.

Although I may have a specific stance on the enrollment uptrends of county-run vo-tech high schools based on personal and professional experiences with the problem, it was critical that inherent biases are minimized, although there may be an evolution in the positionality throughout

the data collection and analysis process. Since qualitative researchers are often criticized for the subjective nature of their methodology, it was essential for me to be transparent with readers on aspects of personal biases, preconceptions, and assumptions. In this study, I employed participant-checking to ensure that the study represents participants' intended meaning, and that the analysis was not influenced by personal biases – thus establishing objectivity (Byrne, 2017; Holmes, 2020). Thereby, I was accountable to the readers, provided clarity and transparency to the research process, and supported the arguments to seek objectivity of the research (Holmes, 2020).

Summary

Recent data has showed an enrollment uptrend at the county-run vo-tech high schools in New Jersey, which has resulted in the missed opportunity for students to pursue their career aspirations in high school due to limited enrollment opportunities at these specialized high schools (New Jersey Department of Education, n. d.; Oglesby, 2019). While there is extensive prior research on the value and benefits of vocational education, the literature reviewed indicated a failure to address the supply and demand issue of vo-tech high schools, and even more importantly, a failure to account for the perceptions of graduates who have lived experiences of vocational education, and to determine whether the benefits of vocational education outlined in the studies are aligned to their personal experiences (Dougherty et al., 2019).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of CXV graduates regarding their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at CXV and how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased at CXV. This was achieved by conducting semi-structured recorded online interviews with a purposive sampling of 11 students who graduated from CXV. A qualitative descriptive study

afforded me with the opportunity to more closely examine CXV graduates' perceptions of the driving forces behind the enrollment uptrends of vocational-technical education based on Steuart's (1796) conceptual framework of the law of supply and demand, and ways to increase enrollment opportunities at CXV.

Research questions included three main questions with follow-up questions guided by participants responses and their lived experiences. Additionally, through transparency throughout the research process, I established trustworthiness and employed procedures and practices to ensure a robust study. The integrity of study was established through reflexivity, when I candidly communicated personal biases, preconceptions, and assumptions about the topic. Moreover, as the study evolved, I was aware that reflexivity can inform my positionality and employed practices, such as participant-checking, to attain objectivity in the study. I made every attempt to maintain the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the study.

Section 2: Methodology and Design

In New Jersey, the increasing demand for technical skilled workers surpasses the availabilities of vo-tech high schools, resulting in the state's inability to produce entry-level technical skilled workers to satisfy the growing technical industries (Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019; Jacob, 2017; Lambert, n. d.; Webb, 2022). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of CXV graduates regarding their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at CXV and how they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased at CXV. This qualitative phenomenological study further provided an exploration of the source of motivation for CXV's graduates to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high schools, such as CXV.

This section will focus on the methodology, design, and the justifications for the appropriateness of the selections. The selected methodology and design examined the problem of limited enrollment opportunities in county-run vo-tech high schools in New Jersey, which according to Burney (2022) and Gonser (2019), cause prospective students the missed opportunity to pursue their career pathway in high school due to the increased number of students desiring to enroll in these schools. By using the research problem, purpose, and research questions as the background for the research, an explanation of the sample population or study participants, instrumentation, and the methods of data collection and analysis is presented in this section. The section will conclude with a discussion of the study assumptions, limitations, and delimitations that potentially influenced the study.

Design and Method

Research methodologies include several techniques with the objective of determining a solution for the problem or to understand a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The

methodology used in this study was qualitative. Qualitative research is defined as an iterative process of inquiry that provides greater insight into a phenomenon by collecting non-numerical data from individuals in their natural setting, based on their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative methodology is most appropriate when the researcher's goal is to explore participants' perceptions, opinions, and experiences of a concept (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, the data collected was non-numerical and was gathered via conversational methods with participants. Based on the research questions and purpose, I aimed to gather participants' sources of motivation to enroll in a vo-tech high school and based on their lived experiences, how they perceived enrollment opportunities at CXV can be improved. As a result, a qualitative methodology is most suited to explore the research questions and is more aligned with a conversational, non-numerical data collection methodology. On the contrary, quantitative methodology entails collecting and analyzing numerical data for statistical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Salkind, 2010). This study focused on gathering narrative data from participants' lived experiences and their perceptions using one-to-one in-depth interviews rather than gathering numerical data. Since the study was geared towards exploring participants' lived experiences and perceptions rather than analyzing numerical data, a quantitative methodology was not appropriate for this study.

A phenomenological research design is most aligned with the purpose of the study. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), phenomenological research designs allow researchers to gain insight on a specific phenomenon based on participants' lived experiences through direct interaction with the participants. Since the study examined the lived experiences of CXV graduates with regard to their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at CXV, the participants' source of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school, and

ways to improve enrollment opportunities at CXV based on their lived experiences, a phenomenological research design was most appropriate. Using the descriptive nature of a phenomenological design, I captured the authentic description of a phenomenon based on participants' lived experiences (Qutoshi, 2018). The study entailed the collection of textual data on CXV graduates' experiences; therefore, a phenomenological design was most appropriate to explore participants' vo-tech high school experience.

Although there are different research designs suited for qualitative studies, it is essential that the researcher selects a design that is best suited to meet the purpose of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2013). For example, scholars who utilize historical research designs, collect and evaluate data from past events or years, to understand current trends and help anticipate future events (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In this study, it would be challenging to gather information from participants over multiple previous years, thus rendering a historical design as unfeasible. Another research design that would be impractical for this study is grounded theory. Researchers who employ grounded theory designs investigate procedures, by formulating and testing data, in order to develop a theory (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In this study, I did not investigate procedures of vo-tech high schools, nor did I test data; thus, a grounded theory design was not applicable.

Characteristic of qualitative methodology, I was the key instrument to collect pertinent data (Booker-Zorigan & Lloyd, 2021). I collected data through one-to-one interviews with the participants on Zoom. By organizing and coding the narrative data, I identified codes, patterns, categories, and themes. Then the themes were interpreted to determine the study outcomes. In my role as the qualitative researcher, I conducted validity checks by sharing the narrative data and the interpretation (the codes and patterns) with participants via email to ensure that their intended meanings were accurately represented (Bradley-Levine, 2015). I incorporated

participants' feedback and revised the analysis and findings. Then finally, I documented the findings in a succinct yet detailed report.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), it is imperative that qualitative researchers who adopt a phenomenological design prudently consider their personal biases that may influence data analysis. Byrne (2017) referred to qualitative researchers' self-awareness of personal biases that could influence aspects of their research process, such as reflexivity. Reflexivity was achieved in this study via participant checking, which ensured that the study accurately represented participants' intended meaning of their words, and that my personal biases did not influence the findings, thus ensuring objectivity and trustworthiness in the study (Byrne, 2017; Holmes, 2020). Since the validity of qualitative phenomenological research was aligned to the authentic presentation of participants' lived experiences, vital to the relevance of the research among experts in the field, was ensuring trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Due to the inherent subjective nature of qualitative studies, in order to construct a robust study, I followed specific protocols and procedures to limit my personal biases (Stahl & King, 2020). I was candidly forthcoming with my positionality through the journalling process, and intentionally avoided personal beliefs, emotions, prior assumptions, and interests that would adversely affect the study outcomes.

Population and Sample

The study population was CXV graduates who were selected using a purposive sampling technique and specific eligibility criteria. Purposive sampling relies on the researchers' expertise to select participants from the sampling frame that meet the purpose of the study (McCombes, 2022). Since the study explored participants' lived experiences of CXV graduates with regard to their motivation to enroll at the county-run vo-tech high school in County X and their perceived

ways to increase enrollment opportunities at CXV, a purposive sampling method was utilized with clearly delineated eligibility criteria. The eligibility criteria were:

1. Participants must be at least 18 years and older.
2. Participants graduated from County X Vocational High School (CXV).
3. Participants attended all 4 years of high school (grades 9-12) at CXV.
4. Participants were enrolled in the same vocational program for the 4 years they attended CXV.

As a non-random sampling method, purposive sampling is best fitted when the researcher seeks in-depth perspectives from a small number of participants or sample size (McCombes, 2022). Given that this study explored CXV graduates' perceptions based on their lived experiences, purposive sampling was most aligned to the phenomenological design of the qualitative study. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to gather narrative data with a small population size to get in-depth information from the participants which will more likely lead to more precise research outcomes (Booker-Zorigan & Lloyd, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Since I gathered data from a specific group of participants (CXV graduates), the sampling procedure was purposeful and non-random, thus the selected sampling method – purposive sampling. The primary goal of purposive sampling is to identify individuals who are best suited to answer the research questions within a time limit that is cost-effective (Booker-Zorigan & Lloyd, 2021). Hence, for the purposes of a study that is limited by time and resources, such as this dissertation study, predefined criteria requirements that must be met by the participants, coupled with the targeted CXV graduates were most appropriate given the purpose, design, and methodology. The study population consisted of participants who attended CXV but varied in characteristics, such as their graduation year, their individualized experiences, and their program

of study. Therefore, the population size included individuals who graduated from CXV, who studied one of the different vo-tech programs offered at CXV. Thus, meeting the phenomenology design and purposive sampling criteria.

The sampling frame, which was a subset of the population that was most suitable for research based on cost, convenience, and time (McCombes, 2022), consisted of CXV graduates from the different vocational programs offered at CXV. The sample ensured varied participants' perspectives and guaranteed that the objectives were met in a timely and cost-effective manner – I used a sample size of 11 participants because data saturation is achieved (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants for the study were recruited by sending a flyer via email to CXV graduates. The flyer (Appendix A) contained information about the study, the eligibility criteria, activities that participants were required to complete, the compensation for their participation, and I requested that graduates indicate whether they were willing to participate by calling, texting, or emailing me.

Materials/Instrumentation

According to Patton (2015), interviews are the primary mode of data collection for qualitative phenomenology studies. Interviews which comprise of open-ended questions, allow the researcher to access in-depth responses from participants about their knowledge, perceptions, opinions, and feelings of a phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Data collection for this study consisted of one-to-one interviews with participants. Research shows that the validity of a qualitative phenomenology study increases when data is gathered directly from participants about their lived experiences of the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Since hearing from participants via interviews is central to qualitative research and data collection (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019;

Castillo-Montoya, 2016; McGrath et al., 2019), semi-structured questions were the interview protocol for this study.

To ensure further reliability and validity of the data gathered, an interview protocol framework was utilized to develop semi-structured interview questions. I conducted a field test to ensure that the interview questions were aligned to the research questions. I developed an alignment chart to ensure that the open-ended interview questions were aligned to the research questions. One column of the chart included the research questions and the key concepts and words for each research question were identified. The second column of the chart consisted of the created semi-structured, open-ended questions that addressed the key concepts in the corresponding research question.

I developed a script that was read to participants before and after the interviews. The purpose of the script was to ensure that all the interviews were conducted using the same words for each participant, thus ensuring consistency in the data collection process. The script included a restatement of the purpose statement, my role as the researcher, the affirmation of participants' informed consent, and an explanation of the interview process and limits (Collins, 2015; Jacob & Furgerson, 2015).

Field Test

The field test was conducted prior to the data collection process. During the field test, I piloted the interview protocol using three individuals who have worked in a vo-tech high school for at least three school years and hold at least a master's degree. After testing the interview protocol, I solicited feedback from the field test participants on the clarity, alignment, limitations, and other areas where modifications were necessary. The feedback was then used to update and revise the instrument.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to recruiting participants for the study, I requested approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of National University to ensure that the rights and welfare of the participants are protected during the study through ethical and compliance regulations (Rankin, 2018). There was no participant recruitment or initiation of the study until IRB approval was granted. Additionally, I inquired whether CXV had an IRB approval process to request approval before conducting the research. CXV does not have an Institutional Review Board, therefore no approval was required. I created a recruitment flyer (Appendix A) to solicit interested participants for the study. The recruitment flyer was submitted to the National University IRB and CXV for approval. The process whereby approval from the superintendent is requested, included scheduling a meeting with the superintendent and other district administrators to discuss the overview, purpose, and significance of the study. During the meeting, I shared the recruitment flyer with the administrators and explained the sampling method.

Once IRB authorization is granted from National University, the IRB approved recruitment flyer was posted on CXV's social media outlets, to launch the study and recruit participants. The recruitment flyer provided an overview and purpose of the study, list the eligibility criteria of the study, expectations of activities for participants, compensation for participants, and a QR code which interested participants could use to indicate their interest in the study.

After prospective participants responded to the recruitment flyer, I contacted them to complete the pre-screening questionnaire (Appendix F). Based on the results from the questionnaire, study participants were selected via a non-random, purposive sampling method guided by the eligibility criteria. The eligibility criteria stated that participants who were willing

to contribute their lived experiences to the study, must be 18 years old and older, attended all four years of high school at CXV enrolled in the same vo-tech program, and graduated from CXV. I informed selected graduates via email, and they were encouraged to ask any questions regarding their participation in the study. At that time, if participants wished to decline their involvement in the study, I ceased further contact. However, if participants wished to continue with the study, they were emailed the consent letter (Appendix B), and I requested a virtual meeting to answer any additional questions about the study. During that first meeting, participants were provided with more details about the study, potential risks, benefits associated with the study, and the steps that I will take to protect their privacy and security of the data collected during the study. I also informed participants that the one-to-one online interviews will be conducted via Zoom and will be recorded.

Participants were reminded that their participation is voluntary and that they were free to discontinue the study at any time without any penalty. At the end of the initial virtual meeting, if participants wished to continue with their involvement, they were directed to sign the consent form and return it to me via email. Then a one-to-one interview was scheduled on Zoom at a date and time that was convenient to the participant.

I engaged participants in one-to-one online recorded Zoom interviews to gather narrative data using the research questions to guide the discussions. The interviews did not exceed 30 minutes. Following the interview, I transcribed the interview recordings and to ensure data accuracy, I conducted member checking by emailing a copy of the interview transcript to participants for their review. Member checking occurs when qualitative researchers share the data with participants to solicit their feedback and ensure that their words and comments are accurately represented, thus increasing the credibility of the study (Birt et al., 2016).

In order to ensure that the study results were sound, it was necessary that participants willingly reported their authentic and candid experiences about their attendance at CXV. The assumption was that participants' honest responses were not motivated by a perceived social or political desirable agenda, rather their answers were based solely on their personal lived experiences of attending CXV. The open-ended questions used during the data collection process aimed to promote unbiased responses, ensure that participants' responses were their true perceptions of CXV, and not purposely aligned to the perceptions of society (Booker-Zorigan & Lloyd, 2021).

Once the participants verified the interview transcripts, I began the data analysis process. Qualitative data analysis encompasses interpreting textual data to derive patterns and themes to inform the research questions (Byrne, 2017). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), systematic qualitative data analysis is critical to ascertain reliable and valuable findings. In this qualitative phenomenological study, the data analysis method that I used was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA afforded me with the opportunity to explore in more detail the lived experiences of the participants (Alase, 2016). As noted by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), researchers who use IPA as their data analysis method, seek to examine how multiple participants who experience similar events, tell their stories without distortions, and attempt to understand their experience. For my data analysis, encompass in IPA, was in-vivo coding followed by interpretation using written thick descriptions to explain and present findings. In-vivo coding uses participants' own words to create codes when analyzing the data (Byrne, 2017). Therefore, prior to the data analysis process, I emailed copies of the transcribed interviews to the participants to ensure validity checks and member checking.

During the coding process, I followed a series of steps to identify categories, themes, patterns, and connections by systematically categorizing the narrative data from the interviews (Byrne, 2017). First, I read the transcripts of the interview responses, searching for words and phrases that were used by multiple participants to identify common themes. The goal of this process was to chunk participants' responses to reduce the sentences in the transcript. Then I re-read the transcripts again two more times to further group repeated words or phrases in participants' responses into fewer words or phrases. After three readings of the transcripts, using a highlighter, I identified common themes and patterns that captured the core essence of the participants' responses. This phase of the coding process according to Graneheim and Lundman (2004) is phenomenological reduction – words or phrases that relate to the same core essence of the participants' lived experiences or the 'meaning unit'. In the final stage of the in-vivo coding, I looked for connections for the themes identified. During the category stage, I meticulously group the themes into one or two words without diminishing or misrepresenting the central meaning of the participants' lived experiences (Alase, 2016).

While coding is essential for effective qualitative data analysis, it is not synonymous with analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2015). However, multiple rounds of coding were the steps that preceded the analysis. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), once coding is completed, qualitative researchers should first describe their individual experiences with the phenomenon being studied, before attempting to interpret the categories, themes, and patterns. By describing my firsthand experiences with vo-tech high schools, I *bracketed* myself away from the lived experiences of the participants as indicated in their responses and avoided injecting my subjective experiences into the participants' responses. Additionally, by examining the themes and categories, I developed a list of significant statements as a foundation of understanding the

participants' perceptions of the reasons for the limited enrollment opportunities in county-run vocational high schools in New Jersey, and how they perceive the problem can be addressed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In the next phase of the IPA process, using verbatim examples from participants, I wrote a textual description of the participants' experiences. According to Smith et al. (2009), the textual description explains *what* the participants experienced. In the next phase of writing thick descriptions, using the identified categories from the interview transcripts, I described the setting and context of *how* the participants experienced their enrollment at CXV in the structural description. Then by incorporating the textual and structural descriptions, I wrote the composite description followed by a mini statement to outline the findings of the phenomenological study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the mini statement, I explained the underlying structure of the participants' perceptions of the reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at CXV and how they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased at CXV.

Assumptions

All studies have inherent flaws which must be accounted for by researchers (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Recognizing, accurately identifying, and explaining these shortcomings in a study differentiates an authentic, expert researcher from a mediocre, novice researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Wargo, 2015). Making feasible assumptions for studies is one way that expert researchers are differentiated from novice scholars. Assumptions are defined as accepted truths by the researcher and readers that are specific to the study, population, research design, data collection and analysis methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Wargo, 2015). Typical of a constructivist worldview, there were some general assumptions that could be made for this qualitative study. First, participants constructed meanings and views based on their experiences

and how they interpret those experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To increase the validity and credibility of this qualitative research, there was an assumption that during the interviews, participants answered with uncoerced truthfulness. It was assumed that participants presented their views and perceptions of vo-tech high schools based on their experiences when they attended CXV and how they interpreted those experiences. By using open-ended questions, the qualitative researcher sought to understand the perspective of the participants based on their honest interpretation of their experiences of attending CXV which were not motivated by a perceived social or political desirable agenda, but rather their answers were based solely on their personal lived experiences of attending CXV.

A second assumption was that the research was based on an inductive form of logic. As the epitome of qualitative studies, researchers use inductive reasoning to gather information from the narrative data collected from participants; they do not undertake a study to find specific outcomes that are predetermined (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this qualitative study, it was assumed that I used inductive reasoning to determine the outcomes of the study. By genuinely learning from the lived experiences of participants, the qualitative researcher identified findings guided by the research questions, rather than using predetermined outcomes to guide the study findings. However, Maxwell (1996) and Waters (2001) warned about the threats of researchers' bias when using inductive reasoning to identify trends and patterns in the data. Therefore, the assumption was that I will be cognizant that, whether consciously or unconsciously, I will not focus on data that supports pre-existing personal beliefs or perceptions to avoid skewing the outcomes.

Limitations

Limitations of studies are defined as potential weaknesses that are beyond the control of the researcher; these restrictions cannot be reasonably avoided and can affect the study findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; PhDStudent, n.d.). The qualitative study had potential limitations which I explored to ensure that conclusions were not compromised. First, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students in the Class of 2021 experienced two years of remote instruction and it is unclear how this non-traditional form of instruction affected participants' perceptions of their experiences at CXV. When recruiting participants, it was possible that some participants experienced remote instruction due to the recent pandemic and they were not present in the building for the entire duration of their enrollment at CXV. This experience could affect how these participants view and interpret their experience at CXV and is a limitation to the study. One way to mitigate this limitation was by asking participants to disclose the years they attended CXV. This allowed me to categorize responses from participants who experienced remote instruction, to determine whether there were any differences with participants who experienced four years of instruction in the school building at CXV.

Additionally, while the goal was to have a sample that encompasses representatives from varied CTE programs offered at CXV, it was not certain that I would get volunteers from the different programs. If the recruited participants did not represent graduates from diverse programs offered at CXV, there was a possibility that the data collected would fail to represent the graduates from varied programs. This limitation, while could not be reasonably avoided, could affect the validity of the study. In an effort to mitigate this limitation, as one of the background questions during the one-to-one interview, I asked participants to share the name of the program studied while attending CXV. Such information allowed me to accurately group

participants based on their program of study and identify common trends or themes characteristic to different programs, during the analysis process.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the boundaries set by the researcher that identifies the study's scope that makes it possible to complete the research within a reasonable time and are strongly linked to the research questions (PhDStudent, n.d.). In this study there was geographical delimitation. Geographical delimitation refers to the physical location where the data will be conducted (Research Method, 2023). Data collection in the study was limited to graduates of CXV rather than gathering data from various vo-tech high schools in multiple localities. While the study afforded me the ease and accessibility of data collection from one school, it excluded the perceptions of graduates from other localities or school districts and may have limited the findings as it relates to the problem statement.

Furthermore, my conscious decision to include only CXV graduates as the participants of the study was also a delimitation. This is known as population delimitation because it ensures that my only focus in the study was graduates of CXV as participants and excluded other CXV stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, and parents. According to Research Method (2023), population delimitation refers to the specific group that was the focus of the study. Population delimitation is critical to ensure that the targeted group (study participants) is aligned to the research questions which can improve the accuracy of the findings (Creswell and Creswell (2018).

An additional delimitation of this study was my reliance on interviews as the method of data collection. The use of specific types of data in a study is referred to as data delimitation (Research Method, 2023). Data delimitation in the study was important because it ensured that I

collected data from reliable and valid data sources that were relevant to the research questions to increase the credibility of the study. According to Busetto and Gumbinger (2020), it was important that the selected methods of data collection were aligned to the information that the research questions aimed to collect and promote validity of the study.

The specific aspect that was the focus in this study was the source of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school and the participants' perceived reasons for the popularity of vo-tech high schools. The specificity of the study is referred to as scope delimitation, as it allowed me to have a targeted focus for the study and ensured that the findings were relevant to the research questions (Research Method, 2023). The study only focused on the enrollment uptrends in vo-tech education, thus rendering a scope delimitation. By setting clear boundaries in the study, I concentrated on efforts and activities that were relevant to the research questions and the problem statement (Booker-Zorigan and Lloyd (2021).

Summary

Over the years, vo-tech high schools in New Jersey have not been able to satisfy the increasing demand for entry-level technical skilled workers in the state (Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019; Jacob, 2017; Lambert, n. d.; Webb, 2022). The 22 county-run vo-tech high schools continue to have an enormous surge in the number of yearly applicants to these top-tiered high schools (Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019). For example, County X Vocational high school (CXV) in 2022, received over 3000 applicants for the 420 available ninth grade seats (New Jersey Council of County Vocational–Technical Schools, 2023; New Jersey State Department of Education, n.d.). While previous studies explored the perceptions of school administrators, teachers, and employers on the value of vo-tech high schools, the literature highlights a gap where little is known on the reasons why students choose to attend a vo-tech high school over traditional non-

vo-tech high schools (Burgaz, 2008; Calero López & Rodríguez-López, 2020; Dougherty et al., 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of CXV graduates with regards to the source of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school and their perceived reasons for the popularity of vo-tech high schools.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), when the researcher's goal is to explore participants' opinions, perceptions, and lived experiences, a qualitative phenomenological methodology and design is optimal to collect non-numerical data to address the research problem and questions. Purposive sampling with specific eligibility criteria was used to identify individuals who were best suited to answer the research questions within a time that was cost-effective (Booker-Zorigan & Lloyd, 2021). Therefore, participants were graduates from different vo-tech programs offered at CXV. Once data saturation was achieved, a sample size of 11 participants ensured that the study objectives were met in a timely manner (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). After ensuring that all necessary authorizations and approvals were received from the National University IRB and the CXV superintendent, I created a recruitment flyer (Appendix A) to recruit participants.

Characteristic of a qualitative methodology, I was the key instrument to collect pertinent data using semi-structured questions for the interview protocol (Booker-Zorigan & Lloyd, 2021). To facilitate alignment of the interview questions with the research questions, I used an interview protocol framework to develop semi-structured interview questions. I piloted the draft interview protocol in a field test using individuals who have worked at vo-tech high schools for at least three school years and who hold at least a master's degree. Conducting the field test prior to the collection of data afforded me an opportunity to identify and address inconsistencies and

misunderstandings within the interview questions and to revise the interview instrument, thus increasing the robustness and validity of the study.

The data collection process consisted of one-to-one interviews. Additionally, I cautiously considered personal biases that may influence the data analysis process. Through various reflectivity practices, I ensured that the study accurately represented participants' intended meaning of their words collected during the data collection process (Byrne, 2017; Holmes, 2020). The preponderance of narrative, descriptive data that were collected from participants were used to evaluate the trustworthiness of the findings (Salkind, 2010). Through the process of journaling, and intentionally avoiding personal beliefs, emotions, prior assumptions, and interests that may adversely affect the study outcomes, I further established credibility by candidly presenting my positionality.

Using multiple rounds of in-vivo coding as the data analysis method, I identified patterns, themes, and commonalities and subsequently prepared a visual representation of the coding process to further accentuate trustworthiness of the study. Then the identified themes were interpreted to determine the study outcomes. Study findings were shared with participants to further enhance the credibility of the study.

I assumed that participants' responses during the data collection process were uncoerced, based on their experiences, and were not motivated by perceived social or political agendas. Additionally, rather than using predetermined study outcomes, the assumption was that I utilized inductive logic guided by the research questions during the data analysis process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 1996; Waters, 2001). A limitation of the study was some of the participants may have experienced remote instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic rather than the traditional four-year in-person instruction. The differences in the participants' lived

experiences could result in potential weaknesses that were beyond my control. A delimitation of the study was that data collection was limited to CXV graduates and excluded perceptions of graduates from other vo-tech high schools in other localities. Data delimitation was also evident, as my sole source of data collection was via one-to-one interviews. The use of purposive sampling with specific inclusion criteria in this qualitative phenomenological study, while best aligns to the research questions and the overall study, I carefully considered the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations that this study presented to ensure a robust study (Wargo, 2015).

In Section 3, I will provide a summary of the participants' demographics, and an overview of the findings based on the research questions. I will also explain the coding schema used in analyzing the narrative data to generate the categories and themes. To ensure objectivity and trustworthiness of the data, in Section 3, when explaining the thematic findings, I will include brief quote excerpts of the participants' experiences. I will also discuss the implications and recommendations of the study.

Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of County X Vocational (CXV) graduates with regard to their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at CXV and how they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased at CXV. Due to the increased number of students desiring to enroll in county-run vo-tech high schools in New Jersey, there are limited enrollment opportunities in these schools, according to Burney (2022) and Gonser (2019), causing prospective students the missed opportunity to pursue their career pathway in high school. Therefore, the problem addressed by this study is that there are limited enrollment opportunities for students to enroll in a county-run vocational-technical high school which is exacerbated each year because the number of vo-tech high school applicants continuously increases although the physical space in these sought-after high schools remain the same (Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019; Oglesby, 2019; The State of New Jersey – Department of Education, 2022).

An extensive review of the literature, revealed that prior studies in the field of vocational education, touted the gains that both students and local economies will reap with expansions of vocational education and training programs (Harris & Clayton, 2020; Li & Seeberg, 2022; Nofiantoro & Affandi, 2018; Ozer, 2022). These studies fueled the urgency for local governments to invest in the expansion of vo-tech high schools, and consequently reversed the rhetoric that vocational education is primarily for students who are deemed not college ready (Lambert, n.d.; Zamir, 2022). The result of this heightened interest is a problem of supply and demand – an increased demand for vo-tech high schools and limited enrollment opportunities for interested students (Kreisman & Stange, 2019). A review of prior studies also revealed that researchers failed to account for the perceptions of graduates who have lived experiences of

vocational education, and their perceptions on how to address the problem of limited enrollment opportunities at vo-tech high schools. Therefore, during this qualitative phenomenological study, narrative data was collected by conducting semi-structured one-to-one Zoom interviews with 11 graduates of CXV, where they shared their lived experiences of attending CXV, their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at CXV, and how they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased at CXV.

Section 3 consists of a succinct and organized descriptive summary of the participants' non-identifying demographic characteristics that were gathered during the study. Then using the research questions as the framework, I will present the overall study. The results salient to each research question is also discussed in this section. In addition, the coding scheme used during the analysis of the data to generate the themes is explained, then the findings and outcomes for each research question are presented. This section contains an objective analysis of the data gathered, free from my personal biases, interpretations, and speculations. A thorough discussion of how the criteria for trustworthiness of the data were established - credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability - will also be discussed in this section. This section also highlights a discussion of how the results are aligned or consistent with the literature reviewed. The section will conclude with a discussion of the limitations of the study, factors that may have influenced the interpretation of the results, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for future research.

While I was cautious to ensure that my personal biases and perceptions had limited effect on the interpretation of the data, one factor that could have influenced my interpretation of the results was a possible unintentional bias in the analysis of the narrative data. Among the 11 participants of the study, there were a few graduates who shared during the interview that they

currently work in different fields than the one they studied at CXV. The interview questions did not require participants to share their current field of work; however, some participants chose to share whether they continued a career in the field of study while they attended CXV. During the interviews, I marked my interview notes for the participants who did not continue in the same field that they studied at CXV, with an asterisk – as a self-reminder – since participants shared that information even though the questions did not require them to share their current field of work. Seven participants work in the same field that they studied at CXV, and four participants are in different fields than their program of study at CXV. Subconsciously, it was possible that during the interpretation of the data, I subconsciously focused more on the responses given by the participants who continued a career in the same field that they studied at CXV. This could have influenced my interpretation of the data, as I could have unintentionally paid closer attention to the asterisk responses during the coding process. Thus, this unconscious action could have likely favored the interpretation of the data from the participants who remained in their field, and likely less attention given to responses from participants who work in different fields. This unintended bias could have impacted the interpretation of the data.

Findings

During the study, 11 participants were interviewed, and they all met the following eligibility criteria, 1) must be at least 18 years old, 2) graduated from County X Vocational High School (CXV), 3) attended all four years of high school (grades 9-12) at CXV, and 4) was enrolled in the same vocational program for all the four years they attended CXV. There were nine female and two male participants, ranging from ages 18 to 40. They graduated from seven different programs at CXV. In order to preserve the anonymity of participants, an alias number was assigned to each, which was used throughout the analysis of the data.

Participant 001 is a 24-year-old female who was enrolled in the CXV Performing Arts-Drama department. She was a graduate of the class of 2018. Participant 001 has always been passionate about theatre and has been involved in performing arts since the age of seven. She attended Drew University where she pursued a degree in musical theatre.

Participant 002 is a 24-year-old female from the graduating class of 2018. While at CXV, she was enrolled in the Allied Health program because she has always been fascinated by the medical field and is passionate about helping others. Participant 002 is currently in her final year of nursing school and will be graduating in December 2024. During the interview, she expressed that attending CXV allowed her to meet her “forever friends.”

Participant 003 is a 32-year-old female who was enrolled in the Culinary and Pastry Arts program while at CXV. She graduated in 2010 and pursued a degree in culinary while in college. She is currently working as a chef. Participant 003 expressed that although it was her parents who urged her to attend CXV (because she did not want to leave her district friends and attend a county high school), looking back, it was the best decision because it laid the foundation for her now successful career as a chef.

Participant 004 graduated from CXV in 2019 and is 22 years old. During the interview, she expressed that it was difficult for her at the time (age 13) to decide on a vocational program because she was interested in culinary, cosmetology, and business. However, she decided to select the Business and Finance program while enrolled at CXV, because she had a greater interest in the hospitality business. Upon graduating from CXV, Participant 004 attended the University of South Carolina where she studied Fashion Management and Hospitality.

Participant 005 is a 29-year-old male who graduated from CXV in 2012. While at CXV, he was enrolled in the Culinary Arts program because of his strong passion for cooking that was

instilled in him from an early age, by cooking with his grandmother. During the interview, Participant 005 shared that he witnessed how beneficial CXV had been to his father's career who was enrolled in the welding program. Therefore, when he was thinking about his future culinary career, he expressed that CXV was a logical choice for him. After pursuing a degree in culinary and working as a chef, he now works for an organization that creates and awards scholarships to vocational-technical students to pursue higher education. Participant 005 views his current job as his mission to give back to his community by helping to invest in the younger generation.

Participant 006 is a 24-year-old female who graduated from CXV in 2018. While at CXV, she was enrolled in the Engineering program. Participant 006 shared that although she was interested in becoming a pilot or an interior designer, she decided to enroll in the engineering program because it would afford her the opportunity to work in the mechanical and possibly the electrical side of the aviation industry. Additionally, she shared that to fulfill her passion for interior design, architectural engineering would satisfy that drive. Therefore, the engineering program at CXV helped satisfy her multiple passions. However, while in college, she decided to focus on interior design and architecture rather than engineering.

Participant 007 is a 25-year-old female who graduated from CXV in 2016. She was enrolled in the Culinary Arts program at CXV. Participant 007 expressed that CXV not only provided her with a valuable foundation for culinary school, but it also helped to significantly curb some financial liabilities compared to her peers who attended a non vo-tech high school. She is currently working as a chef with minimal post-secondary tuition debt.

Participant 008 is a 40-year-old who graduated from CXV in 2001 from the Performing Arts-Dance program. She has been dancing since the age of two and has always excelled at dancing. Therefore, she expressed that CXV was the perfect high school match for her because

she would be able to have “fun” while in school and that school would not just be about learning math and science. Upon graduating from CXV, Participant 008 majored in dance education in college and is currently teaching dance at a vocational-technical high school. Participant 008 views her current employment as a mission to keep dance education relevant and show her students all the different career opportunities that are available with a degree in dance.

Participant 009 is a 22-year-old female who graduated in 2019 and was enrolled in the Allied Health program at CXV. She aspired to become a physical therapist, hence she selected the program of Allied Health. However, after experiencing a few health-related field trips, she quickly realized that a medical career did not align with her emotional capabilities. Subsequently, her guidance counselor recommended an independent study class as a teacher’s assistant in her senior year, and she realized that education was less emotionally burdening and more aligned with her personality than a career in the medical field. Participant 009 credited her experience at CXV to recognizing a potential “career mistake” before she was laden by expenses from a medical related college program.

Participant 010 is an 18-year-old Allied Health graduate of CXV from the class of 2023. She currently attends The College of New Jersey where she is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in biology. During the interview, Participant 010 shared that she had always been interested in the medical field and upon her college graduation, she hoped to matriculate in a medical school. She also shared that due to her participation in the collegiate high school program at CXV, where she took college courses while in high school, she will be graduating with her bachelor’s degree one year earlier than her peers.

Participant 011 is a 27-year-old male from the CXV graduating class of 2015. While at CXV, he was enrolled in the Information Technology (IT) program due to his interest in

computer programming and maintenance. In addition to participating in IT related clubs at CXV, he was also an active member of the robotics team. Participant 011 shared that attending CXV significantly prepared him with the skills necessary to excel in the IT field directly out of high school and that his peers envied the hands-on experience he gathered while at CXV. Table 1 contains more demographic data for each participant.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Participant number	Age	Years attended CXV	Program studied at CXV
*P001	24	2014-2018	Drama
*P002	24	2014-2018	Allied Health
*P003	32	2006 to 2010	Culinary Arts
P004	22	2015-2019	Business and Finance
P005	29	2008-2012	Culinary Arts
P006	24	2014-2018	Engineering
*P007	25	2012-2016	Culinary Arts
*P008	40	1997-2001	Dance
P009	22	2015-2019	Allied Health
*P010	18	2019-2023	Allied Health
*P011	27	2011-2015	Information Technology

Note. *Participants who work in the same field as the program studied at CXV.

According to Calero Lopez and Rodriguez-Lopez (2020) and Dougherty et al. (2019) the advantages and industry-valued skills that vocational technical education affords students have significantly promoted graduates' post-secondary success. These touted gains of vocational

education for students, the labor market, and local economies, led to the resurgence of vocational technical programs and reversing the historical belief that vo-tech high schools are primarily for students who are deemed not college ready (Harris & Clayton, 2020; Lambert, n.d.; Li & Seeberg, 2022; Nofiantoro & Affandi, 2018; Ozer, 2022; Zamir, 2022). In the state of New Jersey, this resulted in a substantial increase in the number of students desiring to enroll in one of the state's 21 county-run vocational technical high schools – an issue of low supply and high demand (Burgaz, 2008; Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019; Kreisman & Stange, 2019). Despite these findings from the literature reviewed, I did not find studies that focused on the perceptions of vo-tech high school graduates on addressing the problem of limited enrollment opportunities at vo-tech high school. Therefore, this study focused on the shared and lived experiences of vo-tech high school graduates' perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at CXV (a New Jersey county-run vo-tech high school) and how they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased at CXV.

The use of a qualitative study allowed for greater insight into participants' lived experiences and perceptions. Once the National University IRB approved the study, the initial recruitment flyer was posted on social media. Potential participants who responded completed a pre-interview questionnaire and attended an information meeting via a phone conference, to ensure that they met the study's eligibility criteria and were willing to be a study participant. Participants then provided their written, uncoerced consent to be a study participant. In order to collect authentic, narrative, descriptive data from participants, one-to-one interviews with me were conducted. The interview questions were based on the study's three research questions that were developed:

RQ1

Based on the lived experiences of attending and graduating from CXV, what were graduates' sources of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school?

RQ2

Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, what are their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment in the county-run vo-tech high schools?

RQ3

Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased or improved at CXV?

Additional semi-structured interview questions were created to gather more in-depth information for each of the research questions. Once the interviews were transcribed and member checking conducted by participants reviewing their interview transcripts, the data was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to determine categories and patterns which led to the findings. During the analysis process, the participants' responses were coded and separated to identify commonalities and patterns, as related to each research question. During the analysis of the narrative data obtained from the interviews, similar words, sentences, or ideas from the participants were grouped to form categories which later helped me identify the underlying meaning of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, when reviewing the data, if the frequency of a similar idea / response mentioned by participants was at least three times, that grouping of similar data was identified as a category. When recurring categories or overarching ideas were identified to have a frequency of at least five times mentioned in participants' responses to the interview questions, the overarching idea was identified as a theme. Therefore, without diminishing or misrepresenting the central meaning of the participants' lived

experiences, themes were identified for each research question (Appendix J – p.178-180). A total of ten themes were identified from the data based on the frequency mentioned during the one-to-one interviews of the participants, as shown in the codebooks in Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4. In this section, I will present the ten themes and how they are aligned and supported by existing research.

The first research question addressed the participants' source of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school. Four themes emerged from the data as the reoccurring source of motivation for vo-tech high schools were found to be: (1) the programs offered; (2) the post-high school preparation – career skills; (3) the hands-on, personalized learning; and (4) Different peer groups – social diversity. Regarding the second research question, which addressed participants' perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at CXV, the three reoccurring themes were: (1) career-focused, certifications or employment readiness; (2) hands-on learning – more time dedicated to programs; and (3) the programs offered. The third research question addressed how the participants perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased or improved at CXV. The three themes identified for the third research question were: (1) strategic scheduling; (2) physical expansion; and (3) creating summer and evening programs.

Trustworthiness of The Data

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research must establish the effectiveness of the researcher in presenting evidence that accurately reflects the descriptions and analysis of participants' lived experiences. Trustworthiness is defined as the degree of confidence in a study based on the data collected and the methods used to analyze and interpret the data to ensure a robust and quality study (Polit & Beck, 2014). Stahl and King (2020) more recently succinctly define the trustworthiness of research as the confidence in the findings of the

study afforded to readers by qualitative researchers. Since I was the primary instrument of data collection in this qualitative research, it was critical to establish trustworthiness. Therefore, confidence in the study was established via a transparent process for recruitment of participants, collection of data, coding, and analysis where each step was documented on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (Appendix K) and a Microsoft Word document (Appendix J).

First, using an Excel spreadsheet (Appendix K), I recorded the participant's responses to the pre-interview questionnaire. To ensure organization and further transparency, using the spreadsheet, I also kept track of my interactions with the participants throughout the data collection process, such as the date of their pre-interview phone conference, whether they provided consent to participate, the date of their one-to-one interview, and the date when their interview transcript was emailed to them for review. It was also important to ensure that all the participants were getting the same email communications from me to avoid any possible biases, therefore, I also recorded the email messages sent at each phase of the process (Appendix L). Once participants responded to the recruitment flyer, to ensure their eligibility, I emailed them a link to the pre-interview questionnaire and the next steps once their responses to the questionnaire were submitted (Appendix L). After I determined participants' eligibility for the study, I informed them via email and requested a phone or Zoom conference to discuss the specifics of the study and to answer their initial questions. Then consent letters were sent to the participants informing them of the purpose of the study, the activities associated with the study, specific details, such as the recording of the interviews, their compensation, how the results will be used, and most importantly, that they can skip any activity or stop their participation at any time. Using a prepared interview script (Appendix D) and interview questions (Appendix C), I conducted 1:1 zoom interviews with each participant which lasted between 30 – 40 minutes. I

avoided leading questions to ensure that participants freely shared their experiences and expressed their perceptions (Collins, 2015). Digital recordings of the interviews ensured that participants responses were captured accurately and were transcribed verbatim to avoid any misrepresentation of participants' comments. To further ensure any misrepresentation of participants' responses, member checking was employed whereby the transcribed interviews were emailed to participants and they were able to make changes to their responses (Birt et al., 2016). To effectively assess qualitative research for trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility

Credibility as a criterion for trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the consistency of the study findings with reality (Stahl & King, 2020). It suggests the extent of the readers' confidence in the data from the study. Cognizant that this qualitative study relied on narrative data from participants' interpretive judgements, experts caution that qualitative research findings are highly subjective, confirming the importance of establishing credibility to ensure a scholarly revered study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The truth value or credibility of qualitative research as explained by Guba (1981) is measured by the instruments utilized in the study and is attained from participants' lived experiences. Hence, my obligation as the researcher was to employ data collection and analysis methods that would not distort participants' words. To promote credibility in my study, I employed strategies such as peer reviews in the form of a field test, member checking, and audit trail – documenting research activities.

I conducted a field test where three individuals who have at least a master's degree and have worked in vocational-technical high schools for at least three years reviewed my interview protocol and questions vis-a-vis each research question. The goal of the field test was to ensure

clarity, alignment, limitations, and other areas where modifications would be necessary with the interview protocol as it relates to the research questions. The field test feedback was then used to update and revise the instrument. The field test served as a peer review which was valuable to evaluate the interview protocol from an objective perspective from uninvolved individuals, thus addressing biases and possible limitations. The field test which was completed before the data collection process, promoted the robustness of the interview protocol and consequently increased my study's credibility. Some of the feedback received from the field test included rephrasing the questions so that they did not allude to a predetermined answer but instead the questions were open ended and required participants to provide unsuggested responses. Another feedback received was that the language and vocabulary should be kept basic. One of the field tester's remarks was – "...you want to pretend that your participant's vocabulary is limited, so use very basic words in the questions." This feedback was welcomed and ultimately allowed for a more robust, unbiased interview protocol.

Member checking occurs when qualitative researchers share the interview transcript with participants and solicit their feedback to ensure that responses are accurately represented (Birt et al., 2016). Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed verbatim each digital recording of the interviews. I then emailed their interview transcript to the participant and requested that they review their responses and make corrections or changes as necessary before the data was analyzed. This was greatly beneficial as many participants returned their transcript with comments that clarified their responses and, at times, more succinct answers to the questions. This step ensured that participants' intended perceptions were accurately represented in the data thus increasing the credibility of the study.

Additionally, it was important that I documented all research activities of my study to establish trust and credibility with my readers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, I first created a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to track my interactions with the participants (Appendix K). Then, to ensure that all participants were receiving the same email correspondence from me, and to limit my personal biases, I documented my emails for each phase of the process and sent the same email to participants (Appendix L). Furthermore, once I began the data analysis process, I created a document to record charts for each phase of the analysis process (Appendix J). The charts clearly illustrated my analysis process which included: (1) identified initial codes, connections, categories, and common themes for each research questions, (2) grouped categories into one or two words without diminishing or misrepresenting the central meaning of the participants' lived experiences, to identify the three themes, and (3) developed a list of significant statements for each research questions using participants' words. By providing readers with a detailed trail of events and steps completed during the research, will increase their confidence levels in the findings as they understand my organization, mindset, and process, thus promoting the credibility of my research.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the researcher's ability to establish that the study findings are consistent with the participants' direct words or comments that were collected throughout the study (Stahl & King, 2020). According to Nowell et al. (2017), dependability also involves the transparency and description of the study's steps throughout the entire research process. This criterion is important to establish trustworthiness because it assures the reader that the study is comprehensive and complete, and they are not misguided by the findings. During the study, the

following strategies were used to promote the dependability of my study: description of the research methods and data analysis with peers.

As part of the final report of the study, a detailed description of the research methods employed during the study was included to establish dependability (Queens University, 2015). Throughout the final report, detailed accounts of each step of the study were included. Establishing familiarity with readers on the research method and process was critical to the trustworthiness of the study. To ensure transparency with readers, the method of recruiting and selecting participants, the interview process, and the detailed analysis process, were clearly outlined and documented. Including rich descriptions of participants' experiences and perceptions in the final report as retrieved from audio recordings of interviews, charts that tracked the interactions with participants and the analysis process, enhanced the dependability of the study. These details about the research methods enhanced the dependability of the research as readers became familiar with the process and were less likely to harbor mistrust in the study's findings.

Another strategy I used to promote dependability of my qualitative research was to collaborate with peers to complete the data analysis. To limit biases due to familiarity with vocational-technical high schools, I solicited the help of three individuals who have at least a master's degree but no experience working in a vo-tech high school environment. These individuals collaborated with me to analyze the raw data from the interviews in lieu of an analysis conducted solely by me (Queens University, 2015). Experts argue that such a strategy limits researcher bias as they are directly involved in the data collection process through their numerous interactions with participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is argued that readers are

more likely to trust the analysis of multiple experts than the sole researcher who also collected the data, thus promoting the credibility of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the neutrality of the research, where it is not influenced by the researchers' personal biases and assumptions (Stahl & King, 2020). Confirmability requires that researchers be aware of their preconceptions and adopt a self-critical attitude throughout the research. Ignoring this criterion results in a study laden with biases, lacking objectivity, and littered with distrust. During the study, I ensured that the data interpretation was not influenced by my beliefs, attitudes, or preferences, but rather, was clearly extracted from the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Byrne (2017) referred to qualitative researchers' self-awareness of personal biases that could influence aspects of their research process, as reflexivity. Since I am currently a vo-tech high school administrator, I utilized strategies of reflexivity throughout the study to avoid the influence of personal biases. The strategies that were used to promote confirmability were participant-directed interviews, forensic data analysis process, and aligning participants' responses to the study findings.

During the one-to-one interviews, I used semi-structured questions and allowed participants' responses to lead the direction of the in-depth conversations, followed by additional questions for clarification. According to Stahl and King (2020), a transparent method that illustrates the data analysis process, significantly increases a qualitative researchers' ability to assure readers of the neutrality and authenticity of the findings. Therefore, the detailed charts (Appendix J), which clearly documented the steps and timeline of the data analysis process provided readers with the opportunity to follow the progression of the data analysis. According to Frey (2018), the objectivity of the study was established by directly aligning participants'

responses to the findings. Therefore, direct quotes from participants were used in the findings to provide evidence that explicitly illustrated the alignment between the findings and data originating from participants. These strategies tremendously limit readers' perceptions of the influence of my biases and increased the trustworthiness of the study.

Transferability

According to Stahl and King (2020), transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the study can be applied to other contexts or settings. While participants in this study were CXV graduates, if the findings can be applied to other county vo-tech high schools in the state, then transferability would be successfully achieved. By including in the final report detailed descriptions on the participants, data collection, and analysis methods, I allowed other researchers to evaluate whether the study can be applied to similar situations or contexts (Frey, 2018). Such details, while cannot guarantee a seamless application to other situations, will likely increase the trustworthiness of the study. Since the study participants range from various vo-tech programs, the same data collection method can be used for similar studies with similar a population. Additionally, thick descriptions and assumptions central to the study were used in the final report which also enhanced the transferability of the study.

The study's final report provided readers with pertinent information about the participants, such as their age groups and their vo-tech program while enrolled at CXV. This information will equip future researchers with the knowledge needed to make informed decisions on whether the study can be applied to different situations, and consequently determine whether the study meets the transferability criterion (Frey, 2018). The final report provided a description of the study site (CXV) and the population used, ensuring that similar findings can be obtained when data is gathered from graduates from other county-run vo-tech high schools or in other

states, thus proving that the study can be applied to different areas and satisfied the transferability criterion (Stahl & King, 2020). The thick descriptions of the study site, participants, and the research process, included in the final report, also afford future researchers the ability to transfer this study to other settings and contexts. Moreover, I keenly presented the study's assumptions in the final report, where I outlined possible pitfalls and limitations of the study (Stahl & King, 2020). Researchers who wish to apply this study to a different situation can closely consider these assumptions and attempt to make improvements in their research to further reduce the identified limitations. Such practices yield a more robust and trustworthy study.

Research Question 1:

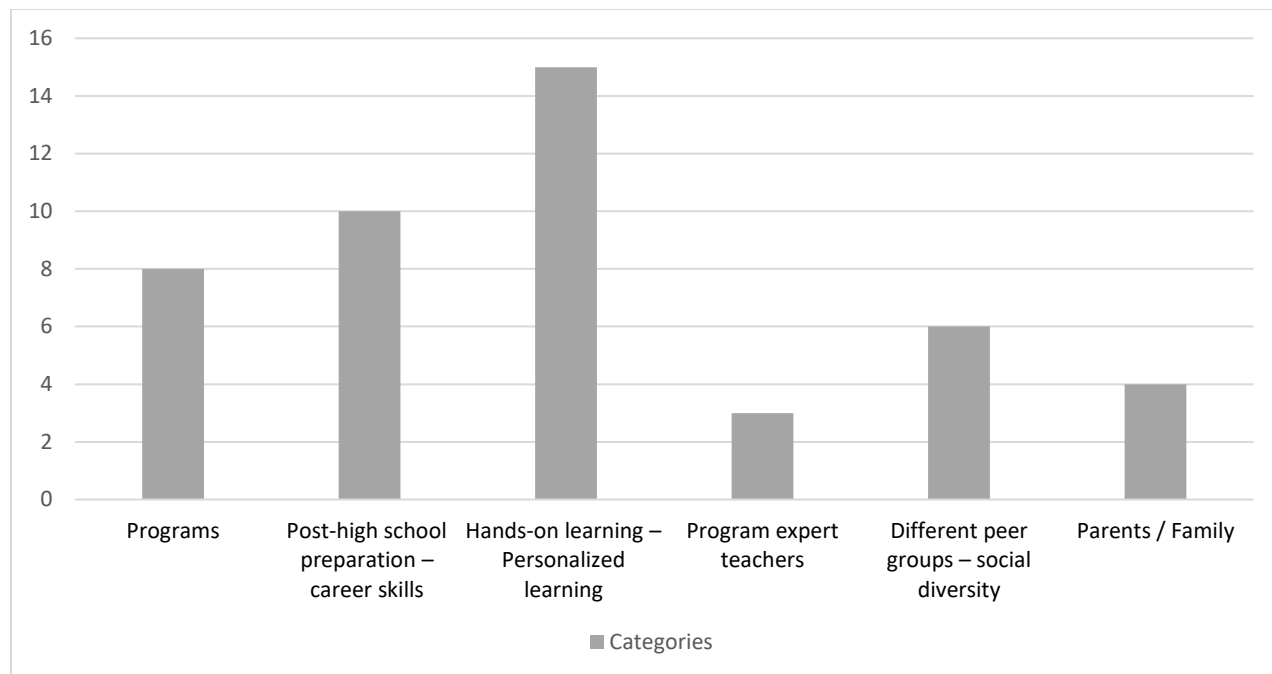
Based on the lived experiences of attending and graduating from CXV, what were graduates' sources of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school?

As noted earlier, this study was guided by three research questions aimed to explore the lived experiences of CXV graduates with regard to their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at CXV and how they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased at CXV. The first research question focused on the source of motivation for participants to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school. Subsequently, three questions were asked during the one-to-one interview related to the first research question. To understand the reasons for the uptrend in the demand to attend a county-run vocational-technical high school, it was necessary to first gather data on graduates' source of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school. Participants candidly shared their subjective experiences regarding their source of motivation to attend CXV instead of attending their home district school which was not a vo-tech high school. Figure 2 below shows the categories of the narrative data that was collected

from participants' responses during the one-to-one interviews. Categories were identified when the frequency mentioned by participants was at least three times. Figure 2 also illustrates the frequency that the categories were mentioned by participants.

Figure 2

Frequency of Categories that were Mentioned in Interviews for RQ1



Within the coding process, in-vivo coding was used to detect similar words and phrases among the different responses. Then phenomenological reduction was utilized to detect initial codes, categories, and finally, the themes. Phenomenological reduction occurs when the researcher intentionally focuses on the participants' lived experiences during the analysis process, by consciously ignoring personal assumptions, thus fully accessing participants' subjective experiences (Stahl & King, 2020). I highlighted similar chunks of narrative data, and subsequently reduced similar responses to a few words to form categories. When recurring categories or overarching ideas were identified to have a frequency of at least five times mentioned in participants' responses to the interview questions, the overarching idea was

identified as a theme. Subsequently, the themes for each research question were identified. During the coding process, I conducted open coding by highlighting chunks of the participants' responses that related to the research questions, then identified similarities within the different participants' responses. In an effort to organize the analysis process and to provide deeper insights from the data, I created a codebook for each research question that lists all the codes used to analyze participants' responses to each research question. Each codebook provides participants' quotes that align with each code and the subsequent theme. The codebooks for each research question are presented in Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4. The codebook for the first research question, is illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2*Codebook for RQ1*

Participants' Direct Quotes	Initial Codes	Themes
<p>"...the programs take you out of that traditional high school mindset and experience."</p> <p>"Definitely the programs"</p> <p>"...CXV had more educational opportunities - the program that I was interested in ..."</p>	<p>Programs offered at CXV</p>	<p>Programs offered</p>
<p>"...looking ahead to life after high school and thinking about how to best prepare..."</p> <p>"... getting the skills for an area of interest and turning that interest into an expertise and a career."</p> <p>"I used the four years in high school (at CXV) to really get ahead of my peers that would be going to culinary school with me, but just went to public school, not a vo-tech high school."</p>	<p>Preparation for life after high school.</p> <p>College and career preparation. Learning career skills.</p> <p>Career preparation</p>	<p>Post-high school preparation – career skills</p>
<p>"...more class time, more access to arts, more time to practice skills."</p> <p>"...students work collaboratively with teachers who do hands-on courses ..."</p> <p>"Dance was really like my outlet - ...and actually learn techniques in dancing that are taught to my learning style...."</p>	<p>Hands-on learning</p> <p>Get an education with a focus on students' interest</p>	<p>Hands-on learning – Personalized learning</p>
<p>"...attending CXV gave me a lot more friends from all over the county that I would not have if I attended my home school. I made friends with people from different cultures and backgrounds..."</p> <p>"Met people from across the county, from a social aspect."</p>	<p>Diverse student population – more friends</p> <p>Diversity of students. Expanding social circle</p>	<p>Different peer groups – social diversity</p>

As shown in Figure 2, the categories of the data for the first research question were: (a) programs, (b) post-high school preparation – career skills, (c) hands-on learning – personalized learning, (d) program expert teachers, (e) different peer groups – social diversity, and (f) parents or family. However, based on the coding and analysis process discussed above and the frequency mentioned during the one-to-one interviews of the participants, the four themes identified as a source of motivation to attend CXV, were the programs offered at CXV, post-high school preparation – career skills, hands-on – personalized learning, and different peer groups – social diversity.

Theme 1: Programs offered. More than 70 percent of the participants credited the variety of the programs offered at CXV as the reason they selected to enroll at a county-run vo-tech high school instead of attending their home district high school. Participant 003 shared – “the programs take you out of that traditional high school mindset and experience. I was interested in culinary arts and pastry, CXV provided me with that option.” Participant 009 and Participant 008 added that the programs offered at CXV were directly aligned to her aspired profession. Participant 009 stated, “...wanted to become a physical therapist. So, I thought the Allied Health Program was great for me. Definitely the programs. Being able to really focus on what I wanted to pursue.” Similarly, Participant 008 shared,

I was not the strongest academic. My academic rigor was not as great. Dance was really like my outlet - being able to attend like a “performing arts high school” and actually learn techniques in dancing that are taught to my learning style, it was a way for me to get my education while doing something fun that you love.

Participant 005 focused on the access to also learn skills from other programs through elective courses as a source of motivation to enroll at CXV.

I wanted an introductory to culinary arts and baking and pastry arts. The access to other disciplines through elective courses where I could learn those skills, even if I wasn't in that given discipline, I had access to those faculty members.

Participant 010 also shared that the programs offered at CXV was her source of motivation to enroll at CXV rather than her home district school - "...CXV had more educational opportunities - the program that I was interested in - specifically the medical program." Participant 001 shared that she was looking for a high school program that would fulfill her interest more than a club, a program that would teach specific program skills.

I wanted a career in theater. I was serious about theater. My home school had theatre and music clubs, but they did not have a theatre class or a theatre program that would teach me in-depth skills that would help in my career in theatre after I graduate or that would really match my interest. I had been in many theatre clubs, but I needed a program dedicated to my interest – that's why I selected CXV over my home school.

More than 70 percent of the participants shared that their source of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school was the programs offered at those schools.

Theme 2: Post-high school preparation – career skills. Another overwhelming source of motivation to enroll at CXV as shared by the participants, was the opportunity to focus on their post-secondary aspirations while attending high school. Participant 001 shared that while at CXV her focus was how she could equip herself with career skills, and that CXV provided the opportunity to hone on a desired career pathway before graduating from high school.

I was looking ahead to life after high school and thinking about how I could best prepare myself. CXV was definitely the best choice to reach the goal to prepare for a successful

life after high school in terms of the skills I would learn to use in my career after high school.

Participants 003 and 011 shared that CXV not only provided a post high school career pathway, but it also afforded them the opportunity to study or “try” a program to decide whether it is a good fit for them before making a financial commitment to that major in college. Participant 003 stated – “...gives a college-like mindset. To decide if I want to pursue that career path after high school, because college and trade school is very expensive.” Participant 011 shared, “... getting the skills for an area of interest and turning that interest into an expertise and a career. I was required to take all college level courses that would better prepare me for a college environment.” Participant 007 added that CXV allowed her to acquire useful skills that would propel her above her peers who did not attend a vo-tech high school – “I used the four years in high school (at CXV) to really get ahead of my peers that would be going to culinary school with me, but just went to public school, not a vo-tech high school.” Participant 002 shared that CXV provided her with an opportunity to immerse herself in content and skills that she would learn in future college endeavors.

It was a more direct path for me to go to college. By studying Allied Health for 4 years at CXV, I had an opportunity to experience the medical content and skills that I will use in medical school and eventually in my medical career.

The response from Participant 005 compared career preparation at CXV to that at other high schools. She emphasized the importance of selecting a program at CXV which is aligned to a desired career because of skills acquisition at CXV.

I wanted to pursue higher education or go towards a vocational track. Career preparation at CXV is better than at other high schools. I knew that I would be prepared with the

skills that I need to get a job in my field after high school, so it was important also that I pick the right program.

The response from Participant 011 highlighted the preparation for both college and career options that CXV afforded her while enrolled.

I was required to take all college level courses that would better prepare me for a college environment. I'm building college credit as a high schooler and that kind of gave me a leg up on some peers from my hometown. A Vo-tech school and getting the skills for an area of interest and turning that interest into expertise and a career. Set me ahead for when I become an adult in the working world.

During the interviews, participants noted multiple times that post-high school preparation and career skills were a source of motivation for them to enroll at a county-run vocational-technical high school, such as CXV.

Theme 3: Hands-on learning – personalized learning. Participants shared that their main source of motivation to enroll at CXV rather than their home district, non-vo-tech high school, was the hands-on and personalized learning offered to students at CXV. Participant 008 shared that her program of study at CXV provided her with a personal outlet to enjoy school.

I was not the strongest academic. My academic rigor was not as great. Dance was really like my outlet - being able to attend like a “performing arts high school,” and actually learn techniques in dancing that are taught to my learning style, it was a way for me to get my education while doing something fun that you love.

Other participants shared that the practical or hands-on training that their teachers taught in addition to the amount of time in the instructional day dedicated to learning and developing practical skills was most appealing about CXV's programs. Participant 001 commented “...more

class time, more access to arts, more time to practice skills.” Participant 002 elaborated that CXV allowed her to “go through all four years and learn about the medical field. Four years you get to take a deep dive in program.” Participant 003 shared that she believed that the hands-on experience offered at CXV was more valuable because all the practical courses are taught by teachers who are experts in the respective fields – “...students work collaboratively with teachers who do hands-on courses and who have real experiences in the field and core learnings – the teachers are experts in their field.” Participants also shared that when selecting a high school, students and their parents would more often select a school that would provide the educational needs and support for the individual student. For example, Participant 005 shared,

I grew up in a really small town that didn't have many resources – wanted more/better educational experience that catered to my personal educational needs and aspirations. A school that would help me specifically with my learning disability while teaching me the hands-on skills I need for my career – the personalized experience was definitely my motivator.

Participant 006 also shared that the personalized learning received at CXV was the source of motivation to enroll instead of attending a non- vo-tech high school.

CXV gave more of a personal aspect of learning with your teachers and your fellow classmates. I was learning with other kids who shared my interest and learning from teachers who are from the field. They taught me the way I needed to learn the specific skill based on how I learn – by doing and seeing. The lessons were tailored so that I can learn the skills and concepts.

Participants stated that the hands-on and personalized learning provided to students attending county-run vo-tech high schools like CXV, was a motivator for them to apply and subsequently enroll at CXV.

Theme 4: Different peer groups – social diversity. Participant 005 shared that from a social standpoint, CXV provided him with a “fresh start” – he shared: “...I met people from across the county, from a social aspect. Making new friends - I was bullied as a kid – CXV looked like I could have a fresh start.” Participant 011 shared similar sentiments – “...I was a bit of a target for bullying – wanted to give myself a clean slate. Get to know people that were brand new to me.” Participant 004 also shared that attending CXV expanded his social circle – “...CXV was cooler in terms of style and social life. I wanted to expand my social life and my opportunities. Wanted to see what the rest of the County looked like.” Participant 006 shared – “...I wanted a new set of people in my life for high school. I didn't have a lot of friends in middle school. I just wanted to reinvent myself.” Participant 003 shared that his enrollment at CXV “opened his social circle” and allowed him to form friendships with people he would not have met at his district high school.

The uniqueness of the school, the different things you would learn, the different peer groups. It attracts people from all over the county. You are interacting with people from all over the county and making new friends with people you have never met if you were in your township high school. Attending CXV definitely opened my social circle – now I have friends from all over the county.

Participants explained that county vo-tech high schools allowed for more social diversity.

Participant 002 shared that CXV was known to have a more diverse student population and choosing to attend provided her with a more diverse group of friends.

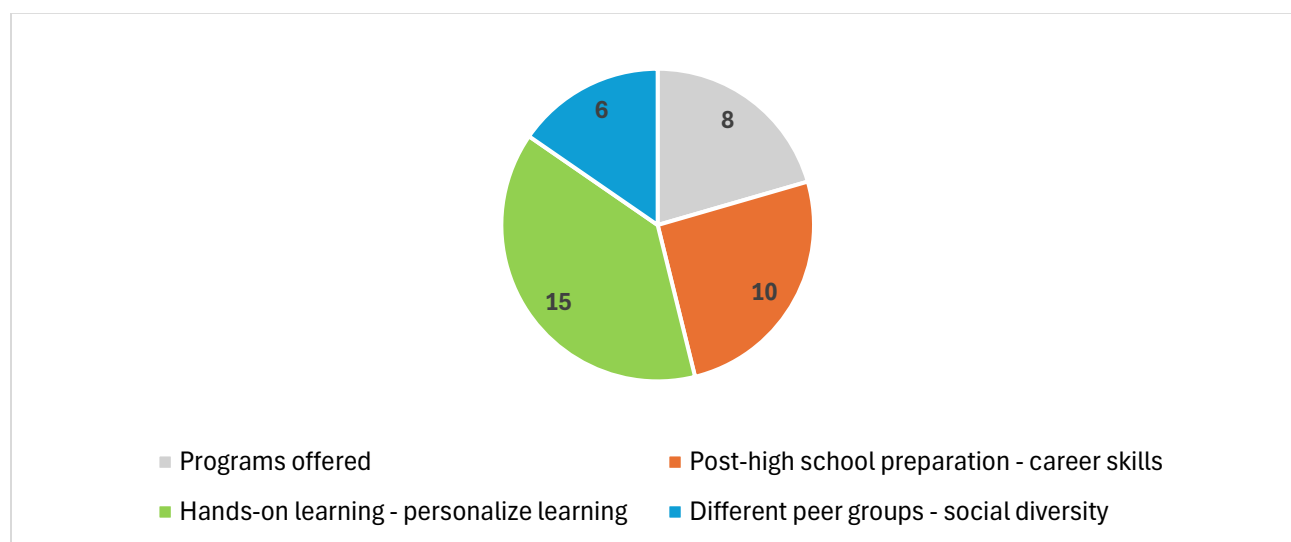
Attending CXV gave me a lot more friends from all over the county that I would not have had if I attended my home school. I made friends with people from different cultures and backgrounds at CXV unlike being around the same group of kids from my town. All of us knew that CXV had more diverse students and if that was your hope – to make new friends from different areas, then that was a good choice for you. I do not regret the choice to attend CXV because thanks to my diverse group of friends I have visited many countries as an adult and learned about different cultures.

During their interviews, many participants stated that CXV afforded them with different peer groups and social diversity, since the student body consists of students from the entire county. Therefore, participants noted that different peer groups and social diversity was a source of motivation to enroll at a county-run vocational-technical high school.

The four themes identified for RQ1 as participants' perceived source of motivation to enroll in CXV and the frequency mentioned by participants are depicted in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

Themes for RQ 1



Note. The number of times the themes were mentioned during participants' interviews.

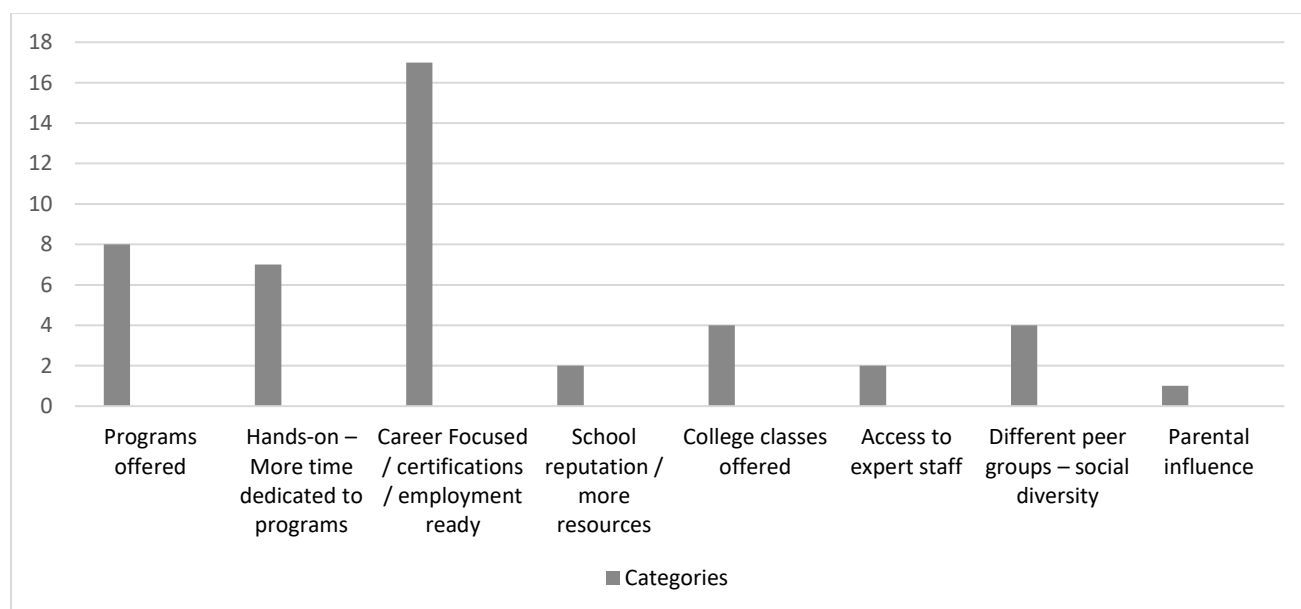
Research Question 2:

Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, what are their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment in the county-run vo-tech high schools?

The focus of the second research question was participants' perceptions for their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at county-run vo-tech high schools. After analyzing the transcripts from the one-to-one interviews, the data was organized into five categories. Categories were identified when the frequency mentioned by participants was at least three times. The categories for participants' perceived reasons for the increased demand for students to enroll at county-run vo-tech high schools were: (a) programs offered, (b) hands-on – more time dedicated to programs, (c) career-focused certifications or employment readiness, (d) college classes offered, and (e) different peer groups – social diversity. Figure 4 shows the distribution of the five categories of participants' responses and the frequency mentioned during the interviews.

Figure 4

Frequency of Categories that were Mentioned in Interviews for RQ2



During the coding process discussed earlier in this section, I created the codebook for the second research question showing the participants' direct quotes, the initial codes, and the identified themes. When recurring categories or overarching ideas were identified to have a frequency of at least five times mentioned in participants' responses to the interview questions, the overarching idea was identified as a theme. Three themes were identified for the second research question based on the frequency mentioned during the one-to-one interviews of the participants and are represented in the codebook as illustrated in Table 3 below. The three themes identified as participants' perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment in the county-run vo-tech high schools, such as CXV, were career-focused / certifications / employment readiness, hands-on – more time dedicated to programs, and programs offered.

Table 3*Codebook for RQ2*

Participants' Direct Quotes	Initial Codes	Themes
<p>"...students wish to have a connection with their passion and the programs offered at CXV matched my passion."</p> <p>"CXV offers a lot of opportunities and branching pathways that I feel like many high schools cannot give. It prepares you for your interests or your field or offers you the exploration opportunities that you may want – that's why there is such a high demand for CXV."</p>	<p>Programs align to passion/interest.</p>	<p>Programs Offered</p>
<p>"...students want something more practical than a purely academic courses, spending more time in your trade. Vo-Tech high schools dedicate more hours in the day for students to engage in their trade."</p> <p>"Vo-tech high schools give an individualized experience and then you get more hands-on experience."</p> <p>"CXV's programs allow students to spend a huge chunk of the school day in their trade and learning trade skills...."</p> <p>"We spent a lot of time in our shop classes."</p>	<p>The practical/hands-on aspect. Spending extended time engaged in the programs.</p>	<p>Hands-on – More time dedicated to programs</p>
<p>"...the programs offered at vo-tech high schools can prepare you better for a career..."</p> <p>"In terms of the trade school aspect, kids that graduated and go straight into working..."</p> <p>"You leave high school with certifications that you need for work – like in Cosmetology you come out with your state board license...."</p>	<p>Better preparation for career than other high schools.</p> <p>Provides industry-valued certifications that can be used directly after high school for work.</p>	<p>Career Focused / certifications / employment ready</p>

Theme 5: Career-focused / certifications / employment ready. Many participants shared that county-run vo-tech high schools such as CXV provide their graduates with an opportunity to enter directly into the work force after high school graduation because students acquired career-ready skills and certifications which made them more marketable in the labor fields than their peers who graduated from traditional high schools. They attributed the career focus, industry certifications, and employment readiness activities at CXV to the increased demand for enrollment. Participant 002 stated that – “...CXV gives you the opportunity in a lot of the programs to leave with some kind of certification. The ability to start working as soon as you're done with high school – that's a big attraction for students.” Participant 001 further elaborated that,

The programs offered at vo-tech high schools can prepare you better for a career than your township high school. Because you're quite literally taking the courses that you need for your career. College is not an option for everybody. With the price of college rising, it can be completely undoable for a lot of people. So, in vo-tech high schools like CXV, you get yourself prepared for work in case you do not go to college. You leave high school with certifications that you need for work – like in Cosmetology you come out with your state board license.

Participants 011 and 005 also shared that they believe that the opportunity to increase graduates' employability with industry-valued skills and certifications is a reason for the increased need for enrollment of students at CXV. Participant 011 shared,

Students wanting to set themselves up on a career track right out of high school to be able to go into their area of study. They would make them a valuable asset in the working

world straight out of high school – skills and certifications – can get a good paying job right after high school.

Participant 004 stated – “In terms of the trade school aspect, kids that graduated and go straight into working - not only does that have dollar signs next to it, but it also has a need and a job guarantee after high school.” Participant 005 succinctly stated – “The option to work right after high school if you choose, that is a big reason to choose CXV.” Participant 007 also shared the belief that CXV prepares students to be competitive in the work force.

The teachers prepare you for the practical and theoretical tests to be able to get your certification. So, you leave high school with that certification, and you immediately become competitive with people who are older than you in the field who might have just gotten their certification or some who don't have it at all. CXV makes their students competitive in the work force so obviously more kids would want to go there.

Throughout the interviews, participants overwhelmingly mentioned that career-focused certifications and employment readiness skills learned at the county-run vo-tech high schools like CXV were their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment in these high schools.

Theme 6: Hands-on – more time dedicated to programs. Another perceived reason that participants shared that contributed to the increased demand for enrollment at county-run vo-tech high schools such as CXV, was the amount of time students spend in their respective programs during the school day doing hands-on activities. Participant 002 also shared similar thoughts – “vo-tech high schools give an individualized experience and then you get more hands-on experience.” Participant 003 attributed the increased demand for enrollment at CXV to the combination of academics and practical instruction offered at CXV – “vo-tech high schools give

a better education – more rounded – it is not just focused on the academics, but it also gives you hands-on skills that you can use in your career.” Participants 008 and 010 shared that the instructional schedule permitted students to spend a considerable amount of time in their specified programs and contributed to the increased demand for enrollment. Participant 008 shared,

A way for me to get into CXV, spend the next four years – because I was passionate about dancing. CXV’s programs allow students to spend a huge chunk of the school day in their trade and learning trade skills. I was in the dancing program and every day we had 3 hours just dedicated to dancing and learning skills and techniques – this was a big plus that other high schools did not offer.

Similarly, Participant 010 also shared,

We spent a lot of time in our shop classes – the schedule was block-scheduling, so we had 3 hours every day in shop class learning about our program. More experience in the field/trade - the more beneficial it was, whether that be cost wise or just compared to your peers in other high schools.

Participant 001 explained that the extended time dedicated to the program classes at CXV allowed students to engage in projects.

Students want something more practical than a purely academic course, spending more time in your trade. Vo-Tech high schools dedicate more hours in the day for students to engage in their trade. CXV has block schedules which allowed us to spend more time in the day in our program area learning practical skills. Other high schools have 40-minute periods which is not lot of time when you are in shop class. At CXV we spent between 2

hours and 3 hours in our programs – this gave us enough time to work on projects just like on a job site.

Many participants touted the hands-on aspect of vo-tech high schools and the extended time in the instructional schedule that is dedicated to programs, as their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at the county-run vo-tech high schools such as CXV.

Theme 7: Programs offered. Participants shared that students desire to attend CXV rather than other high schools because the programs offered at CXV are more aligned to their desired career and passion which made learning and school more fun for students. Participant 001 shared – “...students wish to have a connection with their passion and the programs offered at CXV matched my passion. Other high schools did not provide me with that option.”

Participant 007 stated that the programs offered at CXV afforded students the opportunity to explore different career options to ensure that they select a suitable career.

Although I was not sure of a program or career before getting to CXV, during my time there, I was able to try out different classes and I found what I really wanted to do as a career. Getting to pick something that you are interested in and seeing if you're actually interested in that as a career – in my opinion, this is the reason so many students want to go to CXV because the other high schools in the county did not give us that option.

Participant 008 attributed the increased demand for enrollment at CXV to the “fun” aspect of the school when enrolled in programs that students enjoy.

You get to do something different – not just focus on academics, we got to focus on something hopefully that you enjoy, maybe that you're passionate about. Who wouldn't want to learn about something they love and enjoy? This makes school fun! My time at CXV was fun as a result of my program – it didn't feel like school.

Participants 009 and 010 also shared that the programs offered at CXV are the reason for the increased demand for enrollment. Participant 009 stated,

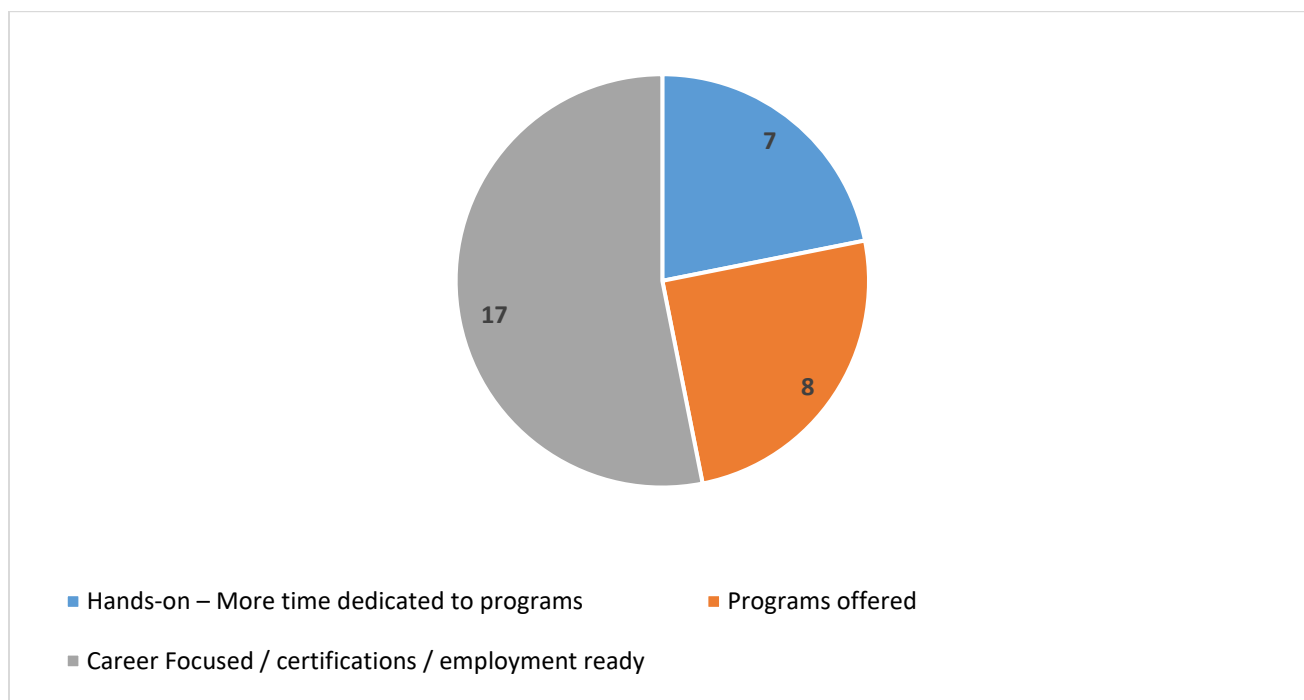
The programs - exploratory arts and certain subjects - want to pursue it a bit more, so I think CXV has that outlet for students to be able to dive into their subject area a little bit deeper than most schools offer. Based on what my friends and I experienced, I think that the different programs at CXV are the reason why so many kids want to go there.

Participant 010 shared that,

CXV offers a lot of opportunities and branching pathways that I feel like many high schools cannot give. It prepares you for your interests or your field or offers you the exploration opportunities that you may want – that’s why there is such a high demand for CXV.

Similar to responses for the first research question, when responding to questions for RQ2, participants stated that their perceived reason for the increased demand for enrollment at county-run vo-tech high schools is the specific programs offered at these vo-tech high schools.

Three themes were identified for RQ2, regarding participants’ perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at county-run vo-tech high schools. Based on the frequency mentioned during the one-to-one interviews of the participants, Figure 5 shows the themes for the second research question as: career-focused / certifications earned / employment readiness, hands-on – more time dedicated to programs, and programs offered.

Figure 5*Themes for RQ 2*

Note. The number of times the themes were mentioned during participants' interviews.

Research Question 3:

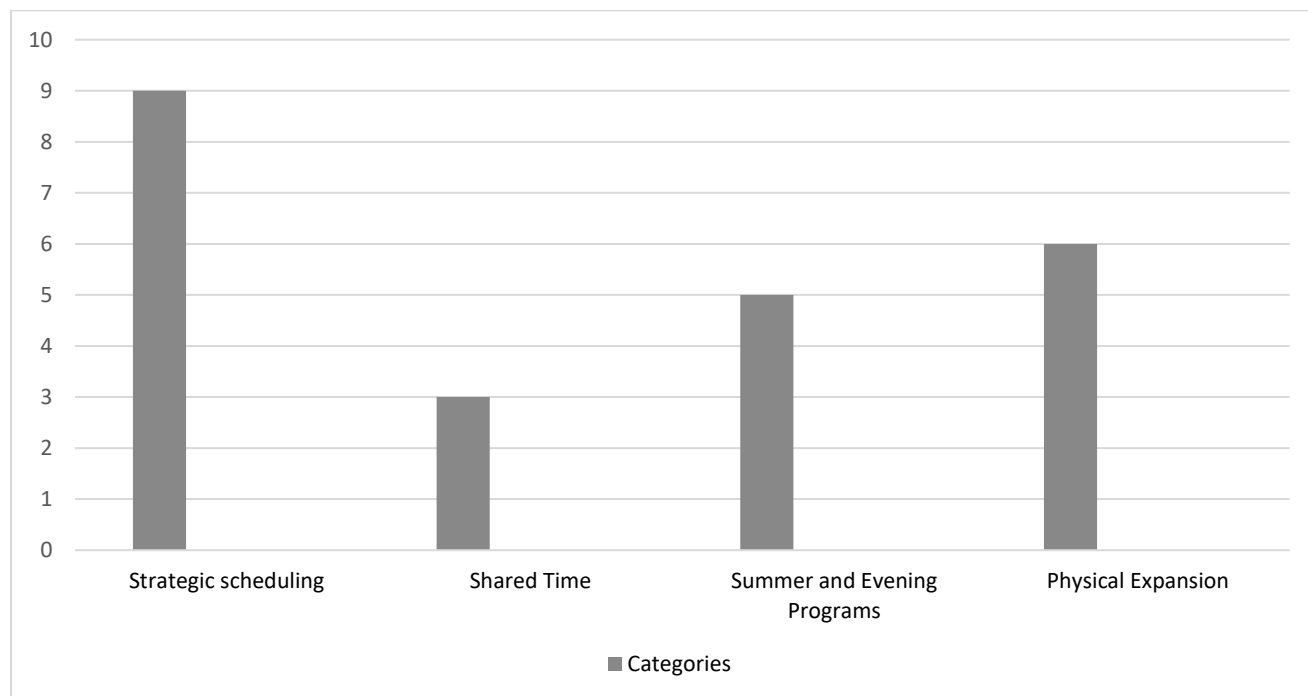
Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased or improved at CXV?

The goal of the third research question was to hear from CXV graduates on how they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased. Participants shared a variety of suggestions based on their lived experiences, and how they believe more enrollment opportunities can be created for students to attend CXV. Categories were identified when the frequency of the responses mentioned by participants was at least three times. Participants' responses for the third research question were organized into four categories. Figure 6 shows the

categories for RQ3: (a) strategic scheduling, (b) shared time, (c) summer and evening programs, and (d) physical expansion.

Figure 6

Frequency of Categories that were Mentioned in Interviews for RQ3



Using in-vivo coding and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) explained earlier in this section, I created the codebook for the third research question. Table 4 below illustrates the codebook for the third research question showing the participants' direct quotes, the initial codes, and the identified themes. When recurring categories or overarching ideas were identified to have a frequency of at least five times mentioned in participants' responses to the interview questions, the overarching idea was identified as a theme. The three themes identified as how participants perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased or improved at CXV were strategic scheduling, physical expansion, and summer and evening programs.

Table 4*Codebook for RQ3*

Participants' Direct Quotes	Initial Codes	Themes
<p>“Creating more flexible schedules where students can take more classes so they can finish their high school graduation requirements by junior year....”</p> <p>“Set up the schedule to have more classes and certifications before senior year – so that in senior year, students can take college classes or work.”</p>	<p>Strategic scheduling to allow completion of high school requirements by junior year.</p>	<p>Strategic scheduling</p>
<p>“Create a “shift” schedule...”</p>	<p>Shift schedule</p>	
<p>“Offer night and summer classes (in vo-tech programs) for high school kids.”</p> <p>“Offer summer programs...”</p>	<p>Night/evening program</p> <p>Summer program -</p> <p>Extending the school year and the school day.</p>	<p>Summer and evening programs</p>
<p>“Physical expansion of the school.”</p>	<p>Physical expansion</p>	<p>Physical expansion</p>

Theme 8: Strategic scheduling. Participants 001, 003, 004, 006, and 010 mentioned that scheduling seniors to take only college classes or work would accommodate the enrollment of more students. Participant 001 shared,

Creating more flexible schedules where students can take more classes so they can finish their high school graduation requirements by junior year. Then in senior year they attend classes directly in the college through the partnership with the college. Seniors who do not want to take college classes can go to work with the school-to-work or apprenticeship program. This will create space to accept more students into 9th grade because the seniors will not be on campus.

Participant 003 – “...partner with the college for more students to take classes out of the building, therefore leaving more space in the building so more students can be offered a seat.”

Participant 004 – “...in the senior year, offer college level classes on the college campus. In so doing, the high school campus would only have grades 9-11 therefore, more students in these grades can be accommodated.” Participant 006 – “By distributing courses in the semesters. And especially when you have kids now going over to the college – it frees up space for more students to attend.” Participant 010 – “Set up the schedule to have more classes and certifications before senior year – so that in senior year, students can take college classes or work.” Participant 009 shared the idea of creating schedules where students complete their graduation requirements by junior year, as a way to increase enrollment opportunities at CXV.

I remember that by junior year I had already finished all my graduation requirements. So I worked most of the time and was in school for one period. Why can't a schedule be created where kids finish all their courses needed for graduation by junior year? Then they can work in their senior year and get on-the-job training in their program. That would free up space for more kids in grades 9-11 to attend. If they cannot expand the physical building, that is one way to create more space for more kids to attend.

While Participant 002 shared that a strategic schedule would help to create more enrollment opportunities, his thought was slightly different – “Create a “shift” schedule – where there are 2 shifts for the school as long as they can get all the hours of instruction needed (for example shift 1: 7am-12:30pm and shift 1pm – 6:30pm).” Participant 006 also offered a different option to scheduling to increase enrollment opportunities.

The courses may be selected like in a college - where you can have timeframes for different classes. A different system of how classes are run and what times they are and

what courses you sign up for – like in a college, students can sign up for classes so that more students can be accommodated like on a college campus.

Participants overwhelmingly shared that creating strategic schedules could increase or improve enrollment opportunities at CXV and at other county-run vo-tech high schools.

Theme 9: Physical expansion. Many participants believed that the problem of insufficient space at CVX to accommodate the increased demand can be resolved by simply expanding the CXV building. Although, some participants noted that this plan would be more of a long-term solution rather than an immediate resolution. When asked how they perceived that enrollment opportunities can be increased or improved at CXV, Participants 004, 006, 007, 008, 009, and 011 simply answered “Physical expansion of the school.” Participant 002 recognized the challenges to physically expanding CXV, therefore proposed that the physical expansion occurred in phases as new programs are added to CXV.

Expanding the school by building more buildings is the best way to create more space for kids to attend CXV but that will be expensive and take time. However, the physical expansions can be done in phases, maybe, build a different campus as new programs are added to the school.

Participant 001 suggested a physical expansion that would accommodate an online and a hands-on section of the school.

Virtual offerings of classes – but that would take away the hands-on aspect – so probably not the best option for the shop classes but it could work for the academic classes that do not have a hands-on portion. The school could be expanded to have an online wing and a practical/shop wing. The online wing could house the academic courses – that would require less space.

Participants candidly acknowledged the unlikely feasibility of expanding the existing building as an immediate solution to create more enrollment opportunities for students desiring to enroll in CXV and other county-run vo-tech high schools. However, multiple participants expressed that they believed that expanding the existing building to increase classroom capacity, is a viable long-term solution to address the limited enrollment opportunities at county-run vo-tech high schools.

Theme 10: Summer and evening programs. Participants 003, 008, 002, 005, and 010 stated that by expanding the school day or school year, more students would get an opportunity to complete CTE courses and certifications. Participant 003 – “Offer night and summer classes (in vo-tech programs) for high school kids.” Participant 008 – “Summer programs would allow those students who cannot attend CXV during the school year to earn CTE credits and certifications.” Participant 002 – “Offer summer programs – maybe students take one or two vo-tech courses in the summer then in the school year have a night/evening program for high school aged kids.” Participant 005 suggested that CXV should expand their current evening program to also include high school aged students, thus affording more students an opportunity to learn vocational-technical skills and subsequently increasing the enrollment for the evening program.

CXV has a very good night school program for adults to learn different trades. This can be expanded to include high school aged kids. Most kids do sports after school, but there are many kids that do not go to CXV who are not involved in sports after school. If CXV offered an evening program to teach courses in the different programs, these kids could take advantage of this and in addition to their high school credits at their home school, they would also earn CTE credits by taking CTE classes. For example, a kid interested in plumbing can take plumbing courses in the evening and get credit for plumbing. If they

take the CTE classes for 3 or 4 years of high school, they would almost get the same number of CTE credits as the kids attending CXV. This is another way to give more kids an opportunity to learn a trade and increase the enrollment of CXV – although it would be in the evening.

Participant 010 admitted that friends who did not attend CXV during the school year would appreciate an opportunity to attend during the summer and learn vo-tech skills. The participant also noted that this technique would increase the CXV enrollment and offer more students an opportunity to engage in CTE courses.

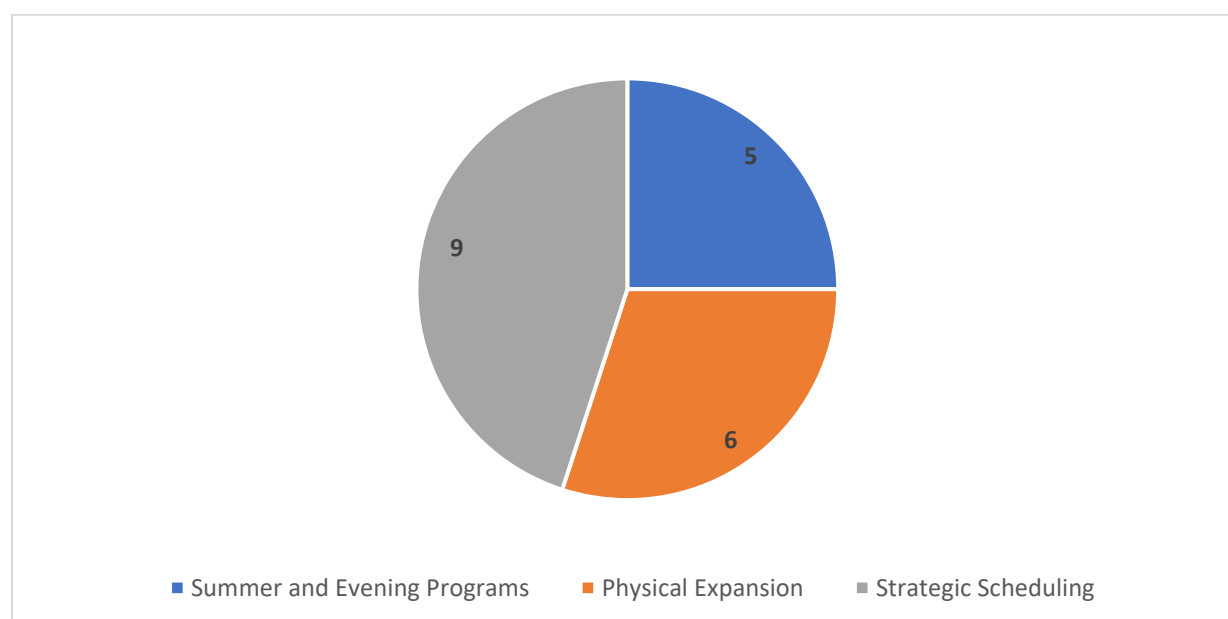
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Participants suggested that offering summer and evening programs at county-run vo-tech high schools will increase their enrollment opportunities and subsequently allow more students with the opportunity to attend CXV and other county-run vo-tech high schools.

The three themes identified from the participants' responses regarding their perceptions on how more enrollment opportunities can be created for students desiring to enroll at CXV and other county-run vo-tech high schools were: strategic scheduling, physical expansion, and offering summer and evening programs. Based on the frequency mentioned during the one-to-one interviews of the participants, Figure 7 below shows the themes identified from participants' responses to the third research question.

Figure 7

Themes for RQ 3



Note. The number of times the themes were mentioned during participants' interviews.

Evaluation of the Outcomes

Over the last decade, researchers and proponents of vocational-technical programs have touted the benefits of earning a skills-based high school education that results in the acquisition of industry-valued credentials and certifications (Budgell, 2022; Dougherty et al., 2019; Kreisman & Stange, 2019). The many commendations of vo-tech high schools and the notion

that these schools are not only for students who were traditionally considered to be not-college-bound, has revitalized the vo-tech high school system in New Jersey (Burney, 2022; Oglesby, 2019). This resurgence of vo-tech education, coupled with the increasing costs of college tuition, inflation, and the need for high school graduates to earn skills-based employment immediately after high school, have exponentially increased the demand for vocational-technical high schools in New Jersey, thus creating the reoccurring problem of limited enrollment opportunities at the state's 21 county-run vo-tech high schools (Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019; Oglesby, 2019). While extensive literature exists on educators' and lawmakers' beliefs on the importance of vo-tech programs, there is a flagrant gap in the literature on vo-tech graduates' perceptions on their reasons for selecting to attend a vo-tech high school and their perceptions on the reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at vo-tech schools. In an attempt to mitigate this deficiency in the literature by contributing to the existing literature and investigating the problem of limited enrollment opportunities at vo-tech high schools, this study focused on vo-tech high school graduates' perceptions. As critical stakeholders in vo-tech high schools, this study concentrated on graduates' source of motivation to attend a vo-tech high school, their perceived reasons for the increased demand for vo-tech high school enrollment, and their perceptions on how enrollment opportunities can be improved at county-run vo-tech high schools. As part of the analysis process, participants' responses were organized into categories from which ten themes were identified based on the frequency mentioned during the one-to-one interviews. Categories were identified when the frequency of the responses mentioned by participants was at least three times. When recurring categories or overarching ideas were identified to have a frequency of at least five times mentioned in participants' responses to the interview questions, the overarching

idea was identified as a theme. The ten themes from the data were aligned and supported by existing research and will be explained in this section.

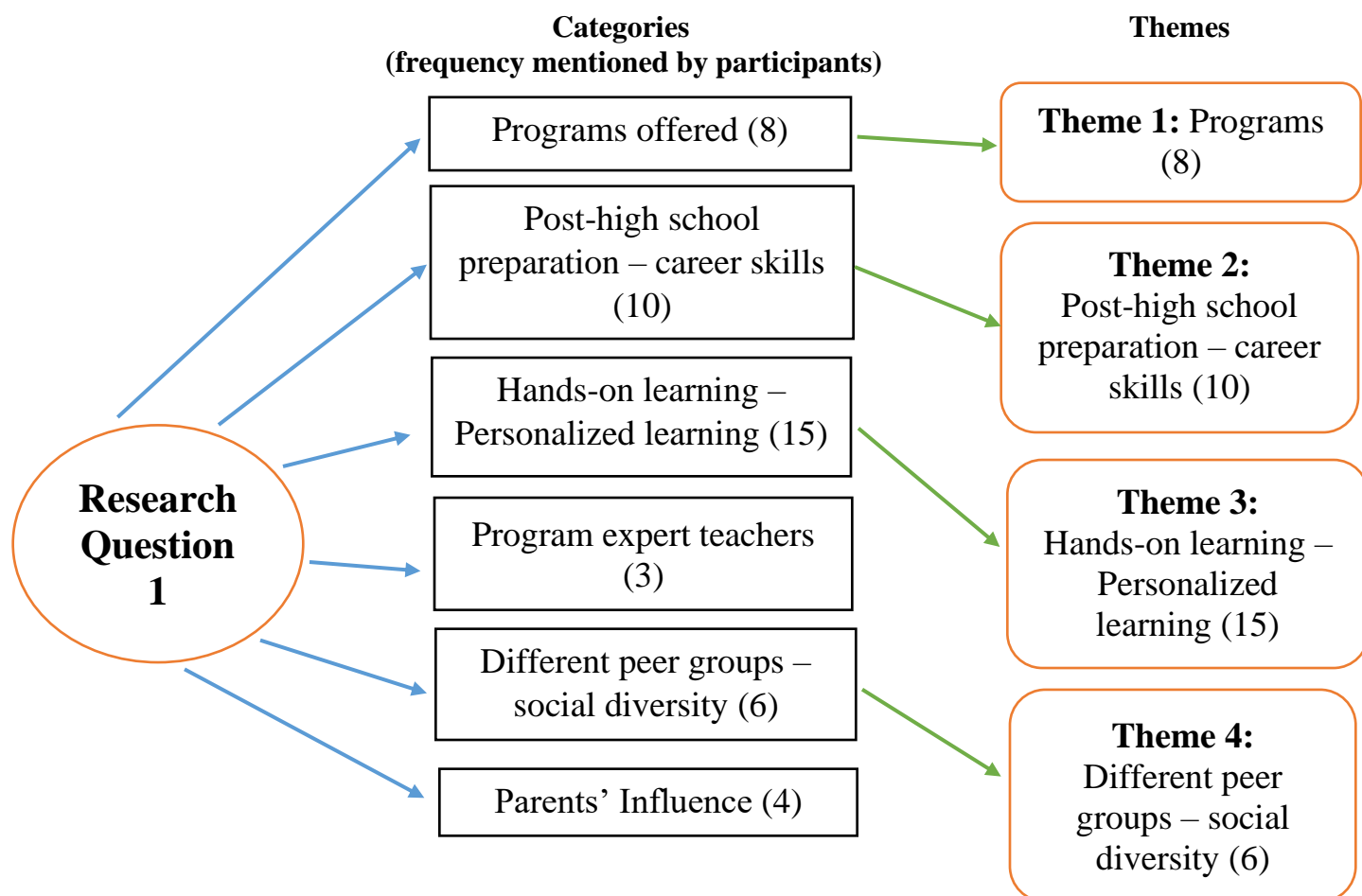
Research Question 1:

Based on the lived experiences of attending and graduating from CXV, what were graduates' sources of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school?

Research question one (RQ1) probed graduates on their source of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school. Figure 8 illustrates that the narrative data for RQ1 was organized into categories and after the analysis process, four themes (Theme 1 – 4) were identified since they were mentioned at least five times during the interviews. Categories mentioned less than five times were considered as outliers of the data.

Figure 8

Categories and Themes for RQ 1 Based on Frequency Mentioned



Theme 1: Programs offered. A theme that was identified as participants' source of motivation to attend a county-run vo-tech high school was that the programs offered at CXV were aligned to their career interests. Participants shared that while high school-aged students typically do not enjoy attending school, their experiences were vastly different. Participant 008 and Participant 009) revealed that since their programs were aligned to their passion and interests, high school was "fun and enjoyable" because they were "doing something they loved and enjoyed."

According to Andreoli et al. (2020), in the quest for school improvement, school leaders are tasked with ensuring that lessons motivate students to remain cognitively engaged in learning and interested in the content, however, participants of this study provided a different account of their high school experience at CXV. Participants 001 and 010 communicated that not only did they enjoy their program of study and that "it did not feel like school," but CXV also gave them an opportunity to explore other passions as elective courses in other programs. Participant 005 explained that he "wanted an introductory to culinary arts and baking and pastry arts" because that was his passion, but he quickly realized that as a CXV student, he had "access to other disciplines" that he could learn about, even if he "wasn't in that given discipline." Other participants shared that CXV afforded them with the opportunity to explore multiple passions, which would not be possible in a traditional high school. Participant 006 shared that "going into a vocational school was a career drive," she further shared that she "wanted to pursue some sort of design or engineering" however, she was able to explore both passions without having to settle on one – "CXV allowed me to see both sides of that passion." According to Bahçelerli (2018), schools that have an instructional program that mirrors students' passion and interest are more likely to produce graduates that are successful in their post high school plans. This

sentiment was echoed by the participants, as they shared their source of motivation to enroll in CXV.

This study can add to the current literature that students are motivated to attend vo-tech high schools because the programs offered are enjoyable and aligned to students' interests and passions. Students are motivated and more engaged in learning because they view their program as enjoyable. Students who may not be the most scholastic, find gratification and value in attending a vo-tech high school because their passion and interests are central to the instructional program. According to the findings of this study, a high school that aligns to students' passion makes for a more enjoyable learning experience.

Theme 2: Post-high school preparation – career skills. Participants shared that since they were focused on their careers, it was critical for them to select a high school that developed career skills, and prepared students for employment directly after high school. Participants shared the importance of attending a high school that provided an experience different from the traditional high school – “an educational difference” – one that offered an extended period of time during the school day dedicated to hands-on learning of career skills that ultimately prepared them for the work force after high school. These findings are consistent with the existing research, as scholars, vo-tech educators, and policymakers perceived that essential to success of vo-tech schools and their graduates, are the extensive practical, real-world training provided to develop specific career skills that are valued in the respective industries (Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020; Dougherty et al., 2019). Additional alignment of this finding was illustrated when Harris and Clayton (2020) and Cedefod (2020) encouraged governments to prioritize vocational-technical education and ensure continuous investments in vo-tech programs to build the labor market.

Existing literature illustrated that scholars suggest that vocational schools that afford students with critical thinking, problem solving, digital literacy coupled with hands-on training are best suited to meet the employment demands of the future (Briede & Drelinga, 2020; Burgaz, 2008; Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020; MIT Open Learning, 2021). This is consistent with the findings of this study, as participants shared that their motivation to attend a county-run vo-tech high school was the assurance that once they graduate, they would possess the knowledge and career skills necessary to be successful in their post-high school endeavors. Participant 001, Participant 005, and Participant 007 all commented that in their search for a high school, they wanted a high school option that would best prepare them for “life after high school,” one that was “focused on specific careers” to increase their employability. Similarly, Jacob (2017), Lambert (n.d.), and Webb (2022) suggested that the goal of vocational-technical education is to build a strong labor force and increase graduates’ employability by equipping students with valuable skills for their specific career. Participant001 and Participant 007 shared further that revolutionary to their CXV enrollment decision was the notion that CXV permitted their graduates to be ahead of their peers who attend traditional high schools, in terms of industry skills and industry-valued certifications earned while in high school. Cheng et al. (2021) echoed this finding, suggested that vocational and technical training programs are an asset to students’ employability after their high school graduation.

Theme 3: Hands-on learning – personalized learning. Similar to findings from researchers in the field of vo-tech education, such as Calero Lopez and Rodriguez-Lopez (2020) and Dougherty et al. (2019), participants shared that their primary source of motivation to attend a county-run vo-tech high school was the hands-on experience that the programs provided them at the high school level. Participants communicated that the instructional program at CXV

allowed students to have “more class time dedicated to the programs” and that the increased instructional time in their specific program permitted them to hone on practical skills that are essential to their specific career. A preponderance of the responses highlighted that the hands-on aspect of CXV’s program was facilitated by the teachers who were experts in their respective fields. Similarly, Briede and Drelinga (2020), Calero Lopez and Rodriguez-Lopez (2020), and Dougherty et al. (2019) suggested that the trademark of vo-tech schools is the practical, real-world exposure that they offer students, and based on participants responses, this attribute of CXV was their key motivator for their enrollment.

Theme 4: Different peer groups – social diversity. Participants 002, 003, and 004 indicated that one of the unique traits of county-run vo-tech high schools is their ability to attract students throughout the county (multiple school districts) rather than one school district, thus allowing for different peer groups and social diversity among students. Studies and literature reviewed highlighted that the diverse student populations at vo-tech high schools contributes to the post-secondary success of graduates and also increase graduates employability (Dougherty et al., 2019; Turner, 2016). In addition to equipping students with industry-valued skills, vo-tech high schools also play a vital role in preparing students with interpersonal skills that are essential to their graduates’ post-secondary success (Dougherty et al., 2019; Turner, 2016). As a result of the variety of programs offered at vo-tech high schools, Turner (2016) explained that students represent diverse cultures and backgrounds. Similar to the findings from this study, Turner (2016) added that county-run vo-tech high school students are able to successfully form relationships with diverse people and learn cultural competences to be productive in their industries upon their graduation, thus contributing to their post-secondary success.

Participants 005 and 010 stated that attending CXV taught them how to interact with people from different backgrounds, which is a highly sought-after trait by employers. Consistent with the literature, vo-tech high schools allow for increased employability after graduation (Calero López & Rodríguez-López, 2020; Dougherty et al., 2019; Harris & Clayton, 2020; Turner, 2016). Similar to the findings from this study, The State of New Jersey - Department of Labor and Workforce Development (2022) credited the diverse student populations at county-run vo-tech high schools for teaching students how to build cultural competencies, broaden their perspectives, and learn skills that foster an inclusive workplace – traits that promote graduates’ employability. A diverse student population encourages the discussions of diverse perspectives and methods to address problems (Dougherty et al., 2019; Harris & Clayton, 2020). Calero López & Rodríguez-López (2020) and Dougherty et al. (2019) cited that crucial to the global workforce, is the awareness of different cultures and effective interpersonal skills that contribute to the success of organizations – a trait that vo-tech high schools provide their graduates due to their diverse student population.

Research Question 2:

Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, what are their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment in the county-run vo-tech high schools?

Researchers agreed that career technical educational programs offered in high schools often bring monetary and/or emotional satisfaction to graduates and often contributes to students’ post-secondary success, whether that success is educational or career path (Briede & Drelinga, 2020; Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020; Nofiantoro & Affandi, 2018). However, there is a gap in the literature which illustrated historical, limited data on whether the touted post-

secondary success from vo-tech programs, resulted in an increased enrollment demand at vo-tech high schools.

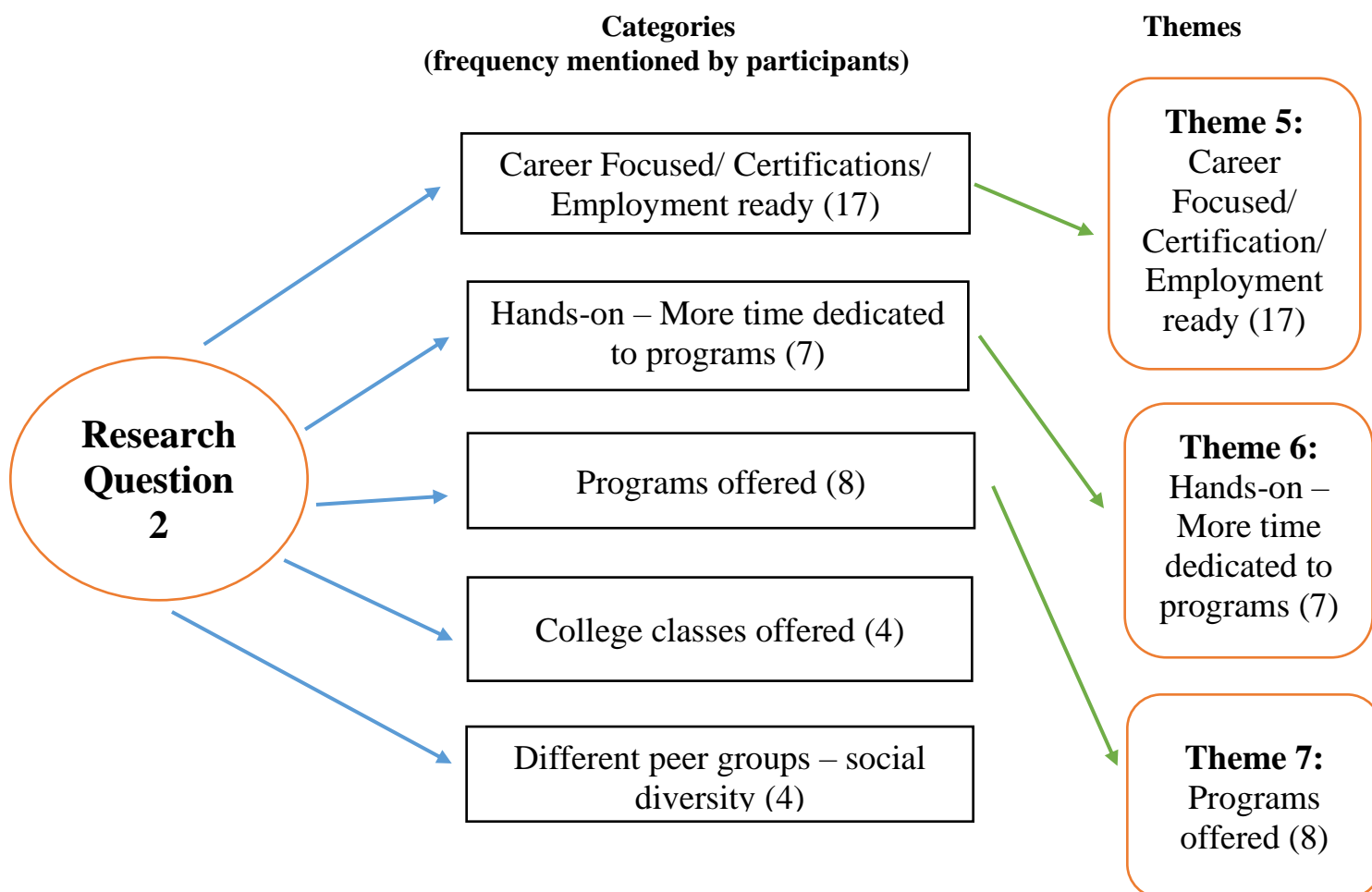
Since vo-tech graduates' perceptions were essential to this study and in alignment with the problem of the study, research question two (RQ2) centered around graduates' perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at the county-run vo-tech high schools. As explained earlier, categories were identified when the frequency of the responses mentioned by participants was at least three times. When recurring categories or overarching ideas were identified to have a frequency of at least five times mentioned in participants' responses to the interview questions, the overarching idea was identified as a theme. As illustrated in Figure 9, the data for RQ2 was organized into categories and three themes (Theme 5 – 7) were identified based on the frequency mentioned during the one-to-one interviews of the participants.

Categories mentioned less than five times were considered as outliers of the data.

Participants' perceived reasons for the increase demand in vo-tech high schools were that these schools are career-focused by providing certifications, career skills, and employment readiness, their instructional program dedicate a considerable amount of time to learning practical skills, and they offer programs that match students' interest and the workforce demand.

Figure 9

Categories and Themes for RQ 2 Based on Frequency Mentioned



Theme 5: Career-focused / certifications / employment ready. Throughout participants’ responses to the second research question, there were numerous references to the career-focused and employment-ready quality of CXV. During her responses, Participant 001 explained the difference between attending her local high school (her “Township” high school) and CXV. She described that in addition to the core courses offered at her Township high school, while at CXV, she was also able to take courses that directly prepared her for her career – “you’re quite literally taking the courses that you need for your career.” Participant 001 further

expounded that given the increasing cost of college tuition, attending college was not an automatic option for many students and CXV provided a lucrative alternative after high school – “...with the price of college rising, it can be completely undoable for a lot of people. So, in vo-tech high schools like CXV, you get yourself prepared for work in case you do not go to college.” Similarly, Harris and Clayton (2020) cited that vo-tech schools are focused on career skills as they enhance students’ development by increasing industry-specific skills that promote their career progression. Other participants (Participants 001, 002, 007, 008, and 011) shared similar comments and applauded county-run vo-tech high schools for ensuring that students graduate high school with industry-valued credentials that make them ready for employment and competitive in the labor market directly after high school – “CXV gives you the opportunity to leave with some kind of certification.” Participant 001 referenced the opportunity for students in the cosmetology program to graduate with their New Jersey State Cosmetologist License, or students in various programs earning their Occupational Safety and Health Administration -10 (OSHA-10) certification. Participants commended their county lawmakers for financing the OSHA-10 certifications because students who did not attend CXV self-funded these certifications that made them equipped and qualified as entry-level employees. Participant 004 echoed the sentiments of others, where she perceived that the likelihood for CXV graduates to earn lucrative employment immediately after graduating high school was the main reason for the increase demand for enrollment at CXV.

The ability to start working as soon as you're done with high school – that’s a big attraction for students -- not only does that have dollar signs next to it, but it also has a need and a job guarantee after high school.

Budgell (2022) and Kreisman and Stange (2019), highlighted similar results, that vo-tech students take advantage of industry-valued certifications offered at their school to boost their practical skills and increase their employability. Participant 005 summarized the answer to RQ2 simply as – “...the option to work right after high school if you choose, that is a big reason to choose CXV.”

Theme 6: Hands-on – more time dedicated to programs. Participant 010 highlighted the importance of dedicating a large amount of instructional time to the specific program courses.

We spent a lot of time in our shop classes – the schedule was block scheduling so we had 3 hours every day in shop class learning about our specific program. More experience in the field/trade - the more beneficial it is, whether that be cost wise or just compared to your peers in other high schools.

Participant 008 also agreed that increased instructional time in the program classes is a reason why more students desire to attend county-run high schools.

CXV’s programs allow student students to spend a huge chunk of the school day in their trade and learning trade skills. I was in the dancing program and every day we had 3 hours just dedicated to dancing and learning skills and techniques – this is a big plus that other high schools do not offer.

Similarly, Cheng et al. (2021) cited that dedicating sufficient time to teaching practical skills at vo-tech schools is an asset to students’ employability and success. Therefore, as noted by the participants, this touted promise of success by vo-tech high schools, is their perceived reason for the increased demand for enrollment at county-run vo-tech high schools.

Theme 7: Programs offered. Participant 002, Participant 008, Participant 009, and Participant 010 credited the increase demand for enrollment at county-run vo-tech high schools such as CXV to the variety of programs that are offered. The participants explained that the wide array of programs offered at CXV were directly aligned to their passions and interests. Participant 001 encapsulated the experiences that many participants shared, "...students wish to have a connection with their passion and the programs offered at CXV matched my passion. Other high schools did not provide me with that option." The study revealed that one perceived reason for the increased demand for enrollment in the county-run vo-tech high schools is that the fact that students' interests, passions, and desired careers are directly aligned to the programs offered at CXV. As a result, participants noted that attending high school at CXV was enjoyable, they were motivated to learn, and most importantly, they were actively engaged in their learning. Participants expressed that the alignment of the programs at CXV to their interest fueled their success.

Calero Lopez and Rodriguez-Lopez (2020) cited similar results that students who are engaged in a program that is directly aligned to their interest, are more likely to be successful in school because they are enjoying learning skills and content that line up with their passion. Additionally, research conducted by Cedefop (2020) revealed that adults who pursue vocational training in a field of interest are more likely to be successful than those who select fields of lesser interest. Cedefop (2020) suggested that the same is likely to be true for high school aged students. Consequently, Cedefop (2020) recommended that vo-tech schools should offer programs that are aligned to their students' interest to maximize student success.

The findings from RQ2 were consistent with the reasons found in the existing research, which motivated students to attend vo-tech high schools (Harris & Clayton, 2020; Kreisman &

Stange, 2019). Participants' responses to the second research question clearly indicated that vo-tech high schools contribute to post-secondary success because industry-specific classes, which produced skilled workers, constituted an extensive part of the instructional day. As a result of the acquired industry-valued skills and the employability of vo-tech high school graduates, the demand for county-run vo-tech high schools continues to increase exponentially. Although prior research in the field of vocational-technical education did not account for vo-tech high school graduates' perceptions regarding the reasons for increased interest and demand for vo-tech high schools, the findings from this study revealed distinct consistency with prior research, notably: vo-tech training contributes to post-secondary success, creates skilled workers, vo-tech programs promotes students' success and increases graduates' employability (Briede & Drelinga, 2020; Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020; Cedefop, 2020; Cheng et al., 2021; Dougherty et al., 2019; Harris & Clayton, 2020).

Research Question 3:

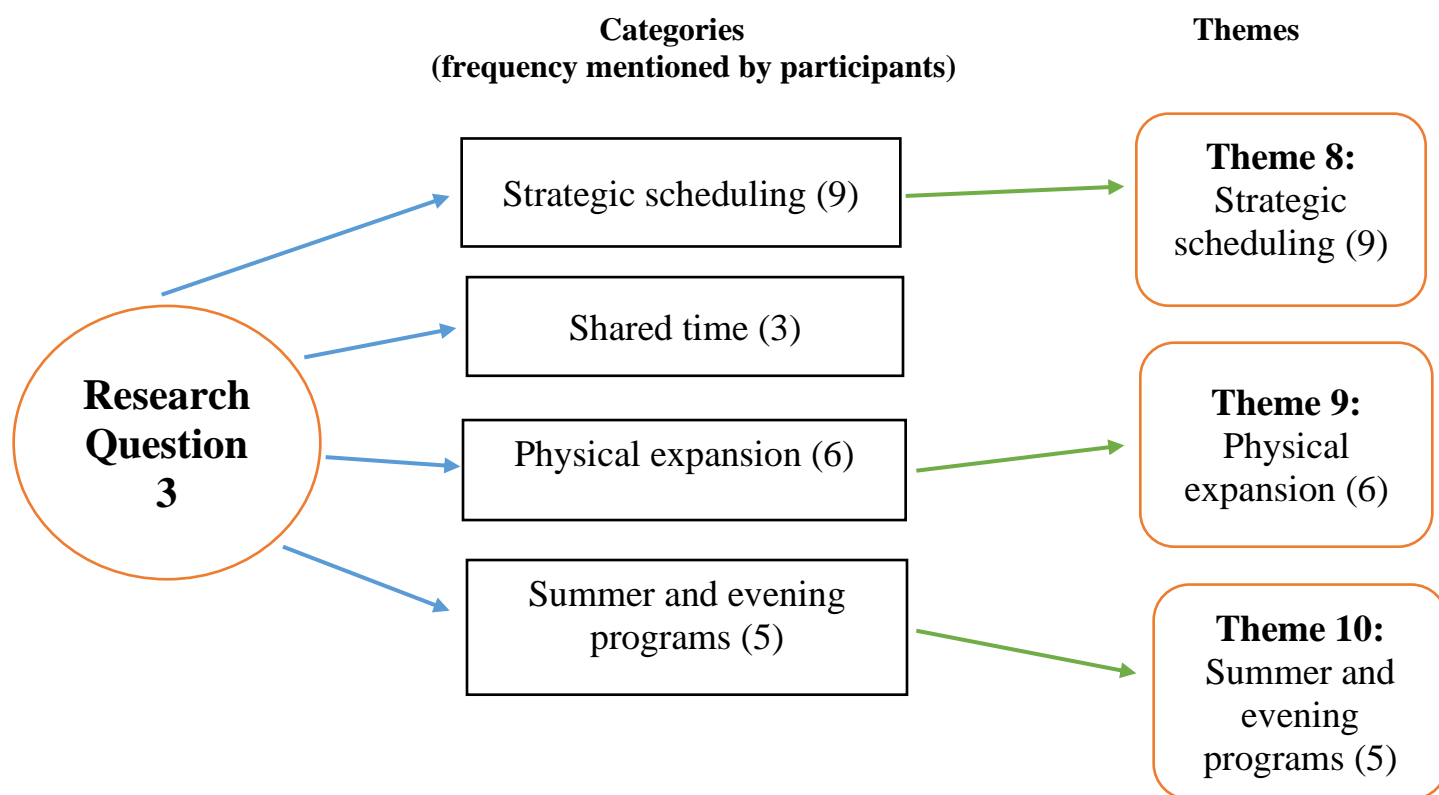
Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased or improved at CXV?

The problem addressed in this study was the limited enrollment opportunities in county-run vo-tech high schools. Although it was critical to gather participants' perceptions on their source of motivation to enroll at CXV and their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at county-run vo-tech high schools, essential to addressing the problem of the study, was to gather how participants perceived that enrollment opportunities can be increased or improved at CXV based on their lived experiences. Therefore, interview questions associated with research question three (RQ3), required participants to share how they perceived the problem of the study can be addressed. Categories were identified when the frequency of the

responses mentioned by participants was at least three times. When recurring categories or overarching ideas were identified to have a frequency of at least five times mentioned in participants' responses to the interview questions, the overarching idea was identified as a theme. Figure 10 illustrates that the responses for RQ3 were organized into categories and after the analysis process, three themes (Theme 8 – 10) were identified based on the frequency mentioned during the one-to-one interviews of the participants. Categories mentioned less than five times were considered as outliers of the data.

Figure 10

Categories and Themes for RQ 3 Based on Frequency Mentioned



Theme 8: Strategic scheduling. Participants recalled their experiences in their senior year at CXV and connected that experience with a possible resolution to address the study's problem. Participants shared that during their senior year, they (and the majority of students in their senior class) rarely had classes on the CXV campus because they were either employed at one of CXV's business partners (the school-to-work program), or they were taking college courses through CXV's partnership with the local community college. Participants reflected and explained that considering the absence of most seniors in the building, more classrooms would be available to the underclassmen. During their interviews, Participants excitedly suggested that creating strategic students' schedule whereby the required core courses and certifications were completed in grades nine to eleven, would permit all seniors to be out of the building (either on their apprenticeship in their career industry or on the college campus taking college classes). The participants further reasoned that strategic schedules that allowed seniors to be out of the building would create physical space in the building to possibly double the enrollment for the entry grade (the freshman class). In the words of Participant 010 – "...set up the schedule to have more classes and certifications before senior year – so that in senior year, students can take college classes or work and be out of the building." Participant 006 added – "... by distributing courses in the semesters, and especially when you have kids now going over to the college – it frees up space for more students to attend." The participants acknowledged that the creation of such strategic schedules would propel an expansion of the school-to-work program and the collegiate high school program, but they agreed that this change would provide far more benefits to students' post-secondary success. Participant 004 suggested,

In senior year, offer college level classes on the college campus. In so doing, the high school campus would only have grades 9-11 therefore, more students in these grades can be accommodated – this would also make students more successful after high school.

Participants stressed that the creation of a strategic school schedule that permitted students to earn all their high school graduation requirements and industry certifications before their senior year, would also allow more students the opportunity to enroll at CXV without exceeding the capacity of the existing physical building. Consistent with the findings, studies conducted by Budgell (2022) and Kreisman and Stange (2019) showed the importance of strategic scheduling in vo-tech high schools. Studies showed that students who are not enrolled in a vocational program in the first and second year of high school, actively seek vocational training during their 11th and 12th grade years (Budgell, 2022, Kreisman & Stange, 2019). Similarly, studies conducted by Jacob (2017), Lambert (n.d.), and Webb (2022) illustrated the importance of strategic scheduling at vo-tech high schools to ensure that students learn valuable skills in preparation for employment in their senior year and beyond high school.

Theme 9: Physical expansion. Initial responses to questions about ways to increase enrollment opportunities at CXV, participants provided the most obvious answer – physically expand the building or campus. Participant’s 006 response “the most obvious way that I see, is to physically expand the school” was echoed by participants 004, 007, 008, 009, and 011, with a simple response – “Physical expansion of the school.” This finding is consistent with existing literature that provide policymakers irrefutable evidence to expand vocational education programs as a method to increase skilled workers and afford youths a gateway to sustainable employment (Cedefod, 2020; Kreisman & Stange, 2019). Other studies show that 11th and 12th grade students actively seek vocational training to boost their skills in various industries thus

rendering expansion of vo-tech high schools as a necessity (Budgell, 2022, Kreisman & Stange, 2019). Studies conducted by Harris and Clayton (2020) also recommended that lawmakers invest in more vo-tech schools with a model that has been proven to be successful. Essentially, Harris and Clayton (2020) advocated for an expansion of the vocational training programs in schools. Similarly, a study conducted by Lambert (n. d.), not only examined the pitfalls of traditional vo-tech institutions but also highlighted the need to return to schools that offer varied vocational-technical training programs and expanding these institutions.

Theme 10: Summer and evening programs. Participants diligently explored avenues to afford students attending non-vo-tech high schools an opportunity to learn and engage in career technical programs. Participants suggested an expansion of the current evening CTE Night School offered at CXV and also suggested a summer program. Participant 008 explained that “summer programs would allow those students who cannot attend CXV during the school year to earn CTE credits and certifications.” Participants discussed that it was vital that educators and county officials recognized that there are countless students who could benefit from a vo-tech program, but due to the limited enrollment opportunities at the county-run vo-tech high schools, they are unable to fulfill their career dream. Therefore, participants urged lawmakers and vo-tech administrators to develop additional pathways to engage non-vo-tech students in the county-run vo-tech high schools and CTE programs. Participant 003 stated, “the people who make the decisions about the vo-tech schools must be creative and find other ways to give the youths that opportunity to attend CXV – this could make a difference in their future – for the better.” Participant 002 also shared a similar idea – “offer summer programs – maybe students take one or two vo-tech courses in the summer, then in the school year have a night/evening program for high school aged kids – this could have a huge impact on their future.” Consistent with

participants' suggestions, scholars such as Briede and Drelinga (2020), Burgaz (2008), and Calero Lopez and Rodriguez-Lopez (2020) recommended that since vocational schools offer students soft skills coupled with hands-on training, part-time access to these schools or programs was best suited to meet the employment demands of the future, rather than no access. Existing literature by Jacob (2017), Lambert (n.d.), and Webb (2022) also suggested that students' access to at least the CTE programs that are in high demand, would be beneficial to improving the labor market.

More than half of the participants shared that based on their experience at CXV, they believed that creating a strategic schedule for the school would provide more students an opportunity to enroll in CXV and other county-run vo-tech high schools. The findings of this study revealed that the creation of a "strategic schedule" where seniors are required to either take college classes (outside the high school building) at a partnering college or are working out of the building in their respective field, will address the problem of this study. The findings show that a strategic master schedule will increase the physical space in the building, thus affording more students the opportunity to enroll in CXV and addressing the problem of limited enrollment opportunities at county-run vo-tech high schools.

The findings from the third research question can undeniably contribute to the existing literature because prior studies have not addressed ways to increase enrollment opportunities at vocational-technical high schools. Although researchers such as Calero Lopez and Rodriguez-Lopez (2020) and Dougherty et al. (2019) hailed the benefits of vo-tech schools and recognized that career and technical education should be infused into secondary education, their research failed to explore avenues to expand vocational-technical education to engage more high school-aged students. Therefore, the findings from this study would fill a void in the literature and offer

options and recommendations to educators and lawmakers to make vocational-technical education accessible to more high school students.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The problem addressed in this research study is the limited enrollment opportunities in county-run vo-tech high schools due to the increased number of students desiring to enroll in these schools in New Jersey, according to Burney (2022) and Gonser (2019), causing prospective students the missed opportunity to pursue their career pathway in high school. Through in-depth one-to-one interviews with participants, this study explored the lived experiences of CXV graduates with regard to their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at CXV and how they perceived that enrollment opportunities could be increased at CXV. Consequently, this study was guided by three research questions. Since the problem of limited enrollment opportunities at the county-run vo-tech high schools continued to persist, I wanted to first understand graduates' source of motivation to attend a county-run vo-tech high school, thus the first research question.

Based on participants' candid comments, they wanted a high school option that would best prepare them for life after high school, one that was focused on specific careers. Consistent with Webb (2022), participants believed that vo-tech high schools and CTE training play a vital role in developing society's human resources since these programs create skilled workers, increase employees' productivity, strengthen the local economy, and enhance citizens' quality of life. Participants shared that not only did their experience at a vo-tech high school prepare them for a more successful future, but the programs offered at CXV were also aligned with their passion, making their learning experience more engaging, enjoyable, and relevant – attributes that were lacking in their home high schools. In alignment with previous studies reviewed by

Briede and Drelinga (2020), Calero Lopez and Rodriguez-Lopez (2020), and Dougherty et al. (2019), participants explained that their CTE programs provided them with specific industry-valued skills while preparing them for the demands of the labor market. In contrast to traditional high schools, participants yearned for an “educational difference,” one where there were extended periods of time dedicated to hands-on learning of career skills. The instructional program at CXV afforded the participants with a significant amount of the instructional day dedicated to hands-on learning, developing career skills, and preparing students for either college or employment directly after high school. As a result of the skills and certifications earned at CXV, graduates were more advanced in vocational skills, in terms of industry-specific skills and industry-valued certifications acquired while at CXV, compared to their peers who attended traditional high schools. Consistent with findings from Harris and Clayton (2020), participants encouraged county commissioners and other lawmakers to prioritize vocational education investments for their youths. As reviewed in the literature, participants explained that in addition to program-specific skills learned at CXV, they were also afforded with soft skills that were critical to their success in the industry – skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and digital literacy that coupled with the extensive hands-on training were best suited to meet the employment demands of the labor market (Briede & Drelinga, 2020; Burgaz, 2008; Calero Lopez & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020; MIT Open Learning, 2021).

Regarding the second research question, the study findings revealed that participants perceived that the reasons for an increased demand for enrollment at county-run vo-tech high schools were due to the programs offered, the focus on industry-specific practical skills and certifications that prepared graduates for employment immediately after high school. The programs offered at CXV were directly connected to students’ passion, interest, and future career

aspirations. CXV offered a wide variety of programs that allowed students to explore other interests and career pathways. Participants perceived that vo-tech high schools provide students with a more lucrative option after high school as compared to non-vocational technical high schools. Participants praised CXV for the opportunity to earn industry-valued credentials that were recognized by employers, which gave them an employment advantage compared to their peers who did not attend a vo-tech high school. This was consistent with the literature reviewed, where Dougherty et al. (2019) found that 90% of the students in Arkansas who took CTE courses at vocational high schools, earned industry-recognized credentials which increased their employability upon graduation.

The study findings on how participants perceived that enrollment opportunities can be increased or improved at CXV, were initially based on a physical expansion of the building. However, participants agreed that this method would require a significant amount of financial and human resources. A more realistic and immediate method to increase enrollment opportunities, according to the participants, was to create a strategic schedule where students complete their graduation requirements prior to their senior year, allowing for the ability to accommodate more students in the building for the ninth to eleventh grade years. Then during the last year of high school, students would be at off campus sites either taking college classes at the college or working in the field with the school-to-work program. This method would only allow students in grades nine to eleven to be present in the high school building, thus leaving more classroom space to double the enrollment opportunities for new students. Offering summer and evening programs at the vo-tech high school to students who attended other high schools, would be another approach to afford more students the opportunity to learn practical, career-focused skills and earn industry-valued certifications and licenses before their high school

graduation. Consistent with the literature reviewed, participants' perceptions highlighted the need to afford opportunities to more students who do not attend vo-tech high schools, so that they are immersed in career and technical education and training programs to foster sustainable post-high school employment and reduce unemployment among youths (Aw, 2019; Dougherty et al., 2019; Harris & Clayton, 2020; Krafft, 2018; Li & Seeberg, 2022; Nofiantoro & Affandi, 2018; Ozer, 2022).

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that vo-tech high school educational leaders strategically create student schedules that permit students to learn industry-specific practical skills as well as complete their high school academic graduation requirements according to state policy, prior to their fourth year of high school. Therefore, educational leaders are recommended to carefully examine their state's graduation requirements vis-a-vis this finding and create a vo-tech high school graduation road map for students. This road map would ensure that all core academic courses required for graduation are successfully completed prior to the fourth year of high school. It is recommended that the road map also ensures that through program-specific courses, students learn key industry-valued skills desired by employers, by the end of their third year in the vo-tech high school. At the end of each academic year (year one, two, and three), the students' individual graduation road map should summarize the credits earned (as per the state's graduation requirements) and the certifications that were successfully completed. The students' completed road map at the end of their third year of high school, would then be a passport to either off-campus college classes or industry-based employment. By creating a graduation road map to complete graduation and industry certification requirements by the end of junior year of vo-tech high school, students' strategic schedules would be created for the first three years in the vo-tech high school. Based on the findings of this study; by

successfully creating these strategic schedules, county-run vo-tech high schools would be able to double the number of students in their freshman class.

In order for the creation of the strategic schedule to be successful, all stakeholders must agree with the model and take a firm stance to ensure its integrity. First, students and parents must agree that all graduation and vocational employment requirements must be completed at the end of junior year. Secondly, educational leaders and vo-tech high school faculty must be diligent in ensuring that students' schedules are robust, by eliminating breaks in schedules, such as study halls. Thirdly, as referenced in the literature by Dougherty et al. (2019) and Harris and Clayton (2020), to ensure vo-tech graduates' post-secondary success, it is recommended that vo-tech high schools form strong partnerships with program-specific businesses and colleges to ensure a well-organized fourth year plan for students. These mutual affiliations will ensure the placement of vo-tech high school seniors in either college courses or employment. Dougherty et al. (2019) proposed that high school career and technical education (CTE) courses have favorable future academic and employment outcomes due to the learned skills from the vocational programs and therefore is considered a public investment in vo-tech high school graduates' postsecondary plans. Calero Lopez and Rodriguez-Lopez (2020) also highlighted that vo-tech schools, as a result of students' direct practical immersion in college level academic content and/or industry-based employment, teach their students a variety of other competencies such as critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, and perseverance, which ultimately promote their post-secondary success.

The strategic schedule grounded in the graduation road map would likely increase the number of students earning an associate's degree while in high school. Therefore, it is recommended that county officials and lawmakers make concessions for either free, subsidized,

or reduced tuition for students desiring to take college courses in their senior year. Consistent with Briede and Drelinga (2020) and Harris and Clayton (2020), participants encouraged lawmakers to empower vo-tech students by affording them the opportunities to prepare for their post-secondary aspirations. One way in which this can be done is by offering free or reduced college tuition for vo-tech high school students enrolled in college courses.

Due to the likely rigidity of the strategic schedule, it is highly recommended that measures are developed to ensure that students enrolling in the county-run vo-tech high schools are certain of their selected program of study because it is unlikely that they will be able to change programs once enrolled. Therefore, it is recommended that vo-tech school leaders create a Program Showcase, where prospective students shadow different programs by attending mini workshops with hands-on activities, to offer potential students an opportunity to engage in the program and foresee some of the required skills for the specific programs. During the Program Showcase, prospective students can shadow multiple programs thus giving them experiential learning before deciding on their program of study. Based on the findings in this study, students are motivated to attend a county-run vo-tech high school because the programs offered are aligned to their passion. The Program Showcase will also allow students to better align their interests and passion to a program offered at the vo-tech high school before submitting their application.

Recommendations for Future Research

Vocational-technical high schools embrace tailored learning paths where students explore diverse pathways aligned with their passion and interests and learn industry-focused skills that promote success in their respective fields (Shin & Bills, 2021; Webb, 2022). The notion that vo-tech high schools propel their graduates' success immediately after graduation has been validated

by many scholars such as Calero Lopez and Rodriguez-Lopez (2020) and Dougherty et al. (2019), resulting in an extensive increase of enrollment demand for these high schools. Subsequently, the problem of low supply and high demand was created – limited supply of vo-tech high school and the increased demand for student enrollment (Allais, 2022; Burney, 2022; Gonser, 2019). Based on the findings of this study, the most sustainable method to increase enrollment opportunities for students desiring to enroll in a vo-tech high school, is to create a strategic instructional schedule that allows students in their fourth year of a vo-tech high school, to be fully immersed in college matriculation or industry-based employment. While many states and localities have several types of schedules for vo-tech high school students, limited research exists connecting the different types of schedules with the successes of graduates. Although it is important for educational leaders to explore avenues to afford more students with an opportunity to attend a vo-tech high school, increasing the enrollment of these schools at the expense of graduates' success will be a futile endeavor.

Therefore, to build on this study, future research analyzing the success rate of vo-tech high school graduates vis-a-vis the several types of vo-tech instructional schedules, will provide needed insight to educational leaders and lawmakers on the future of vo-tech high schools. A study aimed at discovering a vo-tech high school instructional schedule with graduates' success while fostering increased student enrollment, will serve as an excellent model for future vocational-technical learning institutions. A study that not only analyzes the varied schedules of vo-tech high schools in the United States but also incorporates instructional schedules of vo-tech high schools in other countries. It is imperative that future researchers in this field attempt to minimize the limitations of this study by ensuring a representation of a wide range of vo-tech

programs, graduating years, and types of instructional schedules used throughout the United States and other countries around the world.

The next logical step of future studies in this field is to gather samples of instructional schedules from worldwide vo-tech high schools. Then collect data that substantiates the success of graduates who used these different schedules, carefully ensuring the inclusion of multiple programs, graduating years, and localities. Additionally, identify the instructional model or schedule that would afford most students the opportunity to attend a vo-tech high school. Consequently, the vo-tech instructional model or schedule that promotes increased enrollment and fosters increased graduates' success, would be an effective instructional design for educational leaders to adopt and would likely revolutionize the future of vocational-technical education.

This study included a small sample of participants from one county-run vo-tech high school in New Jersey. Conducting the same study and expanding the sample size to include participants from multiple county-run vo-tech high schools across the state would provide a richer description of the phenomenon and would confirm whether the findings were consistent with other county-run vo-tech high schools in the state or limited to one locality. Future researchers could also employ a mixed method research design where both qualitative and quantitative data can be collected and analyzed. By collecting and comparing application and accepted student enrollment data for multiple county-run vo-tech high schools across the state in various CTE programs, future researchers can further prove or disprove whether there are limited enrollment opportunities for students in New Jersey to attend a county-run vo-tech high school. This comparative approach can help future researchers generate theories to explain local issues of vocational education to shape policies and educational practices within CTE programs.

Conclusions

Traditionally, society viewed vocational education and career technical training programs suitable for students who were deemed less academically inclined and needed a second trade option to be financially sustainable in their adult years (Harris & Clayton, 2020). However, due to the rapid onset of post-secondary education costs and the increasing cost of living, there has been a sharp pivot to this rhetoric as citizens, lawmakers, and educational leaders realized that learning industry-valued skills while in high school exponentially propel graduates' employability and career success (Dougherty et al., 2019; Krafft, 2018). According to Burney (2022) and Gonser (2019), the touted successful impact of vocational education on high school graduates' quality of life, created a high demand for the county-run vo-tech high schools in New Jersey as more youths yearn to attend these high-sought after high schools. The result is a problem of high demand and a low supply to satisfy the needs of the local communities as the existing county-run vo-tech high schools are unable to meet the enrollment demands. The gap in the research indicated the need for vo-tech high school graduates' perceptions for the reasons for increased enrollment demand and how they perceived vo-tech high school enrollment opportunities can be increased. Bridging this research gap will provide valuable insight to inform future vo-tech high school policies to address the limited enrollment opportunities at the county-run vo-tech high school in New Jersey.

Consequently, this study answered three central questions: 1) what were graduates' sources of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school? 2) what were graduates' perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment in the county-run vo-tech high schools? and 3) how did graduates perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased or improved at a county-run vo-tech high school (CXV)? The study findings indicated that students

were motivated to attend a county-run vo-tech high school instead of their traditional district school because it provided them with programs that were directly aligned to their career interests that trained them with hands-on learning experiences and equipped them with career skills that prepared them for post-high school opportunities. Study findings also revealed that participants believed that county-run vo-tech high schools were career-focused with programs that aligned to students' interest and the workforce demand. Subsequently, the study pointed to the combination of these attributes as the reasons for the increased demand and limited enrollment opportunities at the county-run vo-tech high school in County X. By strategically creating student schedules that allowed all graduation and employment certifications to be satisfied by the end of junior year, participants in this study believed that vo-tech educational leaders will be able to enroll more students in the entry cohorts at the county-run vo-tech high schools. The study findings suggested that students' schedule would require the senior class to either attend college classes at their off-campus partner college and/or work in their respective industry through the school-to-work program, thus affording the physical space in the building to accommodate more students in grades nine to eleven. Additional findings revealed that participants perceived that even more students can be given the opportunity to learn vocational technical skills if educational leaders expanded the current evening CTE Night School and included summer programs to train students who attend traditional high schools in CTE program specific skills.

Based on this study, it was recommended that educational leaders create a vo-tech high school graduation road map for students. The graduation road map should encompass the completion of all core academic courses required for graduation prior to the fourth year of high school. It was also recommended that by the end of students' third year in the vo-tech high school, the graduation road map ensured the acquisition of key industry-valued skills desired by

employers in the field. Critical to any changes in educational policies, participants recognized that it is essential that all stakeholders agree with the model to satisfy graduation and vo-tech employment requirements within three years of vo-tech high school enrollment to ensure the integrity and success of the model. Additionally, it was recommended that specific parameters are established to sustain the “three-year vo-tech high school graduation requirement model” due to the likely rigidity of the strategic schedule.

This study focused on vo-tech high school graduates’ perceptions of one county-run vo-tech high school on ways to improve enrollment opportunities for students desiring to start their vocational technical career pathway in high school. The study unequivocally indicated that students were motivated to enroll in county-run vo-tech high schools due to the myriad of post-secondary opportunities and benefits, resulting in continued demand for more enrollment opportunities in these high schools. Therefore, educational leaders and lawmakers are charged with the arduous task of creating more opportunities for students to be immersed in vocational-technical education and training programs. Based on the findings of this study, one of the most sustainable ways to achieve this goal and begin to alleviate the problem of limited county-run vo-tech high school enrollment opportunities, is to create strategic student schedules where vo-tech high school students satisfy graduation and vocational employment requirements within three years of high school and dedicate the final year of high school to taking college courses and/or industry-specific employment. This “three-year vo-tech high school graduation requirement model” would allow educational leaders to offer more students the opportunity to access vocational technical education, skills, and certifications that are ultimately essential to their post-secondary success.

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Appendices

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Appendix A

RECRUITMENT FLYER



"Graduates' Perceptions on the Reasons for the Enrollment Uptrends of Vocational-Technical Education."

RESEARCH STUDY

GCIT Graduates Needed!

ABOUT

My name is Sybil Girard, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU). I'm inviting you to participate in an essential research study to learn about GCIT graduates' experiences with regard to their perceived reasons for the increased demand for students to attend GCIT, and how they perceive that more students can be given an opportunity to attend GCIT. Your participation can provide valuable insights into the future of vocational-technical education.

COMPENSATION

Upon successful completion of the research activities, you will receive a **\$25 Amazon eGift Card** via email as a token of appreciation for your invaluable contribution to this study.

1

Eligibility Criteria

To participate, you must:

- Be at least 18 years and older.
- Graduated from Gloucester County Institute of Technology (GCIT).
- Attended all 4 years of high school (grades 9-12) at GCIT.
- Was enrolled in the same vocational program for the 4 years you attended GCIT.

2

Research Activities

As a participant, you will be asked to:

- ✓ Participate in a 1:1 online interview on Zoom (takes 30-40 minutes). Interviews will be recorded.
- ✓ Review your interview transcript via email and if needed send corrections/additions via email (takes 10-15 minutes).

Participants will be asked questions about:

- Their motivation to enroll in GCIT.
- The reasons why they enrolled in their specific vocational program at GCIT.
- Their opinion about the reason for so many students wanting to attend GCIT.
- Based on their experience, their perceptions for the reasons for limited enrollment opportunities at GCIT.
- Their views on ways of increasing opportunities for more students to attend GCIT.

3

Support

- All your questions will be answered prior to and during the study.
- All activities are optional: you may skip any part of the research that you do not wish to complete and may stop at any time.



Participation in this study is strictly voluntary!



FOR ADDITIONAL DETAILS OR TO EXPRESS INTEREST, CONTACT SYBIL GIRARD, OR SCAN THE QR CODE AND THE RESEARCHER WILL CONTACT YOU.



sgirard@gcecnj.org

Sybil Girard
Doctoral Student at National University

Appendix B

CONSENT LETTER

Introduction

My name is Sybil Girard, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU).

I am conducting research on the lived experiences of graduates from Gloucester County Institute of Technology (GCIT) with regard to their perceived reasons for the increased demand to enroll in GCIT and how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased at GCIT.

The problem to be addressed in this research study is due to the increased number of students desiring to enroll in a county-run vocational technical (vo-tech) high schools in New Jersey, there are limited enrollment opportunities in these schools, according to Burney (2022) and Gonsler (2019), causing prospective students the missed opportunity to pursue their career pathway in high school.

The topic of this research is “Graduates’ Perceptions on the Reasons for the Enrollment Uptrends of Vocational-Technical Education.” I am seeking your consent to participate in this research.

Please read this document to learn more about this research and determine if you would like to participate. Your participation is completely voluntary, and I will address your questions or concerns at any point before or during the research.

Eligibility

You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

5. You are 18 years and older.
6. You graduated from Gloucester County Institute of Technology (GCIT).
7. You attended all 4 years of high school (grades 9-12) at GCIT.
8. You were enrolled in the same vocational program for the 4 years you attended GCIT.

I hope to include 12 people in this research.

Activities

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 1:1 online interview over Zoom for 30-40 minutes, which will be recorded.
2. Review your interview transcript via email for 10-15 minutes.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your motivation to enroll in GCIT.
- The reasons why you enrolled in your specific vocational program at GCIT.
- Your opinion about the reason for so many students wanting to attend GCIT?
- Based on your experience, your perceptions for reasons for the limited enrollment opportunities at GCIT.
- Your views about some ways of increasing opportunities for more students to attend GCIT?

All activities and questions are optional: you may skip any part of this research that you do not wish to complete and may stop at any time.

If you need to complete the activities above in a different way than I have described, please let me know, and I will attempt to make other arrangements.

Risks

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. You can still skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time.

Benefits

If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this research.

Privacy and Data Protection

I will take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information, but I cannot guarantee confidentiality of your research data. In addition to me, the following people and offices will have access to your data:

- My NU dissertation committee and any appropriate NU support or leadership staff
- The NU Institutional Review Board

This data could be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or your legally authorized representative.

I will securely store your data for 3 years. Then, I will delete electronic data and destroy paper data.

How the Results Will Be Used

I will publish the results in my dissertation. I may also share the results in a presentation or publication. Participants will not be identified in the results.

Recording

I would like to audio/video record your responses with Zoom during the interview. You can disable the video function of the online meeting platform at any time.

Compensation

After you complete the interview and review the transcribed interview document and return it to me via email, you will receive a \$25 Amazon eGift Card.

Mandated Reporting

My professional role outside of NU requires me to report suspicion of child or elderly abuse, suspicion of possible harm to self or others, and committed crimes to the appropriate authorities.

Contact Information

If you have questions, you can contact me at: sgirard@gcecnj.org and cell phone 917-808-1451.

My dissertation chair's name is Dr. Laurie Wellner. She works at National University and is supervising me on the research. You can contact her at: lwellner@ncu.edu

If you have questions about your rights in the research or if a problem or injury has occurred during your participation, please contact the NU Institutional Review Board at irb@nu.edu.

Voluntary Participation

If you decide not to participate, or if you stop participation after you start, there will be no penalty to you: you will not lose any benefit to which you are otherwise entitled.

Appendix C

DEVELOPMENT OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Topic: Graduates' Perceptions on the Reasons for the Enrollment Uptrends of Vocational- Technical Education

Interview Protocol Framework

Research Question (from study)	Interview Questions
<p>RQ1: Based on the lived experiences of attending and graduating from CXV, what were graduates' sources of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What were your expectations of high school before attending GCIT? 2. Why did you choose to attend GCIT as opposed to your district high school? 3. What would you say motivated you to attend a vo-tech high school?
<p>RQ2: Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, what are their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment in the county-run vo-tech high schools?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. In what program were you enrolled at GCIT, and why did you select that program? 5. Provide details on whether you knew (and how you knew) that more students wanted to attend GCIT than the number of students who actually received an acceptance offer? 6. Based on your experience of attending GCIT and speaking to other students who attended GCIT, in your opinion, what do you think is the reason for so many students wanting to attend GCIT?
<p>RQ3: Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased/improved at CXV?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Why do you think vo-tech programs such as the ones offered at GCIT are so popular? 8. In your view, what would you say are some ways of increasing opportunities for more students to attend GCIT? 9. If you were asked to present to a committee who is responsible for deciding whether to create more vo-tech high schools in Gloucester County, based on your experience, what would you tell them? Give reasons and examples based on your experience attending GCIT.

Appendix D

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Graduates' Perceptions on the Reasons for the Enrollment Uptrends of Vocational- Technical Education

Interview Script

Hi – my name is Sybil Girard and I am a doctoral student at National University. Thank you for your willingness to participate in my study. Before we begin, I will give you an overview of the purpose of the study and go over what you should expect during and after the interview.

I am doing a qualitative study on the perceptions of vocational-technical (vo-tech) high school graduates in regard to their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at GCIT and how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased at GCIT.

The goal of the study is to address the problem that due to the increased number of students desiring to attend GCIT, there is limited enrollment opportunities for students in Gloucester County to attend a vo-tech high school. Therefore, the goal of the study is to provide your perspective on how enrollment opportunities can be increased for new students at GCIT, based on your experience of attending GCIT.

Do you have any questions on the purpose of the study before I continue?

This interview will be about 40 minutes long and it will be recorded so that it can be transcribed afterwards. During this interview, I will ask you some questions which you should answer based on your experience of attending GCIT. I may ask you follow up questions to get a better understanding of your experience. At any time during this interview, if do not wish to answer a question, feel free to let me know and we will skip that question. You do not have any obligations to any a question that you do not wish to answer. All questions are optional: you may skip any part and may stop at any time.

Once your responses are transcribed, I will give you a copy to review to make sure your comments were recorded correctly. At the time when you review the

interview transcript, you can make any changes/corrections if you believe that you misspoke or want to add more information.

Do you have any questions on the interview process before I continue?

My role is to record your experiences at GCIT based on your answers to the questions. Your name or any of your identifiable information will never be used in the study and I will take necessary measures to protect your security and identity.

The information gathered in the study will be analyzed and the findings will be published in my dissertation. However, participants of the study will never be identified in the results or in my dissertation.

Do you have any questions on securing your identity during the study or regarding any other parts of the study?

So, I will begin now by asking you a few questions about your experience when you attended GCIT – is that ok?

Interview questions (Appendix C) will be asked, if necessary there may be follow-up questions to ensure clarification of participants' responses.

At the end of the interview:

Thank you again for taking the time to participate in my study and for sharing your experiences and perspectives as it relates to the limited enrollment opportunities for students to attend a vo-tech high school in Gloucester County.

I will be in touch with the transcript of your interview. The transcript will be emailed to you for your review and I kindly ask that you return it to me within a week with any additions or corrections.

Do you have any questions before we end?

Thank you and enjoy the remainder of your day/evening.

Appendix E

FIELD TEST DOCUMENT

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed in this research study is due to the increased number of students desiring to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high schools in New Jersey, there are limited enrollment opportunities in these schools, according to Burney (2022) and Gonser (2019), causing prospective students the missed opportunity to pursue their career pathway in high school. County X youngsters are afflicted with stress and emotional trauma because their dream of attending a vo-tech high school is diminished by the realization that CXV is unable to meet the enrollment demands of the county (Oglesby, 2019). As vo-tech enrollment demands increase resulting in limited enrollment opportunities, graduates' motivation to enroll is unclear, since the problem has not been explored from their perspective. Failure to address the limited enrollment opportunities of county-run vo-tech high schools in New Jersey, will negatively impact prospective students who aspire to attend a county-run vo-tech high school in New Jersey.

Over the years, scholars such as Harris and Clayton (2020), Li and Seeberg (2022), Nofiantoro and Affandi (2018), and Ozer (2022), examined the economic value of vo-tech schools. Yet, Dougherty et al. (2019), Krafft (2018), and Kreisman and Stange (2019) indicated the need for further research on graduates' perceptions of their motivation to enroll in a vo-tech school. The gap in the research and the problem of increased demands for county-run vo-tech high schools resulting in limited enrollment opportunities at these schools in New Jersey, prove that further research is warranted. Bridging this research gap will provide valuable insight to inform future vo-tech high school policies to address the limited enrollment opportunities at the county-run vo-tech high school in County X, New Jersey. Failure to increase the enrollment

opportunities in CXV would mean that the local vo-tech high school will be unable to satisfy the demands of County X's growing labor market demands thus rendering an unsustainable high school-to-industry labor pipeline.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of CXV graduates with regard to their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment at CXV and how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased at CXV. According to the New Jersey Department of Education (n. d.), with a graduation rate of 99%, the annual enrollment demands at CXV continue to increase, resulting in a reduced number of applicants who are offered enrollment at the county's lone vo-tech high school. The acceptance rate of CXV decreased from 31% in 2019 to 28.6% in 2022, as the number of applicants increased (The State of New Jersey – Department of Education, 2022). Educational and county leaders yearn to hone on the driving forces behind the uptrends in the enrollment of county-run vo-tech high schools, which results in the problem of limited enrollment opportunities at CXV, thus failing to meet the demands of the county (Burney, 2022). Purposive sampling will be used to select 12 CXV graduates to be the study participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, the number of CXV graduates that will be used in the sample may vary until data saturation is achieved (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Directed by the research questions, the data collected from in-depth interviews using semi-structured questions, will be analyzed to explore participants' motivation to enroll, and their perceptions on how to increase enrollment opportunities for county-run vo-tech high schools such as CXV. Using a thorough process to analyze themes and commonalities, the study will provide insight from the perspective of the graduates on the impactful influences that motivated them to enroll at CXV and ways to

increase enrollment opportunities at the vo-tech high school in County X. Findings and recommendations will be presented to school leaders and county officials to determine the factors that influence students' motivation to enroll in CXV and explore the ways of increasing the enrollment opportunities at the county-run vo-tech high school based on graduates' perceptions. Additionally, the study findings will assist county and education leaders in strategizing solutions to alleviate the problem of limited enrollment opportunities at the county-run vo-tech high school in County X.

Development of Interview Questions

Research Question (from study) (Key words/concepts highlighted)	Interview Questions
<p>RQ1: Based on the lived experiences of attending and graduating from CXV, what were graduates' sources of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What were your expectations of high school before attending GCIT? 2. Why did you choose to attend GCIT as opposed to your district high school? 3. What would you say motivated you to attend GCIT?
<p>RQ2: Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, what are their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment in the county-run vo-tech high schools?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. In what program were you enrolled at GCIT, and why did you select that program? 5. Provide details on whether you knew (and how you knew) that more students wanted to attend GCIT than the number of students who actually received an acceptance offer? 6. Based on your experience of attending GCIT and speaking to other students who attended GCIT, in your opinion, what do you think is the reason for so many students wanting to attend GCIT?
<p>RQ3: Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased/improved at CXV?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Why do you think vo-tech programs such as the ones offered at GCIT are so popular? 8. In your view, what would you say are some ways of increasing opportunities for more students to attend GCIT? 9. If you were asked to present to a committee who is responsible for deciding whether to create more vo-tech high schools in Gloucester County, based on your experience, what would you tell them? Give reasons and examples based on your experience attending GCIT.

Appendix F

PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

The following data will be collected during the pre-screening via voice call, text, or email, after individuals indicate willingness to participate in the study:

1. What is your age?

Answer: _____

2. Did you graduate from Gloucester County Institute of Technology (GCIT).

Answer: _____

3. What years did you attend GCIT?

Answer: _____

4. In what program were you enrolled in at GCIT and how long did you stay in that program?

Answer: _____

Eligibility is

Confirmed – can participate in the study.

Not confirmed – will not be able to participate in the study.

Appendix G

SITE PERMISSION

Michael C. Dicken
Superintendent
mdicken@gcecnj.org



**Gloucester County
Vocational-Technical
School District**
1360 Tanyard Road
Sewell, New Jersey 08080

January 23, 2024

Hello NU IRB,

My name is Michael Dicken and I am the Superintendent at the Gloucester County Vocational Technical School District.

I have reviewed Sybil Girard's study, and I understand that she will be recruiting participants who meet all of the following criteria:

1. Participants must be at least 18 years and older.
2. Participants graduated from Gloucester County Institute of Technology (GCIT).
3. Participants attended all 4 years of high school (grades 9-12) at GCIT.
4. Participants were enrolled in the same vocational program for the 4 years they attended GCIT.

I grant permission to Sybil Girard to do the following:

1. Obtain a list of graduates' email addresses, that they provided the school for the purposes of post-graduation correspondence, to distribute her recruitment flyer for the study.
2. Use the GCIT social media outlets to post the study's recruitment flyer.
3. Display the recruitment flyer on the school's announcement TV screens.

If you have questions and would like to reach me, please do so at mdicken@gcecnj.org

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Michael Dicken
Superintendent

Appendix H

RECRUITMENT EMAIL LETTER

My name is Sybil Girard, and I am a doctoral student at National University. I am conducting a research study to learn about GCIT graduates' experiences with regard to their perceived reasons for the increased demand for students to attend GCIT, and how they perceive that more students can be given an opportunity to attend GCIT.

I am recruiting individuals who meet all of these criteria:

1. At least 18 years and older.
2. Graduated from Gloucester County Institute of Technology (GCIT).
3. Attended all 4 years of high school (grades 9-12) at GCIT.
4. Was enrolled in the same vocational program for the 4 years they attended GCIT.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 1:1 online interview with me over Zoom for 30-40 minutes. Interviews will be recorded.
2. Review your interview transcript via email for 10-15 minutes, then if needed send corrections/additions to me via email.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your motivation to enroll in GCIT.
- The reasons why you enrolled in your specific vocational program at GCIT.
- Your opinion about the reason for so many students wanting to attend GCIT.
- Based on your experience, your perceptions for the reasons for the limited enrollment opportunities at GCIT.
- Your views about some ways of increasing opportunities for more students to attend GCIT.

Participants in this study will receive a \$25 Amazon eGift card via email after the interview and the review of the interview transcript.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me via email at sgirard@gcecnj.org

Thank you for considering participating in this voluntary research!

Sybil Girard

Appendix I

RECRUITMENT SOCIAL MEDIA POST LETTER

My name is Sybil Girard, and I am a doctoral student at National University. I am conducting a research study to learn about GCIT graduates' experiences with regard to their perceived reasons for the increased demand for students to attend GCIT, and how they perceive that more students can be given an opportunity to attend GCIT.

I am recruiting individuals who meet all of these criteria:

5. At least 18 years and older.
6. Graduated from Gloucester County Institute of Technology (GCIT).
7. Attended all 4 years of high school (grades 9-12) at GCIT.
8. Was enrolled in the same vocational program for the 4 years they attended GCIT.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

3. Participate in a 1:1 online interview with me over Zoom for 30-40 minutes. Interviews will be recorded.
4. Review your interview transcript via email for 10-15 minutes, then if needed send corrections/additions to me via email.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your motivation to enroll in GCIT.
- The reasons why you enrolled in your specific vocational program at GCIT.
- Your opinion about the reason for so many students wanting to attend GCIT.
- Based on your experience, your perceptions for the reasons for the limited enrollment opportunities at GCIT.
- Your views about some ways of increasing opportunities for more students to attend GCIT.

Participants in this study will receive a \$25 Amazon eGift card via email after the interview and the review of the interview transcript.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me via email at sgirard@gcecnj.org

Thank you for considering participating in this voluntary research!

Sybil Girard

A one-to-one online interview with me, to hear your perceptions based on your experience of attending GCIT.



Let me Interview you!

Tell me how you think more students can be given an opportunity to attend GCIT.

Appendix J

ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE DATA

Topic: Graduates' Perceptions on the Reasons for the Enrollment Uptrends of Vocational- Technical Education

Research Question (from study)	Interview Questions
RQ1: Based on the lived experiences of attending and graduating from CXV, what were graduates' sources of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What were your expectations of high school before attending CXV? 2. Why did you choose to attend CXV as opposed to your district high school? 3. What would you say motivated you to attend a vo-tech high school?

Analyzed participants' responses for the questions related to RQ1 – to identify initial codes, common categories, connections, and themes.

Analysis of Narrative Data

After multiple review of the data, I believe that I have reached saturation in my data collection with 11 participants.

Participant	Participant's words – Direct Quotes – (direct from interviews)	Phenomenological Reduction – Initial Codes / Common Themes	Connections or Categorized Themes
P001	I wanted a career in theater. I was serious about theater. My home school had theatre and music clubs but they did not have a theatre class or a theatre program that would teach me in-depth skills that would help in my career in theatre after I graduate or that would really match my interest – it did not feel like school. I had been in many theatre clubs, but I needed a program dedicated to my	Programs offered at CXV.	Programs

	<p>interest. Also, I was able to explore my other passions in other programs – that’s why I selected CXV over my home school.</p> <p>Was looking ahead to life after high school and thinking about how I could best prepare myself. A school that was focused on my career and gave me certifications for a job after high school.</p> <p>More class time, more access to arts.</p>	<p>Preparation for life after high school.</p> <p>Time dedicated to program</p>	<p>Post-high school preparation</p> <p>Hands-on learning</p>
P002	<p>Personalized learning experience. Focused learning experience.</p> <p>Go through all four years and learn about the medical field. Four years you get to take the deep dive in program.</p> <p>A more direct path for me to go to college.</p> <p>Professors that have experience in the field. They can give you answers based off of direct experience – definitely the teachers who are experts in their field.”</p> <p>Attending CXV gave me a lot more friends from all over the county that I would not have if I attended my home school. I made friends with people from different cultures and backgrounds at CXV unlike being around the same group of kids from my town. All of</p>	<p>Personalized learning</p> <p>Time dedicated to program</p> <p>College Preparation</p> <p>Experienced teachers in the program field</p> <p>Diverse student population – more friends</p>	<p>Personalized learning</p> <p>Hands-on learning</p> <p>Post-high school preparation</p> <p>Program expert teachers</p> <p>Different peer groups – social diversity</p>

	<p>us knew that CXV had more diverse students and if that was your hope – to make new friends from different areas, then that was a good choice for you. I do not regret the choice to attend CXV because thanks to my diverse group of friends I have visited many countries as an adult and learned about different cultures.</p>		
P003	<p>The programs – take you out of that traditional high school mindset and experience. Interested in culinary arts and pastry.</p> <p>Gives a college-like mindset. To pursue that career path after high school.</p> <p>Collaborate with teachers who do hands-on courses and have experiences and core learnings.</p> <p>Education was much better – in terms of test scores and things I would personally learn.</p> <p>The uniqueness of the school, the different things you would learn, the different peer groups. It attracts people from all over the county.</p> <p>My Parents</p>	<p>Programs offered at CXV.</p> <p>College Preparation</p> <p>Experienced teachers in the program field.</p> <p>Personalized learning</p> <p>Diversity of students and learning.</p> <p>Parents' influence</p>	<p>Programs</p> <p>Post-high school preparation</p> <p>Program expert teachers. Hands-on learning.</p> <p>Personalized learning</p> <p>Different peer groups – social diversity</p> <p>Parents / Family</p>
P004	<p>Cooler in terms of style and social life. Wanted to expand my social life and my opportunities. Wanted to see what the rest of Gloucester County looked like.</p>	<p>Expand social circle and opportunities</p>	<p>Different peer groups – social diversity</p>

	<p>Small class size.</p> <p>Better discipline and learning. Wanted an educational difference.</p>	<p>More access to programs</p> <p>Better educational experience/ learning</p>	<p>Programs</p> <p>Personalized learning/ higher standard</p>
P005	<p>My dad introduced the idea. He used to go to CXV. He had a really great experience through the welding program, which really set him up for his career and the success that he has today.</p> <p>I grew up in a really small town that didn't have many resources – wanted more/better educational experience.</p> <p>Wanted to pursue higher education, or vocational track. Career preparation. I knew that I would be prepared with the skills that I need to get a job. I wanted a school focused on my career.</p> <p>Wanted an introductory to culinary arts and baking and pastry arts. The access to disciplines I could learn about, even if I wasn't in that given discipline, I had access to those faculty members.</p> <p>Met people from across the county, from a social aspect. Making new friends - I was bullied as a kid – CXV looked like I could have a fresh start. Also, I learned how to interact with people from</p>	<p>Parents' influence and testimonials.</p> <p>Better educational experience/ learning.</p> <p>College and career preparation. Learning career skills.</p> <p>Programs offered at CXV. Experienced teachers in the program field.</p> <p>Diversity of students. Expanding social circle. Fresh group of friends.</p>	<p>Parents / Family</p> <p>Personalized learning / higher standard</p> <p>Post-high school preparation. Career Skills acquisition.</p> <p>Programs Program expert teachers.</p> <p>Different peer groups – social diversity</p>

	different backgrounds, which helped me in the workplace.		
P006	<p>CXV gave more of a personal aspect of learning with your teachers and your fellow classmates. I was learning with other kids who shared my interest and learning from teachers who are from the field. They taught me the way I needed to learn the specific skill based on how I learn – by doing and seeing. The lessons were tailored so that I can learn the skills and concepts.</p> <p>Going into a vocational school. A drive for my career - I wanted to pursue some sort of design or engineering. The interior design portion, I knew that there was architectural engineering – CXV allowed me to see both sides of that passion.</p> <p>The vocational hands-on aspect of CXV.</p> <p>In middle school my parents would point out my strengths in just daily activities – they would say things like, “your ideas to redesign your room was really good” – so when it came time to decide on high school, they reminded me of my passion and what I seemed to enjoy. I remember my dad telling me that by going to CXV I would be able to pursue both my interior design and engineering passion. My parents’ encouragement was also</p>	<p>Personalized learning</p> <p>Programs offered at CXV. Career preparation</p> <p>Hands-on learning.</p> <p>The influence of family - parents</p>	<p>Personalized learning</p> <p>Programs Post-high school preparation.</p> <p>Hands-on learning.</p> <p>Parents</p>

	a huge factor in choosing to attend CXV.		
P007	<p>I wanted a new set of people in my life for high school. I didn't have a lot of friends in middle school. I just wanted to reinvent myself - CXV gave me that option.</p> <p>I love that vocational school is free. Also, I got free certifications, like ServSafe.</p> <p>Use these four years in high school to really get ahead of my peers that maybe are going to culinary school that just went to public school. Hands-on training. I did learn a lot of these basics that I can hone in on now that I'm actually in culinary school. To learn all the basics of culinary and baking and production. Also I got the certifications I needed for a job.</p> <p>I really wanted to make sure that I was ready for my college career. For culinary school you need to have prior culinary experience – I got my experience from high school. I wanted a school that would help me focus on my career.</p>	<p>Diversity of students. Expanding social circle. Fresh group of friends.</p> <p>Free access to vocational training and certifications</p> <p>Programs offered at CXV. Time dedicated to program. Ahead of peers in respective field. Career preparation</p> <p>College and career preparation. Getting experience in the field.</p>	<p>Different peer groups – social diversity</p> <p>Free vocational training and certifications. Earn industry-valued credentials</p> <p>Hands-on learning Career Skills acquisition. Programs Post-high school preparation</p> <p>Post-high school preparation Acquire field experience</p>
P008	<p>My mom asked if I wanted to audition.</p> <p>I was not the strongest academic. My academic rigor was not as</p>	<p>Parents' influence</p> <p>A way to enjoy school since academics were not</p>	<p>Parents / Family</p> <p>Personalized learning</p>

	<p>great. Dance was really like my outlet - being able to attend like a “performing arts high school” and actually learn techniques in dancing that are taught to my learning style, it was a way for me to get my education while doing something fun that you love.</p>	<p>strong. Get an education with a focus on students’ interest.</p>	
P009	<p>My mom knew about CXV and heard about her friend's kids going to CXV and how much they loved it there.</p> <p>Wanting to become a physical therapist. So I thought the Allied Health Program was great for me. The programs. Being able to really focus on what I wanted to pursue</p>	<p>Parents’ influence and friends’ testimonials.</p> <p>Interest – program offered at CXV. Focused learning Career preparation</p>	<p>Parents / Family</p> <p>Programs Personalized learning Career preparation Post-high school preparation</p>
P010	<p>My home district is very small - I wanted a bigger class, where I didn't feel like I'd always be knowing everything about everyone and everyone would be knowing me – this is important in the workplace. Employers like people who can get along with all different types of people.</p> <p>CXV had more educational opportunities - the program that I was interested in - specifically the medical program – it was fun and did not feel like school. The elective classes in other programs allowed me to explore my other passions.</p> <p>To learn medical experiences to know if medicine will be right for me.</p>	<p>Diversity of students. Expanding social circle.</p> <p>Programs offered at CXV. Focused learning</p> <p>Getting experience in the field. Career preparation</p> <p>Expert teachers with field experience</p>	<p>Different peer groups – social diversity</p> <p>Programs Personalized learning</p> <p>Career preparation Post-high school preparation</p> <p>Expert program teachers</p>

	<p>My Medical Terminology teacher was a nurse who had experience working in hospitals and other medical facilities – she was well versed on the language and terminology of the field and even taught us tricks to learn the complicated medical terms. I would not have received that experience from a teacher who never worked in the medical field. So it is important that the teachers for the different programs, not only have the knowledge of the content but also have the experience – hands-on experience to teach us tricks of the trade. CXV has that – they hire program teachers who are experts in their field – that was a huge advantage over the other schools in the county.</p>		
<p>P011</p>	<p>I was a bit of a target for bullying – wanted to give myself a clean slate. Get to know people that were brand new to me.</p> <p>The education itself would be better than what I would be getting in my hometown. A higher standard of classes. More programs that interest me. Programs that interest me - three programs I applied for were IT, Business and allied Health.</p> <p>I was required to take all college level courses that would better prepare me for a college environment. I'm building college credit as a high schooler and that</p>	<p>Diversity of students. Expanding social circle. Fresh group of friends.</p> <p>Better educational experience/ learning. Interest – program offered at CXV</p> <p>College and career preparation Ahead of peers in respective field.</p>	<p>Different peer groups – social diversity</p> <p>Higher standard education Programs Personalized learning</p> <p>Career preparation Post-high school preparation</p>

	<p>kind of gave me a leg up on some peers from my hometown.</p> <p>A Vo-tech school and getting the skills for an area of interest and turning that interest into an expertise and a career. Set me ahead for when I became an adult in the working world.</p> <p>I had family members who attended the shared time program at CXV and they were able to compare the education given at CXV to the one given at their high school because they spent half of their day at their high school and the other half at CXV and they told me that CXV was by far the better school to attend. In terms of everything, the programs the way the kids behaved and the benefits after high school. I am happy that I listened to those family members, I think I am in a much better place today than if I attended my home school.</p>	<p>Getting experience in the field. Career preparation Acquisition of career skills Ahead of peers in respective field</p> <p>Family members influence</p> <p>More benefits – programs, students' conduct, post-high school benefits</p>	<p>Acquire field experience Career preparation Career skills acquisition – gain industry-valued skills Post-high school preparation</p> <p>Family members/parents</p>
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Analyzed participants' responses for the questions related to RQ2 – to identify initial codes, common categories, connections, and themes.

Research Question (from study)	Interview Questions
<p>RQ2: Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, what are their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment in the county-run vo-tech high schools?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. In what program were you enrolled at CXV, and why did you select that program? 5. Provide details on whether you knew (and how you knew) that more students wanted to attend CXV than the number of students who actually received an acceptance offer? 6. Based on your experience of attending CXV and speaking to other students who attended CXV, in your opinion, what do you think is the reason for so many students wanting to attend CXV?

Participant	Participant's words – Direct Quotes – (direct from interviews)	Phenomenological Reduction – Initial Codes / Common Themes	Connections or Categorized Themes
<p>P001</p>	<p>Students wish to have a connection with their passion and the programs offered at CXV matched my passion. Other high schools did not provide me with that option.</p> <p>Students want something more practical than a purely academic course, spending more time in your trade. Vo-Tech high schools dedicate more hours in the day for students to engage in their trade. CXV has block schedules which allowed us to spend more time in the day in our program area learning practical skills. Other high schools have 40 minute periods which not lot of</p>	<p>Students' passion for various trades/programs.</p> <p>The practical/hands-on aspect. Spending extended time engaged in the programs.</p>	<p>Programs offered</p> <p>More hands-on More time to programs / field</p>

	<p>time when you are in shop class. At CXV we spent between 2 hours and 3 hours in our programs – this gave us enough time to work on projects just like on a job site.</p> <p>The programs offered at Vo-Tech high schools can prepare you better for a career than your township high school. Because you're quite literally taking the courses that you need for your career.</p> <p>College is not an option for everybody. With the price of college rising, it can be completely undoable for a lot of people. So in vo-tech high schools like CXV, you get yourself prepared for work in case you do not go to college. You leave high school with certifications that you need for work – like in Cosmetology you come out with your state board license. CXV gives you the opportunity to leave with some kind of certification.</p>	<p>Better preparation for career than other high schools.</p> <p>The increasing cost of college tuition does not make it an automatic option after high school.</p> <p>Preparation for careers if college is not an option. Provides industry-valued certifications that can be used directly after high school for work.</p>	<p>More focused on careers compared to other high schools</p> <p>Alternative option to college – High college tuition cost</p> <p>Career preparations</p> <p>Industry-valued certifications More marketable for the work force</p>
P002	<p>Vo-tech high schools give an individualized experience and then you get more hands-on experience.</p> <p>CXV gives you the opportunity in a lot of the programs to leave with some kind of certification.</p> <p>The ability to start working as soon as you're done with high</p>	<p>Individualized experience – more hands-on</p> <p>Programs offered Program certifications</p> <p>Ability to go directly to work after high school</p>	<p>More hands-on Individualized school experience</p> <p>Programs offered Career preparations Industry-valued certifications</p> <p>More marketable for the work force</p>

	<p>school – that’s a big attraction for students.</p> <p>College is expensive and some people may not be able to afford it and may need to work right after high school.</p> <p>Vo-tech high schools also give you the ability to get a little bit of college education under their belt, to see what it was like – they offer college classes.</p>	<p>Expensive college tuition – provides an alternative to college</p> <p>Experience college while in high school</p>	<p>Alternative option to college – High college tuition cost</p> <p>College classes offered – Earn college credits</p>
P003	<p>Vo-Tech high schools give a better education – more rounded – it is not just focused on the academics, but it also gives you hands-on skills that you can use in your career.</p> <p>More opportunities available to you after you graduate.</p> <p>Our teachers were people who worked in the field for years before teaching us. My cosmetology teacher had her own salon for years and wanted to teach the younger generation the skills of the trade. That was valuable because we did not have someone who studied History teaching us how to do hair.</p>	<p>More rounded educational experience – hands-on and academics</p> <p>More opportunities after high school</p> <p>Teachers are experts in their field</p>	<p>Hands-on combined with academics</p> <p>More post-secondary options</p> <p>Expert trade teachers</p>
P004	<p>Vo-tech high schools appeal to a lot of people in putting them on the right track to go straight into their career, or get into college</p>	<p>Provides the option for both career and college prep</p>	<p>College and career preparations options</p> <p>More post-secondary options</p>

	<p>and already have some credits, after high school.</p> <p>In terms of the trade school aspect, kids that graduated and go straight into working - not only does that have dollar signs next to it, but it also has a need and a job guarantee after high school.</p> <p>Kids who want to go to college after high school can begin to take college classes - my peers graduated with an associate's degree. Take as many credits at RCGC as possible to then have maybe less debt in college or a head start in college.</p> <p>CXV is known for offering their students free college classes. Therefore, if kids want to learn a trade and also want to explore college classes, CXV would be the best fit for them, especially if their family is not financially able to pay for the college classes. The other high schools in the county offered college classes, but the kids had to pay out of pocket. Since CXV has a partnership with the college next door, and is another county institution, they are able to offer free college credits to the kids. It's a win-win for CXV students, so more kids would want to attend CXV.</p>	<p>Benefits of more lucrative employment after high school Job guarantee after high school.</p> <p>Experience college while in high school</p> <p>Dual benefit: Learn a trade and take free college classes</p>	<p>Guaranteed employment More lucrative employment More marketable for the work force Better financial benefit after high school</p> <p>College classes offered – Earn college credits</p> <p>College classes Learn trade skills</p>
P005	County vo-tech high schools are heavily funded so they have more resources for students – more opportunities and access	County vo-tech high schools have more funding Better resources and more opportunities for students	More funding for county vo-tech high schools

	<p>to practical programs. In my opinion, the education at CXV is better than the other county high schools.</p> <p>The option to work right after high school if you choose, that is a big reason to choose CXV.</p> <p>In regard to the social aspect of CXV, it is definitely more appealing than the home schools. High school is the time when kids make friends and meet new people. It's one thing to go to the homecoming dance with the same people you have been with since kindergarten, but it's a lot more fun to go with kids who are new to you from all over the county. I liked that and I think more and more kids enjoy that social diversity that CXV offers.</p>	<p>Ability to go directly to work after high school</p> <p>Social diversity</p>	<p>More marketable for the work force</p> <p>Social diversity</p>
<p>P006</p>	<p>The ability to take college credits. I was able to experience college while in high school and realized that I wanted to first work in my field before continuing to college after graduating high school. I would not be able to make that decision if I attended my township high school because my parents did not have the money for me to take college classes in high school.</p> <p>The class size – smaller teacher to student ratio. A graduating</p>	<p>Experience college while in high school</p> <p>Smaller teacher to student ratio</p>	<p>College classes offered – Earn college credits</p> <p>Individualized school experience</p>

	<p>class of 315 compared to 900 in my township high school. You never like went to a school and felt like you were just a number.</p> <p>This gives you really great connections with my teachers, guidance counselors, we were close with the principal.</p> <p>Everybody's starting fresh, on the same pace – new and better school environment. Kids feel like they can get away from bullies at their township school – there were no clicks in the beginning of 9th grade. For me that was important.</p>	<p>Greater connections with teachers and staff</p> <p>Opportunity to start fresh – new school environment</p>	<p>More connections and access to staff</p> <p>New school environment – fresh start Diverse Peers</p>
<p>P007</p>	<p>Although I was not sure of a program or career before getting to CXV, during my time there, I was able to try out different classes and I found what I really wanted to do as a career. Getting to pick something that you are interested in and seeing if you're actually interested in that as a career- in my opinion, this is the reason why so many students want to go to CXV because the other high schools in the county do not give us that option.</p> <p>I also believe kids want to meet people outside of their district. County vo-tech high schools broaden your pool of friends than just your district alone. So, I think that's also important for people.</p>	<p>Interest in programs – the ability to “try it” to confirm interest/passion</p> <p>Opportunity to start fresh – new school environment</p>	<p>Programs offered Alignment of programs to careers</p> <p>New school environment – fresh start Diverse Peers</p> <p>Certifications</p>

	<p>Going to CXV guarantees you a certification in your program which can be used for work after high school. The teachers prepare you for the practical and theoretical tests to be able to get your certification. So you leave high school with that certification and you immediately become competitive with people who are older than you in the field who might have just gotten their certification or some who don't have it at all. CXV makes their students competitive in the work force so obviously more kids would want to go there.</p> <p>With the job security that CXV offers students, more parents and family members are encouraging kids to apply to schools like CXV. Parents are in the work field and they know how competitive it gets and they also see how successful CXV graduates are when they join a company. Parents want the same level of success for their kids, so more parents send their kids to CXV. I think that is another reason for the increased demand of kids who want to attend CXV – job security is a real thing these days.</p>	<p>Industry-valued certifications</p> <p>Competitive in the work force</p> <p>Parents' influence</p> <p>Job security</p>	<p>Employment readiness</p> <p>Parents – and job security</p>
P008	<p>You get to do something different – not just focus on academics, they get to focus on something hopefully that you enjoy, maybe that you're passionate about. Who wouldn't</p>	<p>More rounded educational experience – hands-on and academics</p> <p>Programs align to passion/interest</p>	<p>Hands-on combined with academics</p> <p>Programs offered aligned to passion/interest</p>

	<p>want to learn about something they love and enjoy? This makes school fun! My time at CXV was fun as a result of my program – it didn't feel like school.</p> <p>A smaller environment – we had a tight knit art community.</p> <p>A way for me to get into CXV, spend the next four years – because I was passionate about dancing. CXV's programs allow student students to spend a huge chunk of the school day in their trade and learning trade skills. I was in the dancing program and every day, we had 3 hours just dedicated to dancing and learning skills and techniques – this is a big plus that other high schools do not offer.</p> <p>As a graduate and now from the teacher's perspective – I hear my parents wanted me to come here.</p> <p>The school has a great reputation. Compared to the other high schools in the county, CXV has a high graduation rate, low incidents of discipline issues, and they have a lot more resources. It's like winning the jackpot when you get accepted to CXV – this is a parent's dream for their child – to attend a school with a good reputation.</p>	<p>Greater connections with peers, teachers and staff</p> <p>The practical/hands-on aspect. Spending extended time engaged in the programs.</p> <p>Parental influence</p> <p>Reputation of the school</p>	<p>More connections and access to staff Stronger peer relationships</p> <p>More hands-on More time to programs / field</p> <p>Parental influence</p> <p>Reputation of the school</p>
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<p>P009</p>	<p>The programs - exploratory arts and certain subjects - want to pursue it a bit more, so I think CXV has that outlet for students to be able to dive into their subject area a little bit deeper than most schools offer. Based on what my friends and I experienced, I think that the different programs offered at CXV is the reason why so many kids want to go there.</p> <p>Kids didn't want to go to their home schools – so it provides a fresh start without paying for a private school.</p> <p>CXV is considered to be a “rich” school as compared to other high schools in the county – because they have the backing of the county to fund different initiatives and provide financial resources that other high schools would not get. Being a county vo-tech school, CXV gets county funds that other schools do not get, so they have better resources and more funds to create more opportunities for students. No one wants to go to a school where they would have to share books or not be able to have their own computer or iPad. CXV is that school where kids get exactly what they need – they have much more resources.</p>	<p>Students’ passion for various trades/programs.</p> <p>The practical/hands-on aspect. Spending extended time engaged in the programs.</p> <p>Opportunity to start fresh – new school environment</p> <p>County funds available for more programs and initiatives</p>	<p>Programs offered</p> <p>More hands-on More time to programs / field</p> <p>New school environment – fresh start Diverse Peers</p> <p>More financial resources</p>
<p>P010</p>	<p>CXV offers a lot of opportunities and branching pathways that I feel like many high schools</p>	<p>Students’ passion for various trades/programs.</p>	<p>Programs offered</p>

	<p>cannot give. It prepares you for your interests or your field or offers you the exploration opportunities that you may want – that’s why there is such a high demand for CXV enrollment.</p> <p>We spent a lot of time in our shop classes – the schedule was block scheduling so we had 3 hours every day in shop class learning about our specific program. More experience in the field/trade - the more beneficial it is, whether that be cost wise or just compared to your peers in other high schools.</p> <p>I was able to take some classes that were more beneficial for my degree or the next step after high school. The ability to earn college credits at no cost to my parents was a huge factor in my desire to attend CXV. I was able to earn an associate’s degree while in high school which cut my time to get my bachelor’s by 2 years – all free of charge.</p> <p>Some schools have trade classes like Auto or Culinary, but the teachers teaching that class are often math, English or History teachers who have some knowledge in these programs. Maybe they took a class in college, or they have a talent or interest in that program, but they are not experts in the program. Its like having a History teacher teaching you plumbing! CXV has</p>	<p>The practical/hands-on aspect. Spending extended time engaged in the programs.</p> <p>Experience college while in high school</p> <p>Learn from expert teachers in the field.</p>	<p>More hands-on More time to programs / field</p> <p>College classes offered – Earn college credits</p> <p>Expert and certified program teachers</p>
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	<p>expert teachers who are certified in the field teaching different programs, so kids learn Auto from a certified mechanic or plumbing from a licensed plumber for example. That is very different in schools that are not vo-tech schools – so more kids would want to go to a vo-tech school like CXV.</p>		
P011	<p>Get a higher level of education – the courses/programs offered – students wanting to set themselves up on a career track right out of high school to be able to go into their area of study.</p> <p>They would make them a valuable asset in the working world straight out of high school – skills and certifications – can get a good paying job right after high school.</p> <p>Since CXV gets funds from the state and the county, they are able to pay their teachers more than the other high schools, therefore they attract better qualified teachers and are able to purchase better equipment for the different programs. Students are able to learn and</p>	<p>More rounded educational experience – hands-on and academics</p> <p>Ability to go directly to work after high school</p> <p>Career preparation</p> <p>Benefits of more lucrative employment after high school</p> <p>Provides industry-valued certifications that can be used directly after high school for work.</p> <p>More resources means better teachers, better equipment and tools</p>	<p>Programs offered More marketable for the workforce</p> <p>Career preparation</p> <p>Guaranteed employment More lucrative employment Better financial benefit after high school</p> <p>Industry-valued certifications More marketable for the work force</p> <p>More and better resources</p>

	<p>practice on the same kind of equipment in the field on a real job site, therefore it makes it easier for them to transition from the classroom to the work force. The availability of more resources is attractive to kids, because everything is better when the school has more resources.</p>		
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Analyzed participants' responses for the questions related to RQ3 – to identify initial codes, common categories, connections, and themes.

Research Question (from study)	Interview Questions
<p>RQ3: Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased/improved at CXV?</p>	<p>7. Why do you think vo-tech programs such as the ones offered at CXV are so popular?</p> <p>8. In your view, what would you say are some ways of increasing opportunities for more students to attend CXV?</p> <p>9. If you were asked to present to a committee who is responsible for deciding whether to create more vo-tech high schools in Gloucester County, based on your experience, what would you tell them? Give reasons and examples based on your experience attending CXV.</p>

Participant	Participant's words – Direct Quotes – (direct from interviews)	Phenomenological Reduction – Initial Codes / Common Themes	Connections or Categorized Themes
<p>P001</p>	<p>Creating more flexible schedules where students can take more classes so they can finish their high school graduation requirements by junior year. Then in senior year they attend classes directly in the college through the partnership with the college. Seniors who do not want to take college classes can go to work with the school-to-work or apprenticeship program. This will create space to accept</p>	<p>Strategic scheduling to allow completion of high school requirements by junior year.</p> <p>Seniors only take college classes (at the college) or go out to work (school-to-work program).</p>	<p>Strategic scheduling</p> <p>Seniors move to College and/or school-to-work</p>

	<p>more students into 9th grade because the seniors will not be on campus.</p> <p>Create a satellite program - form partnerships with local high schools to bus kids to CXV for their program courses where they use the different shops/labs.</p> <p>Virtual offerings of classes – but that would take away the hands-on aspect – so probably not the best option for the shop classes but it could work for the academic classes that do not have a hands-on portion. The school could be expanded to have an online wing and a practical/shop wing. The online wing could house the academic courses – that would require less space.</p>	<p>Shared time program with other local high schools.</p> <p>Physical expansion – online wing and shop wing for academic classes</p>	<p>Expand shared time program</p> <p>Physical expansion</p>
P002	<p>Offer summer programs – maybe students take one or two vo-tech courses in the summer then in the school year have a night/evening program for high school aged kids – this could have a huge impact on their future.</p> <p>Create a “shift” schedule – where there are 2 shifts for the school as long as they can get all the hours of instruction needed (for example shift 1: 7am-12:30pm and shift 1pm – 6:30pm)</p> <p>In the past, CXV had a shared time program that allowed kids</p>	<p>Summer program</p> <p>Night/evening program</p> <p>“shift” schedule</p>	<p>Extending the school year and the school day</p> <p>Strategic scheduling</p> <p>Shared time program</p>

	<p>for other high schools to attend program classes for half of the day while they get their academics in their home school. Although a shared time program would not allow kids to attend CXV full time, at least it would give more kids an opportunity to learn a vocational program and earn some kind of certification for work after high school.</p> <p>Expanding the school by building more buildings is the best way to create more space for kids to attend CXV but that will be expensive and take time. However, the physical expansions can be done in phases, maybe, build a different campus as new programs are added to the school.</p>	<p>Shared time program – although it would not allow for full time enrollment</p> <p>Physical expansion in phases – with each new program added</p>	<p>Physical expansion – multiple campus</p>
<p>P003</p>	<p>Offer half day of the CTE classes for kids in other high schools. These kids would take their academic courses in their high school then go to CXV for their hands-on program courses.</p> <p>Partner with the college for more students to take classes out of the building, therefore leaving more space in the building so more students can be offered a seat.</p> <p>Offer night and summer classes (in vo-tech programs) for high school kids.</p>	<p>Shared time program with other local high schools.</p> <p>More students take classes out of HS building – in the college</p> <p>Night/evening program</p>	<p>Expand shared time program</p> <p>Strategic scheduling – classes in the college</p>

	<p>The people who make the decisions about the vo-tech schools must be creative and find other ways to give the youths that opportunity to attend CXV – this could make a difference in their future – for the better.</p>	<p>Summer program</p>	<p>Extending the school year and the school day</p>
<p>P004</p>	<p>Senior year offer college level classes on the college campus. In so doing, the high school campus would only have grades 9-11 therefore, more students in these grades can be accommodated – this would also make students more successful after high school.</p> <p>Inhabit some of the college's campus. CXV is a county school and there are other county buildings, so maybe the county pull their resources and share the space in other county buildings with CXV.</p> <p>Physical expansion of the school.</p>	<p>Seniors only take college classes at the college.</p> <p>Share some space with the college – a county institution like CXV.</p> <p>Physical expansion</p>	<p>Strategic scheduling – classes in the college</p> <p>Share space with other county institutions.</p> <p>Physical expansion</p>
<p>P005</p>	<p>Share time programs</p> <p>Partner with other county institutions like their special services schools and the college and share the space. If these other schools are not filled, maybe dedicate a portion of those buildings to CXV.</p> <p>CXV has a very good night school program for adults to</p>	<p>Shared time program with other local high schools.</p> <p>Share some space with the college – a county institution like CXV.</p>	<p>Expand shared time program</p> <p>Share space with other county institutions.</p>

	<p>learn different trades. This can be expanded to include high school aged kids. Most kids do sports after school, but there are many kids that do not go to CXV who are not involved in sports after school. If CXV offered an evening program to teach courses in the different programs, these kids could take advantage of this and in addition to their high credits at their home school, they would also earn CTE credits by taking CTE classes. For example, a kid interested in plumbing can take plumbing courses in the evening and get credits for plumbing. If they take the CTE classes for 3 or 4 years of high school, they would almost get the same number of CTE credits as the kids attending CXV. This is another way to give more kids an opportunity to learn a trade and increase the enrollment of CXV – although it would be in the evening.</p>	<p>Expand the current CXV night school offered to adults at CXV to include high school aged students.</p>	<p>Evening school - CTE courses to high school students.</p>
P006	<p>The most obvious way that I see, is to physically expand the school.</p> <p>By distributing courses in the semesters. And especially when you have kids now going over to the college – it frees up space for more students to attend.</p> <p>The courses maybe selected like in a college - where you can have timeframes for different</p>	<p>Physical expansion</p> <p>Seniors only take college classes (at the college)</p> <p>The method in which student schedules are created, the way</p>	<p>Physical expansion</p> <p>Strategic scheduling</p> <p>Strategic scheduling</p>

	<p>classes. A different system of how classes are run and what times they are and what courses you sign up for – like in a college, students can sign up for classes so that more students can be accommodated like on a college campus.</p>	<p>students sign up for classes – a college-like schedule of classes.</p>	
P007	<p>Physical expansion of the school.</p> <p>Many vo-tech high schools have more than one campus or buildings in other locations. Since CXV is a county school, maybe there are underused county buildings that can be converted to fit the needs of CXV, maybe have a different program at a different site. This way they are physically expanding the school without building new buildings – that could be an option – then more kids can attend.</p>	<p>Physical expansion</p> <p>Convert underused county buildings to CXV program sites</p>	<p>Physical expansion</p> <p>Using other county buildings to expand the school - Multiple campuses</p>
P008	<p>Summer programs would allow those students who cannot attend CXV during the school year to earn CTE credits and certifications.</p> <p>Physical expansion of the school.</p>	<p>Summer programs</p> <p>Physical expansion</p>	<p>Extending the school year</p> <p>Physical expansion</p>
P009	<p>Physical expansion of the school.</p> <p>I remember that by junior year I had already finished all my graduation requirements. So I</p>	<p>Physical expansion</p> <p>Create schedules to complete graduation</p>	<p>Physical expansion</p> <p>Strategic scheduling</p>

	<p>worked most of the time and was in school for one period. Why can't a schedule be created where kids finish all their courses needed for graduation by junior year? Then they can work in their senior year and get on-the-job training in their program. That would free up space for more kids in grades 9-11 to attend. If they cannot expand the physical building, that is one way to create more space for more kids to attend.</p>	<p>requirement by junior year</p>	
P010	<p>Set up the schedule to have more classes and certifications before senior year – so that in senior year, students can take college classes or work.</p> <p>Some of my friends who attended their home school would have loved an opportunity to learn the things I learned at CXV, even though they don't attend CXV full time. So a summer program where kids from other high schools learn skills for an interested program would help them. Maybe even allowing them to earn a certificate in that program if the summer did not allow enough time for them to earn a high school credit. I think many students who do not attend CXV to take that opportunity.</p>	<p>Seniors only take college classes (at the college) or go out to work (school-to-work program).</p> <p>A summer program for non-CXV students – possibly earning a certificate in a program of interest.</p>	<p>Strategic scheduling Seniors move to College and/or school-to-work</p> <p>Summer program</p>
P011	<p>Physical expansion of the school</p>	<p>Physical expansion</p>	<p>Physical expansion</p>

Week 8 – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) continues

Stage of Analysis: grouping categories into one or two words (pertaining to research questions) without diminishing or misrepresenting the central meaning of the participants’ lived experiences.

Key: ** Themes

Research Question	Categories	Frequency mentioned by participants during their interview (number of times referenced in answers for questions 1 – 3)
RQ1: Based on the lived experiences of attending and graduating from CXV, what were graduates’ sources of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school?	**Programs	8
	**Post-high school preparation – career skills	10
	**Hands-on learning – Personalized learning	15
	Program expert teachers	3
	**Different peer groups – social diversity	6
	Parents / Family	4
Research Question	Categories	Frequency mentioned by participants during their interview (number of times referenced in answers for questions 4 – 6)
RQ2: Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, what are their perceived reasons for the increased demand for	**Programs offered	8
	**Hands-on – More time dedicated to programs	7
	**Career Focused / certifications / employment ready	17

enrollment in the county-run vo-tech high schools?	School reputation / more resources	2
	College classes offered	4
	Access to expert staff	2
	Different peer groups – social diversity	4
	Parental influence	1
Research Question	Categories	Frequency mentioned by participants during their interview (number of times referenced in answers for questions 7 – 9)
RQ3: Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased/improved at CXV?	**Strategic scheduling	9
	Shared time	3
	**Summer and evening program	5
	Share space with college (county institution)	2
	**Physical expansion	6
	Increase class size	1

Week 9

Task: Developing a list of significant statements as a foundation of understanding the participants' perceptions of the reasons for the limited enrollment opportunities in county-run vo-tech high schools in New Jersey, and how they perceive the problem can be addressed.

Research Question	Themes	Significant Statements Based on Participants' Perceptions
<p>RQ1:</p> <p>Based on the lived experiences of attending and graduating from CXV, what were graduates' sources of motivation to enroll in a county-run vo-tech high school?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs • Post-high school preparation – career skills • Hands-on learning – Personalized learning • Different peer groups – social diversity 	<p>Looking for / source of motivation:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A high school option that would best prepare them for life after high school, one that is focused on specific careers. 2. A high school that aligns to their passion which would make learning more enjoyable. 3. A high school that provides an experience different from traditional high schools (an educational difference) – the extended time dedicated to hands-on learning of career skills. 4. A high school that had a significant amount of the instructional day dedicated to hands-on learning, developing career skills, and prepares students for either college or employment directly after high school. 5. A high school that would allow their graduates to be ahead of their peers who attend traditional high schools, in terms of industry skills and industry-valued certifications earned while in high school.

		6. A high school that provided a diverse group of friends and contains social diversity thus allowing graduates to learn cultural competences and effective interpersonal skills.
Research Question	Themes	Significant Statements Based on Participants' Perceptions
<p>RQ2:</p> <p>Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, what are their perceived reasons for the increased demand for enrollment in the county-run vo-tech high schools?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs offered • Hands-on – More time dedicated to programs • Career Focused / certifications / employment ready 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The programs offered are directly connected to students' passion, interest, and future career aspirations. 2. Vo-tech high schools offer a wide variety of programs which also afford students to explore other interests and career pathways. 3. Vo-tech high schools dedicate more time during the instructional day to teaching practical skills that are beneficial to employment and careers. 4. Vo-tech high schools provide students with free industry-valued certifications and licenses which makes them employment-ready directly after high school – students would otherwise have to pay to get these certifications in trade schools. 5. Vo-tech high schools provide students with a more lucrative option after high school as compared to non-vocational technical high schools.

Research Question	Themes	Significant Statements Based on Participants' Perceptions
<p>RQ3: Based on the lived experiences of CXV graduates, how do they perceive that enrollment opportunities can be increased/improved at CXV?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic scheduling • Summer and evening program • Physical expansion 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create a strategic schedule where seniors are out of the building – either taking college classes at the college or out in the field working in the school-to-work program. 2. Accommodating only students in grades 9-11 in the building will allow for more space, thus doubling the enrollment opportunities for new students. 3. Another type of strategic scheduling can be created, where students are in the building on a “shift” basis, while still ensuring the required number of daily instructional hours are met. 4. Offer summer and evening programs for students who attend other high schools, to learn practical career-focused skills and earn industry-valued certifications and licenses. 5. Physical expansion of vo-tech high schools will provide a more sustainable option and provide an increased long-term enrollment opportunities for students, however, it would require significant resources (both capital and human resources).

Appendix K

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INTERACTION TRACKER

Participant #	Age	Did you graduate from CXV?	What years did you attend CXV?	In what program were you enrolled in at CXV ?	Did you study that program	Pre-interview Date	Consent	1:1 Interview Date	Transcript emailed to Participant
P007	25	Yes	2012-2016	Culinary Arts	Yes	2/26 at 6:30pm	Consent	3/7 at 5pm	13-Apr
P001	24	Yes	2014-2018	Drama	Yes	2/27 at 4pm	Consent	3/14 at 6pm	12-Apr
P010	18	Yes	2019-2023	Medical Science/Allied Health	Yes	2/28 at 5pm	consent	3/13 at 4:30pm	15-Apr
P011	27	Yes	2011-2015	Information Technology	Yes	zoom 2/25 at 1pm	Consent	3/10 at 1pm	15-Apr
P012	19	Yes	2018-2022	Allied Health	Yes	3/1 at 5pm	Consent		
P013	31	Yes	2006 - 2010	Dance	Yes				
P014	37	Yes	2001-2005	Finance and information technology	Yes				
P015	19	Yes	2019-2023	Digital Media	Yes	3/1 at 4pm	Consent		
P016	22	Yes	2016-2020	allied health and medical science	Yes	2/24/24	Consent		
P017	26	Yes	2012-2016	Allied health	Yes				
P018	21	Yes	2016-2020	Performing Arts - Dance	Yes				
P019	22	Yes	2016-2020	Business	Yes				
P002	24	Yes	2014-2018	Allied Health and Medical Sciences	Yes	2/26 at 5:30pm	Consent	3/6 at 7:15pm	10-Apr
P020	20	Yes	2018-2022	Computer Science	Yes				
P021	28	Yes	2010-2014	Performing Arts, Drama	Yes				
P022	25	Yes	2012-2016	Drama	Yes				
P023	29	Yes	2013	Performing Arts - Drama	Yes	2/26 at 12pm	Consent	3/18 at 5pm	
P024	26	Yes	2012-2015	Cosmetology	Yes				
P025	26	Yes	2012-2016	cosmetology	Yes	3/1 at 1:30	Consent		
P026	33	Yes	2004-2008	Allied Health	Yes				
P027	20	Yes	2017-2021	Information Technology and Digital Communications	Yes	2/29 at 6	Consent		
P028	21	Yes	2016-2020	Business/finance	Yes				
P029	22	Yes	2015-2019	Allied health and medical science	Yes				
P003	32	Yes	2006 to 2010	Culinary/Pastry Arts	Yes	2/29 at 5:30	Consent	3/25 @ 5:30pm	11-Apr
P030	25	Yes	2012-2016	Culinary and Baking Pastry Arts	Yes				
P031	19	Yes	2018-2022	Computer Science	Yes	2/29 at 5pm			
P032	40	Yes	1997-2001	SNJAPA- Dance Academy	Yes				
P033	27	Yes	2011-2015	Information Technology	Yes				
P034	30	Yes	2007-2011	Business	Yes	3/1 at 1pm	Consent		
P035	28	Yes	2009-2013	The school of Culinary Arts	Yes	zoom 2/27 @ 6:30	Consent		
P036	29	Yes	2009-2013	Business	Yes	2/25 at 2pm	Consent		
P037	20	Yes	2018-2022	Engineering	Yes				
P038	18	Yes	2019-2023	Health science	Yes	3/1 at 2pm	Consent		
P039	22	Yes	2015-2019	cosmetology	Yes				
P004	22	Yes	2015-2019	Business and Finance	Yes	2/28 at 5:30pm	Consent	3/13 at 5:30pm	10-Apr
P005	29	Yes	2008-2012	Culinary Arts	Yes	3/1 at 6pm	Consent	3/21 at 6pm	12-Apr
P006	24	Yes	2014-2018	Engineering	Yes	2/27/24 @ 5:30	Consent	3/8 at 5pm	11-Apr
P008	40	Yes	1997-2001	Dance	Yes	2/28 at 10:30	Consent	3/14 at 5pm	15-Apr
P009	22	Yes	2015-2019	Allied Health	Yes	2/26 at 5pm	Consent	3/8 at 6pm	13-Apr

Appendix L

EMAILS TO PARTICIPANTS

Email 1: After Indicating Interest to be a Participant

Good evening,

Thank you so much for your interest in participating in my study! Your participation and input based on your experience at CXV will provide valuable insight to the future of vocational-technical education. I am really excited to speak with you! Before we schedule the 1:1 interview, please complete the short pre-screening questionnaire to determine your eligibility to participate. Please use the link below to take the short questionnaire.

<https://forms.gle/HNXbvpHWDDAqsJHk7>

Next Steps after the Pre-screening Questionnaire is submitted:

1. I will inform you of your eligibility.
2. I will schedule a time to review the details of the study with you. You will let me know if you prefer this to be via a phone call or Zoom. This is to give you an opportunity to hear more about the study and ask any questions you may have before the 1:1 interview.
3. After this first conversation, if you are still interested in participating in the study, I will send you a written consent form. The consent form also has details about the study.
4. Once I receive your signed consent form indicating that you would like to continue your participation, we will schedule the 1:1 interview at a time that is convenient to you.

Once again, I truly appreciate your interest and please feel free to email me with any questions you may have: sgirard@gcecnj.org

Looking forward to speaking with you soon.

Best,

Sybil Girard

Week of February 25, 2024

Email 2: After Meeting Eligibility Criteria

Thank you for completing the pre-screening questionnaire! Based on your responses you have met all the eligibility criteria for the study. The next step prior to the 1:1 interview is for us to set up a time for either a phone or Zoom call to discuss the specific details of the study and answer any of your questions.

Please let me know your preference – phone call or Zoom call (*no more than 10 minutes*). Also the date and time that works best for you.

Thanks again – looking forward to speaking with you!

Email 3: After Initial 10-minute Conversation

It was a pleasure to speak with you! Thank you for giving me an opportunity to discuss the details of the study with you. I hope I was able to answer all your questions about the study. Remember, you can always email me if you have additional questions.

If you would like to continue with your participation, please review the attached consent letter and respond to this email by simply copying and pasting the following sentence and include your name at the end:

I have reviewed the consent letter and would like to continue to be a participant in the study - “Graduates’ Perceptions on the Reasons for the Enrollment Uptrends of Vocational-Technical Education.**”**

Name: _____

Once I receive your consent email, we will schedule the 1:1 interview.

Best,

Sybil

Email 4: After Receiving Written Consent

Thanks _____, for sending your consent 😊!

I will be scheduling the 1:1 interviews beginning the week of March 4. Please let me know the date and time that is most convenient for you. If the week of March 4 does not work, please feel free to select a date the following week.

Please remember that this next call will be the recorded zoom interview which should take about 40 minutes. Once we finalize the date and time, I will send you the zoom link. Let me know if you have any questions.

Best,

Sybil

Second Batch of emails when consent was received

Thanks _____, for sending your consent 😊!

I will be scheduling the 1:1 interviews beginning the week of March 11. I will reach out to you next week so we can schedule the interview on a day and time that is most convenient for you.

Please remember that this next call will be the recorded zoom interview which should take about 40 minutes. Once we finalize the date and time, I will send you the zoom link. Let me know if you have any questions.

Best,

Sybil

Email 5: Zoom link for 1:1 Interview

Just giving you a reminder that we scheduled the 1:1 40-minute zoom interview for this evening at 7:15pm. Please let me know if that time still works for you. Below is the invitation to the zoom 1:1 interview:

Insert link

Looking forward to speaking with you.

Best,

Sybil

Email 6: To send Transcript of Interview

Good evening,

Thank you for your patience while I got the transcript of your interview to you. It has been a tedious process 😊.

Attached is the transcript of your interview. Please review it – make any changes in your answers (remove or add any information) as necessary. Then send the revised/changed copy back to me upon completion of your review.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to interview you and I received some great insights from your responses.

Let me know if you have any questions.

Best,

Sybil Girard

Email 7: After Transcript is reviewed and returned to me:

Hi _____,

Thank you for reviewing your interview transcript and returning it to me.

Please check your email (*the one you listed when you completed the questionnaire at the start of this process- if different from this email address*) you will find a \$25 Amazon e-Gift card. This is a token of my appreciation to you!

Thanks again for your help and I hope it will be ok if contact you during the analysis phase, if I have any further questions.

Thanks again!

Sybil Girard