

**A Qualitative Case Study on Roles and Perspectives of Black Students at a Community  
College: Empowering Communities Through Workforce Education**

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## **Abstract**

A practice-based study explored barriers and support systems affecting adult learner access, persistence, and completion in community college workforce education programs. This study aimed to address the gap between the availability of workforce education programs and adult learners' ability to enroll in, persist in, and complete short-term credential programs due to financial constraints, competing employment responsibilities, and limited institutional support. Workforce education divisions face enrollment and completion issues for historically underprivileged adult learners, highlighting systemic inequalities in community college and workforce systems. Research shows that structural inequalities in institutional and societal systems affect educational opportunities and outcomes for adult learners seeking economic mobility. This qualitative study aimed to examine adult learners' experiences in workforce education programs and identify institutional practices that affect persistence and completion. The study was guided by a social justice framework that prioritizes fair access to workforce training, economic opportunity, and education. This paradigm supports research on culturally relevant support services and on intersectional student experiences in community colleges. A career education division at a northeastern U.S. community college used focus group methodology for qualitative research. The final sample consisted of eight adult learners in workforce education programs. Structured focus groups, thematic coding, and iterative pattern analysis were used to analyze data. Focus group technique and thematic analysis are common qualitative methods for capturing participant experiences and meaning-making. Key findings indicate that financial strain, employment duties, limited financial literacy, and navigating institutional systems affect workforce education participation and persistence.

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## **Section 1: Foundation**

Workforce education is pivotal to societal development, evolving from local institutions, such as the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) to community colleges (D'Amico et al., 2022). These institutions serve as foundational stepping stones for individuals seeking to enhance their employability, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas. As technological advancements and market demands evolve, community colleges are increasingly vital for equipping individuals with the skills needed for competitive workplaces (Cohen & Brawer, 2021). The American Association of Community Colleges (2022) noted that workforce education offers diverse programs for adult learners, underrepresented groups, and individuals transitioning into new careers. College administrators prioritize skill development to strengthen community economic well-being and individual aspirations.

Despite its potential, workforce education faces challenges in engaging community members, particularly those facing employment and educational barriers such as financial constraints and transportation issues. Baker (2021) identified critical problems that hinder program efficacy, with research indicating that financial limitations and inadequate support services disproportionately affect marginalized groups. Addressing these challenges is crucial for enhancing workforce education and community empowerment.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem to be addressed was that, despite the critical role of community colleges in workforce education, significant barriers persist that limit access and effectiveness for marginalized populations (Rana, 2024). Recent literature indicates that financial constraints, inadequate support services, and a misalignment between educational programs and labor market demands contribute to these barriers. For example, Johnson (2022) found that nearly 40% of

adult learners cited financial difficulties as a primary reason for not enrolling in or completing workforce programs. Smith and Lee (2023) highlighted that many community colleges fail to adapt their curricula to meet the evolving needs of local industries, resulting in graduates who are not adequately prepared for available jobs. Numerous community colleges have established financial aid programs and career counseling services; however, these initiatives often lack sufficient funding and resources to reach all students. Moreover, a continual disparity between educational institutions and local enterprises might hinder the advancement of pertinent training programs.

A qualitative research methodology might address the unresolved issues of empowering communities through workforce education and the role and impact of a community college. The methodology might involve conducting comprehensive interviews and focus groups with students, educators, and local industry representatives to gather insights into the obstacles encountered and the effectiveness of existing workforce education programs. I intend to assess participants' perspectives and experiences regarding educational access, the significance of training programs, and the availability of support services. This qualitative approach, centered on practical problem-solving, will yield a comprehensive understanding of the issues communities face and guide the development of actionable measures to enhance the effectiveness of workforce education programs at community colleges.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore Black students' experiences and perspectives enrolled in workforce education programs at a community college. The study might seek to understand these students' challenges, the factors contributing to their success, and how workforce education programs might be improved to serve Black students better. This research

provided actionable insights that might inform the development of more inclusive and supportive workforce education programs, empowering Black students and enhancing their chances of success. By examining the experiences of students enrolled in the program, this research aimed to uncover how workforce education enhances economic mobility, fosters social empowerment, and impacts local communities. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Before data collection, the interview and focus group questions were field-tested with individuals who had characteristics similar to those of the study participants but were not included in the final sample. The purpose of the field test was to ensure the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the questions with the research objectives. Data were then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns across participant responses. Triangulation was achieved by comparing and corroborating findings across multiple data sources, including individual interviews and focus group discussions, to identify consistent themes and strengthen the credibility of the study's findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Triangulation was achieved by comparing and corroborating findings across different data sources, including individual interviews and focus group discussions, to identify consistent patterns and strengthen the credibility of the study's findings (Meydan & Akkas, 2024). The research was conducted in a metropolitan area within the northeast region of the United States, where community colleges serve diverse populations. The target population comprised adult learners enrolled in workforce education programs, with a sample size of eight participants selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2021). By identifying key barriers and potential solutions, this study aimed to make a significant contribution to educational practice by providing community colleges with actionable

recommendations to enhance their workforce education programs and to empower more individuals within the community to achieve their academic and career goals (Baker, 2021).

### **Research Questions**

Community colleges are essential to empowering local communities because they can quickly provide education and training that improve workforce competencies. Bailey and Morest (2021) explained the integral role of community colleges in workforce development and their engagement with local communities. This study aimed to investigate the complex effects of workforce education programs at community colleges by examining how these programs strengthen both communities and individuals. The following research questions explored various aspects of this subject.

#### ***RQ1.***

What are the perspectives of Black students regarding their experiences in workforce education programs at a community college?

#### ***RQ2.***

What perspectives do Black students have on the position of workforce education in their personal and professional development?

#### ***RQ3.***

What challenges do Black students describe that they face in workforce education programs?

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study was grounded in a social justice conceptual framework to examine the challenges Black students encounter in workforce education programs at community colleges. A social justice framework was particularly appropriate for this study because it centers equity,

access, and the dismantling of systemic barriers that disproportionately affect historically marginalized populations. Workforce education programs were often promoted as pathways to economic mobility; however, unequal access to resources, institutional practices, and structural inequities can limit Black students' ability to benefit from these programs fully. Kontaxis and Esfandiari (2023) emphasized that social justice education seeks to raise awareness of societal inequalities and motivate action for social change.

Within the context of community colleges, social justice theory emphasizes the need to critically examine how institutional structures, policies, and practices shape student experiences and outcomes. Rather than framing student challenges as individual deficiencies, a social justice lens situates these challenges within broader social, economic, and political systems. This perspective allows the study to move beyond surface-level explanations and instead interrogate how racism, classism, and systemic inequality intersect to influence Black students' participation, persistence, and success in workforce education programs. A social justice strategy is required to address and change these processes. The aim is to improve Black African students' intellectual and social inclusion in higher education (Cele et al., 2025).

Consequently, the social justice framework guiding this study highlighted disparities in access to information, financial resources, academic and social support, and culturally responsive instructional practices. By applying a social justice framework, this study examined how these barriers were embedded within institutional contexts rather than isolated to individual student circumstances. Additionally, a social justice approach highlighted how a lack of inclusivity within workforce education programs might contribute to feelings of isolation, disengagement, or mistrust, which can negatively affect persistence and completion. DiAngelo and Sensoy (2025) clarified that most people have a working understanding of social justice, which is

generally understood as the values of equality and justice for all individuals, as well as respect for their fundamental human rights. The majority of people claim that they respect these ideals. Subsequently, the social justice conceptual framework ultimately corresponds with the study's objective of identifying obstacles encountered by Black students in workforce education and fostering more fair and inclusive institutional practices. By contextualizing student experiences within broader structural frameworks, the model facilitates a deeper understanding of how workforce education programs might be restructured to more effectively support Black students and foster significant avenues for economic advancement. Therefore, numerous frameworks and elements were identified as facilitating or impeding change, including leaders' ability to adjust at various levels, the coherence of initiatives, and the coordination of reforms (Eisenschmidt & Vanari, 2025).

### ***Rationale for Employing the Social Justice Framework***

The social justice framework, grounded in equity, inclusiveness, and advocacy for underrepresented groups, explores the intersection of social, economic, and political issues and creates educational obstacles (Wiggan et al., 2021). By reviewing these disparities, I can gain insights into the experiences of underprivileged learners, which are essential for understanding their distinct challenges and needs within workforce education programs. Recent literature highlights the significance of this approach in educational research, as demonstrated by O'Connor and Rosen (2022), who showed its utility for uncovering obstacles to fair access to resources and support services.

### ***Essential Elements of the Social Justice Framework***

Equity in access can be measured by systemic factors, such as socioeconomic status, race, and gender, that impact educational opportunities. Studies indicate that marginalized groups face

significant obstacles in accessing workforce education programs, including financial limitations and inadequate support services (Hernandez, 2021). Empowerment and advocacy emphasize empowering marginalized individuals and advocating for their needs and interests. This study aimed to amplify marginalized learners' perspectives, thereby informing recommendations for program improvement (Davis & Gonzalez, 2021). Collaboration and community engagement foster cooperative initiatives among educators, community organizations, and industry stakeholders to develop solutions addressing research-identified challenges. Baker (2021) emphasized the importance of stakeholder involvement in formulating comprehensive policies for a more inclusive educational environment.

The social justice framework guides research design, data gathering, and analysis. Comprehensive qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups with students, educators, and community partners. Thematic analysis identified recurring themes related to obstacles and solutions, ensuring that the perspectives of marginalized learners are central to the outcomes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This approach advances educational fairness by providing practical insights for community colleges to enhance workforce education programs and promote equitable opportunities for all individuals.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

This section clarifies and defines the underlying notions central to the study's debate or analysis. It is significant because it helps ensure readers have a clear grasp of a particular vocabulary, which might be technical or subject-specific. My ability to provide context and precision by defining key phrases helps reduce ambiguity and improve comprehension of the material.

### ***Access and Equity***

Access relates to the availability of educational resources and opportunities, whereas equity refers to the fairness and justice with which those resources are distributed. In education, establishing access and equity entailed ensuring that all students, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds, have equal opportunities for success. Recent initiatives have emphasized the importance of policies that break down barriers and encourage inclusive school practices (Dermody et al., 2022).

### ***Black Students***

Individuals of African heritage who participated in educational institutions were referred to as Black students. Due to their historical and structural inequities, they often face specific challenges that impact their academic experiences and outcomes. Recent research has highlighted the importance of culturally sensitive teaching and support systems that acknowledge and affirm Black students' identities, thereby facilitating their success in educational environments (Stephens & Rock-Vanloo, 2022).

### ***Empowerment***

Rappaport (1987) explained that empowerment is the process by which individuals gain control over their lives, develop their capacity to make decisions, and take action on issues that affect them.

### ***Feedback***

Feedback might be provided to learners about their performance or understanding, which helps them identify areas for improvement and reinforce learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

### ***Inclusive Education***

UNESCO (2021) outlined that inclusive education might be an educational philosophy that promotes the integration of all students, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, into general education settings.

### ***Peer Assessment***

Peer assessment is a process in which students evaluate each other's work, provide constructive feedback, and foster a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Topping, 1998).

### ***Social Constructivism***

Social constructivism is a learning theory that posits knowledge is constructed through social interactions and experiences, emphasizing the role of culture and context in learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

### ***Systematic Challenges***

Systematic problems are entrenched hurdles within educational systems that disproportionately affect specific populations, notably Black students. These issues include institutional racism, insufficient funding for schools in predominantly Black communities, and discrepancies in access to advanced curriculum and experienced teachers. Addressing these difficulties is critical to achieving educational equity (Banaji et al., 2021).

### ***Transformative Learning***

Transformative learning is a process in which individuals critically reflect on their experiences, leading to a change in perspective and fostering personal growth (Mezirow, 1991).

### ***Workforce Education***

Workforce education encompasses several short-term, career-oriented training programs that equip individuals with industry-specific skills, credentials, and certifications to enter or

advance in the labor market. These programs are typically offered by community colleges and serve as accessible pathways to employment, especially for adult learners and individuals from historically underrepresented groups. Workforce education prioritizes practical skill acquisition, alignment with labor-market requirements, and swift transitions into employment; however, access to and success in these programs are not uniformly experienced across diverse student demographics. Recent conversations have emphasized the importance of equitable funding and support for workforce programs targeting disadvantaged communities (Stephens & Rock-Vanloo, 2022).

From a social justice perspective, workforce education must be examined not only in terms of skill acquisition, but also in relation to equity and institutional responsibility. While workforce programs are frequently framed as neutral or merit-based, social justice scholarship highlights how systemic inequities shape who can enroll, persist, and complete them. Organizations focused on education, training, and workforce development provide services to assist both prospective and existing business proprietors, including noncredit and for-credit educational programs, individual and group coaching, and guidance on securing funding (Biu et al., 2024). This process can explain why Black students were disproportionately affected by inequitable funding models, rigid scheduling, and limited access to wraparound support services, which can undermine their participation and outcomes within workforce education programs.

### **Review of the Literature**

The current literature review utilized multiple search engines, including ERIC, Academic Search Complete, JSTOR, Google Scholar, SAGE Journals, and SpringerLink. The search terms included *Black students*, *community college*, *workforce education*, *financial barriers*, *education and racial equity*, *vocational training*, *Black students or African American students*, *racial equity*

*in education, workforce development, workforce education, and community college*, among others. Articles were selected based on social mobility and empowerment, as well as challenges and barriers, and focused on students at community colleges, guiding the study of the role and perspectives of Black students in workforce education. The experiences and perspectives of Black students in workforce education programs at community colleges are complex and influenced by diverse social, economic, and institutional issues.

Community colleges play a transformative role in educating workers, particularly for underrepresented groups, such as African Americans. They serve as gateways to economic mobility and empowerment, bridging the gap between skill acquisition and labor market participation (Camardelle, 2022). However, several systemic barriers limit the efficacy of workforce education programs. These barriers can be categorized into broader themes of systemic discrimination, encompassing both cultural and institutional biases that affect Black students. Systemic discrimination manifests in various forms, including financial constraints, inadequate support services, and institutional racism. Financial barriers were a significant issue, as community colleges often offer underfunded financial aid programs that fall short of covering the full cost of attendance, forcing students to rely on loans or part-time work. Research indicates that these economic challenges disproportionately affect Black students, resulting in lower enrollment and completion rates (Hernandez, 2021; Johnson, 2022).

Cultural biases, including social assumptions about the capabilities and goals of Black students, further exacerbate these challenges. Studies have shown that such biases can lead to a lack of self-assurance and decreased motivation among students (Acevedo & Solórzano, 2023; Brown et al., 2022). Additionally, institutional biases, such as unfair recruitment practices and insufficient mentorship opportunities, create barriers that limit access to workforce education

programs (Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022). To tackle these systemic challenges effectively, it was crucial to adopt a comprehensive approach that integrates financial, cultural, and institutional factors affecting Black students in workforce education. Recent literature advocates that community colleges actively participate in equity initiatives to break down these barriers and improve program accessibility (Stephens & Rock-Vanloo, 2022). By recognizing and addressing systemic discrimination, educational institutions can develop inclusive and supportive workforce education programs that empower Black students and promote their academic and career success.

Black students have complex hurdles in workforce education that are fundamentally fixed in structural, institutional, and cultural biases. These obstacles hinder access to education and diminish the overall effectiveness of labor programs designed to empower underrepresented groups. Systemic insufficient funding in predominantly Black neighborhoods results in a lack of educational resources and opportunities.

Systemic disparities result in financial difficulties, since numerous Black students face substantial financial obstacles that hinder their enrollment and retention in workforce education programs. Hernandez (2021) suggested that financial aid programs often lack sufficient resources, compelling students to rely on loans or part-time employment, which can divert their attention from academic focus. Research Question 2 can address this financial burden by examining the specific obstacles Black students face. Notably, over 40% of adult learners cite financial concerns as the primary reason they do not complete workforce programs (Johnson, 2022).

Institutional biases can worsen these issues. In that case, it resulted in graduates who were insufficiently equipped for the labor market. This misalignment can sustain a cycle in

which Black students, who might already encounter restricted access to opportunities, are disadvantaged in their pursuit of employment. Institutional practices, including discriminatory recruitment and insufficient mentorship opportunities, foster an environment in which Black students experience marginalization (Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022).

Cultural biases can significantly influence experiences. Cultural capital is often overlooked in schools, and biased perceptions of their skills can erode their self-confidence and motivation. Research indicates that this lack of recognition might lead to feelings of separation among Black students, thereby intensifying their difficulties in workforce education (Brown et al., 2022; Acevedo & Solórzano, 2023). By synthesizing these subsections, we can effectively elucidate how systemic, institutional, and cultural issues converge to form a multifaceted network of obstacles that Black students face in the workforce education system.

### ***Economic Impact of Workforce Education***

Workforce education creates economic advantages by equipping students with skills in high demand in the market, thereby reducing the unemployment rate. Carnevale et al. (2023) assessed the favorable link between locations with comprehensive workforce education programs. It was essential to note that community colleges collaborating with local businesses report higher student employment rates after graduation, which helps maintain economic stability in their respective areas. Despite this, disparities in outcomes persist. Deggs and Flores (2023) found that Black students often enter lower-paying professions due to structural barriers in program accessibility and industry biases.

Through workforce education, students of African descent have the potential to break free from the cycle of generational poverty. Within 5 years of graduation, Black students who participated in trade-specific programs, such as healthcare and information technology,

experienced a 60% increase in income, according to a 2023 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research. In contrast, discrepancies in access to high-demand sectors frequently prevent many African students from earning comparable economic advantages.

Community colleges need to equip students from underrepresented groups, particularly those of African descent, with skills that are directly applicable to the workforce, thereby enhancing their employability and economic mobility. Within the context of contemporary research on the financial impact of workforce education on Black students attending community colleges, this review examines the parallels, differences, findings, and changes observed across these studies. Vo and Rios-Aguilar (2025) explained that community colleges in the United States have successfully fulfilled their role as social institutions that contribute to achieving Economic and Workforce Development (EWD) objectives in several states.

The economic influence on workforce education can significantly affect the financial stability of Black students, the job opportunities available to them, and interactions within the larger community. Increasing earning potential, boosting employment opportunities, enhancing economic mobility, and promoting community development are all potential outcomes of workforce initiatives. Participation in educational and training opportunities is how these benefits might be obtained. One example of the California Apprenticeship Initiative is the California Community Colleges' (2021) program, which might increase earnings potential, enhance employment opportunities, and contribute to economic mobility and community development.

### ***Systemic Challenges in Workforce Education***

One of the most significant challenges Black students faces is financial hurdles. Although some programs receive federal financial assistance, they often fall short of covering the full cost of attendance, forcing students to rely on loans or part-time work. Hernandez (2021) found that

of the Black students who dropped out of school, nearly half cited financial stress as the key contributing factor. Recurrent obstacles in the field of workforce education include institutional racism and implicit bias. These experiences contribute to feelings of isolation and lower academic performance among Black students. Research indicates that Black students face significant obstacles in accessing workforce education options (Roberts & King, 2022; Portland Community College Board, 2023). Some of the most prevalent barriers students face include a lack of support services, outdated curricula, and limited access to occupational counseling—these restrictions frequently lower enrollment and completion rates than expected. The excessive financial load placed on students of African descent is a recurrent issue in the literature. The combination of tuition fees, living expenses, and inadequate financial aid continues to be a substantial impediment (Illinois Community College Board, 2022; Simmons, 2022, 2023). This reality was true, although community colleges are generally less expensive than four-year universities.

### ***Financial Barriers to Workforce Education***

Due to financial constraints, the provision of workforce education for students of African descent was significantly limited, as several studies have indicated. In the report titled “The Condition of Education 2022,” which was published by the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), for instance, it is highlighted that Black students were subjected to higher levels of student debt and financial hardship, which might discourage them from pursuing degrees in vocational and technical education at the university level. Due to financial stress, students were often compelled to prioritize immediate work over educational advancement. This concern can significantly impact students’ long-term professional success. According to Li (2022), the most considerable challenge Black students face in acquiring vocational training is a lack of financial

means. Financial aid and scholarships were often insufficient to cover living expenses, tuition, and materials. Consequently, fewer people enroll in employment training programs.

**Cultural Biases.** Cultural biases and the effects they have on Black students in workforce education have been frequently neglected, even though documents demonstrating financial hurdles are abundant. Brown et al. (2022) conducted a study investigating how social assumptions about the capabilities and goals of Black students might hinder their pursuit of these goals. In addition to the limitations imposed by financial constraints, the authors contend that these cultural beliefs contribute to a lack of self-assurance and motivation. For this reason, Acevedo and Solórzano (2023) investigated how Black students' cultural capital is frequently undervalued in educational environments. According to their results, educational institutions typically fail to recognize and appreciate the experiences and skills that Black students bring to the table. This failure might lead to feelings of alienation and reduced involvement in occupational training programs.

**Institutional Biases.** Institutional prejudices also have a substantial impact on the access that Black students have to opportunities for workforce education. In a paper titled “Barriers to Access: Institutional Inequality in Workforce Education,” published in 2023 by the Center for American Progress, the authors addressed how institutional rules and practices might disproportionately discriminate against Black students. The report highlighted problems such as biased recruitment procedures, a lack of mentorship, and inadequate support services. Institutional biases can create barriers not primarily based on financial considerations when taken together. According to Thiem and Dasgupta (2022), the issues that Black students experience are frequently made worse by the systemic disparities that exist within educational institutions. They emphasized that institutional improvements addressing these prejudices, such as an inclusive

curriculum and equitable access to resources, must be complemented by financial support to meet the organization's needs.

### ***Integrates Financial, Cultural, and Institutional Factors***

According to the literature, there is a critical need for a study that integrates financial, cultural, and institutional variables that affect Black students in workforce education. Stephens and Rock-Vanloo (2022) conducted a study that called for a holistic approach that considers the interconnection between financial and non-financial barriers. They contended that focusing solely on financial constraints was a way to ignore the larger context of structural inequities that affect the educational experiences of Black students. This literature study emphasizes that discussions of workforce education among Black students focus on financial barriers while ignoring cultural and institutional prejudices. Additionally, to develop effective ways to tackle these complex issues and improve access to workforce education for Black students, future research needs to adopt a comprehensive approach that considers all aspects of inequality.

### ***Perspectives of Black Students in Workforce Education***

Black students bring diverse experiences of resilience to their educational journeys. Stephens and Rock-Vanloo (2022) found that, despite systemic challenges, many Black students view workforce education as a vital tool for breaking cycles of poverty and discrimination. Narratives from students in community colleges reveal a commitment to using education to uplift themselves and their communities. Many different types of training programs fall under the umbrella of workforce education. These programs were designed to prepare students for specific jobs, typically in high-demand industries such as healthcare, information technology, and skilled trades. According to Hernandez (2021), these initiatives have the potential to provide Black

students with crucial opportunities to overcome systemic constraints that have historically limited their access to employable jobs and high-standard educational opportunities.

Moore and Chester (2021) stated that community colleges serve as accessible entry points to higher education for students of African descent. These colleges also equip these students with the competencies to navigate the labor market successfully. However, the success of these programs in meeting the needs of Black students depends on several key elements, including the institution's support, community involvement, and students' motivation.

Education programs that prepare students for the workforce substantially contribute to Black students' economic mobility. Compared to their colleagues who did not complete post-secondary education, graduates of these programs frequently report enhanced earning potential and improved job security. According to research (Gabriel, 2023), individuals who have received vocational training are more likely to earn higher incomes and achieve better job placement rates. This was of utmost significance for Black kids who were attempting to escape the generational poverty that had been occurring in their families.

Furthermore, the economic impact is not limited to individual outcomes; it extends to communities as a whole. With the completion of workforce education programs and the acquisition of steady jobs, African American students make significant contributions to their communities' economies through increased consumer spending and tax contributions. According to Zhao and Weng (2021), this economic regeneration might lead to more robust community development and an improved quality of life for area residents.

### ***Access and Equity in Workforce Education***

Research indicates that Black students face many obstacles when entering workforce education programs. One of these obstacles was a lack of information about the programs

offered, as well as budgetary limits and transportation problems (Hernandez, 2021). According to Moore and Chester (2021), research has demonstrated that Black students are disproportionately affected by systemic imbalances in education funding and assistance, which significantly hinder their capacity to enroll in and finish workforce programs. Moore and Chester (2021) highlighted that some institutional characteristics, such as restricted outreach initiatives and a lack of culturally appropriate support services, further exacerbate access challenges for students of African descent. To ensure that Black students can fully participate in workforce education programs, the authors propose that community colleges actively engage in equity initiatives to dismantle these barriers.

Many community colleges have established equity initiatives to increase access for students of African descent in response to these challenges. It has been demonstrated that efforts to improve enrollment and retention rates among Black students might be accomplished by implementing programs that offer financial assistance, mentoring, and academic support (Patterson, 2022). Implementing these measures was crucial to establishing an educational environment that welcomes all students, empowers them, and encourages them to engage with their communities.

### ***Supportive Learning Environments***

Mentoring was a crucial component of workforce education, particularly for students of African descent. According to Harris and Wood (2021), research indicates that access to mentors familiar with the student's experiences might significantly impact the student's academic progress and professional goals. Organizational leaders must establish mentorship programs that enable students to network, receive guidance and support, and participate in professional development.

Additionally, research suggests that mentoring helps Black students develop a sense of community and belonging, which is crucial to their motivation and engagement in the learning process. According to Wood and Harris (2021), leaders who support and promote mentorship activities create an environment that encourages Black students to persevere and succeed in their academic endeavors.

### ***Lifelong Learning and Advancement***

Implementing workforce education programs that foster a culture of continuous learning might give students of African descent more agency. According to Moore and Chester (2021), graduates who continue their education and pursue additional training are in a better position to advance their careers and maintain economic security. To ensure that Black students might successfully navigate their career trajectories, leaders of organizations must cultivate an institutional culture that promotes ongoing education and provides opportunities for higher education.

The significance of strong organizational leadership in improving access, relevance, and results for Black students in workforce education was a theme that runs throughout the several topics investigated in this research review. Several studies have emphasized the importance of community colleges actively participating in equity programs, developing curricula aligned with industry standards, and fostering supportive learning environments. One constant theme highlighting the interdependence of individual success and community development was the economic impact of empowering Black students through workforce education.

Although they share many insights, the emphasis on specific leadership methods and challenges might vary. However, other studies have focused more on the value of curriculum relevance and industry connections. For instance, some research has focused on the function of

mentorship and support services. The difficulties that Black students experience can vary significantly depending on factors such as geographic location, institutional resources, and community dynamics. This suggests solutions must be tailored to specific situations rather than be universally applicable.

### ***The Role of Community Colleges in Workforce Education***

Community colleges are accessible and affordable, providing a critical entry point for students who may not have the financial resources to attend four-year universities. Community colleges were designed to be accessible and economical. Community colleges can serve as a gateway to higher education and employment opportunities for students of African descent. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) reports that community colleges enroll over half of all Black undergraduate students in the United States. This achievement highlights the importance of community colleges in facilitating access to education.

Black students frequently face obstacles that prevent them from participating in workforce education programs, even though community colleges are easily accessible. Financial constraints are one type of barrier that might be encountered. Many students of African descent come from low-income families, which might make it difficult for them to afford the costs of education, including tuition, fees, and other associated expenses. According to research by Lateef et al. (2025), access to quality education is a crucial means of human capital development, but financial limitations continue to pose a substantial obstacle.

Black communities frequently lack an understanding of workforce education programs. Outreach efforts to educate prospective students about the opportunities available at community colleges were essential. Research indicates that targeted outreach programs can significantly enhance enrollment among underrepresented populations (Hernandez, 2021).

Black students might experience cultural dissonance in primarily white institutions, which might result in feelings of isolation and decreased engagement. Furthermore, there might also be social barriers. Fostering a sense of belonging and cultivating a friendly environment are two key steps to encourage participation in workforce education programs.

### ***Workforce Education Programs and Their Effectiveness***

Workforce education programs at community colleges were designed to provide students with the skills and training necessary for specific careers. These programs often focus on high-demand fields, such as healthcare, information technology, and skilled trades. The effectiveness of these programs might be analyzed through several lenses. The curricula of workforce education programs need to align with the requirements of local companies to be successful. Community colleges might ensure their programs are relevant and equip students with the skills employers desire by collaborating with local businesses and establishing partnerships with industry leaders. Zamani-Gallaher and Liu (2021) conducted research that demonstrated the significance of industry partnerships in developing curricula that align with workforce requirements.

### ***Broader Implications for Community Empowerment***

Individual students and the community as a whole benefit from workforce education. Black students might be empowered through workforce education, resulting in various positive outcomes, such as economic regeneration, intergenerational effect, and social mobility and equity. Tariq (2023) stated that access to a good education is a critical predictor of social mobility. Disparities in educational opportunities based on socioeconomic class usually exacerbate inequality. Initiatives to ensure equal access to education are crucial for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and promoting upward mobility. The consequences of

community empowerment were far-reaching, with the potential to spur economic growth, social solidarity, and cultural preservation.

**Economic Revitalization.** Community colleges played a key role in economic revitalization, mainly through workforce education programs that empower Black students. Economic revitalization involves strengthening a community or region's financial health. When Black students graduate from workforce education programs, they often enter the local labor market with the skills needed for high-demand professions. This influx of skilled personnel could attract firms to relocate to the area. For instance, Edwards-Fapohunda (2024) explained that adult learning and education are considered essential for both individual growth and societal progress. Adult education is essential in community development because it helps individuals build skills, knowledge, and competencies that significantly contribute to the overall welfare and progress of communities. As a result, students of African descent who complete workforce education programs enter the local labor market equipped to succeed in high-demand jobs. The United States Department of Labor (2021) found that community colleges significantly contribute to their communities' economies by aligning training programs with employers' needs, promoting job creation, and expanding the local economy.

Graduates of workforce education programs typically experience higher earning potential. A report from the National Skills Coalition (2022) highlighted that individuals with postsecondary credentials earn higher wages and have lower unemployment rates than those without. Increased disposable income drives higher consumer spending, supporting local businesses and stimulating economic activity.

**Intergenerational Impact.** The concept of intergenerational impact refers to how the achievements and opportunities of one generation can influence subsequent generations'

outcomes. Students who graduate from programs that provide workforce education often become role models in the communities in which they live. According to research conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE, 2022), mentoring has been shown to favor educational aspirations among younger children. When Black alumni share their experiences, they may motivate and inspire the next generation.

Research has shown that children of parents with higher education are more likely to pursue higher education. According to the Pew Research Center's (2021) findings, parents' educational attainment substantially influences their children's academic outcomes. This process highlights the need for higher education to break the cycle of poverty.

**Social Mobility and Equity.** The principles of social mobility and equity were critical to understanding the impact of workforce education on Black students and the communities in which they reside. Black students have access to workforce education programs at community colleges, which prepare them with the skills necessary to compete for in-demand occupations. According to a 2021 study by the Lumina Foundation, workforce education has a significant impact on improving the economic prospects available to underrepresented populations.

### ***Challenges Faced by Black Students in Community Colleges***

When pursuing an education at a community college, one significant obstacle Black students must overcome is economic constraints. Most of them come from economically challenged families, making it difficult for them to afford living costs, tuition, and fees. African American students, in comparison to their peers, are more likely to incur student debt and experience higher levels of financial stress, as stated by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (2021). This economic burden might increase the number of students who drop out of school and impede academic progress. Many students of African descent enroll in community

colleges with varying levels of academic readiness. Research by the National Center for Education Statistics (2021) suggested that a sizeable proportion of African American students are enrolled in remedial classes, which may prolong their time in college and increase their costs. Because they are not well-prepared, their self-assurance and willingness to participate fully in their schooling may suffer.

Many Black students encounter obstacles when enrolling in workforce education programs, despite the potential advantages. Geographic location, budgetary limitations, and program availability might hamper participation. The quality and scope of programs offered might be impacted by differences in funding and resources, despite community colleges being the primary providers of workforce education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). The lack of adequate support services, such as tutoring, counseling, and career services, might impact the success of Black students in workforce education programs. Community colleges must prioritize allocating resources to support these students effectively, ensuring they have access to the tools needed for academic and career success.

With varied degrees of academic readiness, many Black students enroll in community colleges. According to research by the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), a sizable proportion of students of African descent were assigned to remedial classes. This often results in the students spending more time in college and incurring additional expenses. Their self-assurance and willingness to participate entirely in their schooling might suffer due to this lack of preparedness. Another problem that Black students in community colleges might face is the presence of cultural dissonance, as well as a lack of representation. Black students frequently experience feelings of isolation in primarily white institutions, according to a study conducted by the American Council on Education (2022). This might lead to a lack of involvement and lower

student retention rates. As a result, these feelings might be worsened by the absence of culturally relevant curricula and support networks. Therefore, community colleges must develop inclusive environments.

There is a possibility that systemic hurdles, such as unconscious bias and discrimination in educational circumstances, might influence the experiences of Black students. Systemic inequalities in education are a contributing factor to unequal outcomes for Black children, according to research conducted by the National Urban League in the year 2022. The various ways these obstacles might manifest include biased counsel, limited mentorship opportunities, and restricted access to resources.

### ***Inequality in the System***

Systemic inequality might be one of the biggest obstacles Black students in community colleges must overcome. It could manifest itself as a range of socioeconomic and educational disparities. Black students are more likely to come from economically disadvantaged households, which might restrict their access to essential resources, including financial support, technology, and transportation (Harper, 2021). Since many students can juggle employment and family obligations alongside their education, the economic burden might lead to higher dropout rates, making it difficult for them to complete their programs (Hernandez, 2021).

### ***Stigma and Institutional Racism***

Black students might face extra challenges due to institutional racism in educational systems. Research shows that Black students often experience prejudice and microaggressions, which can negatively affect their mental health and academic success (Williams & Williams, 2021). Additionally, the stigma associated with community institutions can affect motivation and

self-esteem. Many students might view community colleges as inferior to four-year universities, which could weaken their self-esteem and motivation (Gasman et al., 2021).

### ***Insufficient Culturally Appropriate Support Services***

The lack of culturally appropriate support resources might make Black students' difficulties worse. Black students at community colleges often lack academic counseling and mentorship tailored to their unique needs, which can lead to feelings of isolation and disengagement (Gasman et al., 2021). Reduced educational outcomes and decreased retention rates might arise from this lack of support. According to research by Bailey et al. (2021), Black students could be less likely to ask for assistance because they do not trust the structures meant to aid them.

### ***Possibilities for Workforce Education Programs that Empower***

Despite these obstacles, community college workforce education programs could offer substantial opportunities for empowerment. These schools provide instruction in in-demand industries essential to economic mobility, such as technology, healthcare, and skilled trades. According to the National Skills Coalition (2021), community colleges play a critical role in closing the skills gap and equipping students with the skills necessary to secure meaningful employment. Students might benefit from programs that align with the local job market's needs and support the community's economic growth.

### ***Activities that Assist Black Students***

Increasingly, community institutions recognize the importance of creating welcoming spaces that promote fairness and support for Black students. Resources aimed at educational achievement are the focus of targeted recruitment campaigns, scholarship programs, and partnerships with neighborhood organizations (Bailey et al., 2021). For example, some

universities might develop mentorship programs that connect Black students with academics and business leaders to provide networking opportunities, support, and guidance.

### *Culturally Appropriate Initiatives*

Implementing culturally relevant approaches was essential for enhancing engagement, retention, and academic achievement among Black students in community college workforce and career-oriented programs. Recent studies highlight that culturally responsive practices go beyond mere symbolic inclusion; they necessitate the deliberate incorporation of students' cultural identities, lived experiences, and sociopolitical contexts into institutional frameworks and educational settings (Hernandez, 2021). When schools recognize and validate the cultural capital of Black students, they cultivate learning environments that enhance both academic success and psychological health.

Community colleges were well equipped to promote culturally relevant initiatives by integrating culturally responsive pedagogy into curricula, student support services, and cocurricular programs. Recent research indicates that including Black history, contributions, and perspectives—especially in practical and workforce education—enhances relevance, boosts motivation, and strengthens students' sense of purpose throughout their educational journeys (White, 2025). Culturally pertinent pedagogical methods promote critical engagement and validate students' identities, which are associated with enhanced course completion and program retention rates among racially marginalized students (Gasman et al., 2021).

In addition to the curriculum, cultivating a sense of belonging through culturally affirming environments and programming is a fundamental aspect of culturally appropriate efforts. Research from 2025 found that Black students in community colleges frequently experience marginalization, isolation, and limited institutional engagement, especially in

accelerated workforce programs (Strayhorn, 2025). The deliberate cultivation of student clubs, affinity groups, and culturally relevant activities fosters peer connections, leadership growth, and community cohesion, which are vital protective elements against disengagement and attrition.

Institutional dedication to culturally relevant efforts must be evident in personnel, advising, and student support frameworks. Research demonstrates that culturally responsive advising practices marked by empathy, cultural humility, and proactive engagement substantially improve students' trust in the institution and their tendency to seek assistance during difficulties (Hassan, 2025). Educating professors and staff in culturally responsive communication and trauma-informed techniques enhances the institution's ability to support Black students comprehensively.

Culturally relevant efforts must be assessed using equity-focused frameworks that measure both participation and outcomes, including persistence, credential attainment, and post-completion economic mobility. Equity-focused assessment methodologies help institutions identify systemic obstacles and continually enhance culturally attuned methods to ensure lasting effects (Medina III, 2025). These methods regard culturally relevant efforts as vital instruments for promoting fairness, inclusion, and sustained success for Black students in community college workforce education.

### ***Partnerships and Community Involvement***

Community colleges can also strengthen their relationships with surrounding communities by participating in cooperative projects that address the unique needs of Black students. Students' employability and real-world experience might be improved through internships and job placement opportunities created through partnerships with local companies and organizations (Zinth, 2021). Community colleges could also serve as centers for lifelong

learning by offering training courses and workshops that address the evolving demands of the labor market.

Community colleges might empower Black students through workforce education to promote economic development and community growth. Even while issues like institutional racism, systemic inequality, and a lack of support services still exist, community colleges might significantly improve the chances for Black students. By removing obstacles and establishing inclusive learning environments that acknowledge and accommodate the unique needs of Black students, community colleges can substantially empower individuals and elevate communities.

### ***Support Systems for Workforce Education***

For workforce education to be effective, a curriculum must be developed with the local job market's demands in mind. Local employers and community institutions should collaborate to create programs that provide relevant information and skills. The National Skills Coalition (2022) emphasizes the importance of aligning workforce education with industry needs to ensure graduates are well prepared for the workforce. According to the American Council on Education (2022), effective advising services could help Black students make informed decisions about their courses, careers, and resources as they progress through their academic careers. Both graduation results and retention rates might be enhanced by personalized advice. Strong advising systems were essential for helping underrepresented students pursue workforce education. Financial aid, including targeted scholarships and grants, might alleviate the financial burden on Black students pursuing workforce education. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research (2021), financial assistance can significantly affect enrollment and completion rates, making education more accessible to the workforce.

### ***Community Engagement in Workforce Education***

Community participation is essential to achieving the goals of workforce education programs. Community colleges can help create relevant training options that align with workforce requirements by partnering with local employers. Students' employability can be improved by forming job placements, internships, and apprenticeships through the collaborations discussed here. The workforce's Education programs must be coordinated with comprehensive community economic development initiatives. By collaborating with local governments, such as BOCES and WIOA, community colleges can contribute to projects that foster economic growth and create new job opportunities. Regarding workforce development, the United States Department of Labor (2022) emphasized the significance of community-based initiatives.

**Responsive Curriculum Design.** The development of flexible curricula that cater to the needs of both students and employers should be a top priority for community institutions. Graduates can possess the necessary information and skills for employment, and programs should incorporate industry partner feedback. The National Skills Coalition (2022) strongly emphasizes the importance of aligning workforce education with the needs of various industries. Engaging employers in the development and evaluation of workforce education programs can enhance their relevance and effectiveness. Community colleges should establish advisory boards with industry representatives to guide curriculum design and program improvement. This collaboration might help ensure that graduates are well-prepared for employment. According to Baker (2021), workforce education is an essential option for students of African descent seeking economic mobility and stability. Community colleges can help these students achieve their educational and career goals by addressing their needs, developing supportive systems, engaging with the community, utilizing technology, and adopting best practices. Understanding the

interrelationships between workforce education, economic revitalization, intergenerational effects, and social mobility underscores the importance of this aspect in fostering a more equitable society.

### **Ethical Assurances**

Research on workforce education necessitates a robust framework of ethical safeguards to protect participants' rights, welfare, and dignity, particularly when community colleges are involved. This section, supported by pertinent academic references, outlines the primary ethical guidelines that researchers must follow when conducting such studies. As stated by Gusliana et al. (2024), ethical assurances are essential ideas and procedures that safeguard the rights, welfare, and dignity of individuals who participate in research. Researchers provided a framework that enabled them to conduct studies responsibly and transparently, ensuring that ethical standards are maintained throughout the entire research process. It was essential to provide these assurances to cultivate confidence between researchers and participants, ultimately increasing the legitimacy and integrity of the research findings.

### ***Knowledgeable Consent***

A critical ethical concept was informed consent, which ensures that participants were fully aware of the study's goals, methods, risks, and benefits before participating. Informed consent is a continuous process that upholds people's autonomy, not just a formality, claim Beauchamp and Childress (2021). To enable participants to make an informed decision about their involvement, researchers must present information clearly and concisely. According to Robson and McCartan (2021), this procedure allows participants to leave the study without penalty.

### ***Confidentiality***

Encouraging engagement and building trust might depend on protecting participants' privacy and confidentiality. I must ensure that data sets are free of personal identifiers, that any information gathered is securely preserved, and that only authorized individuals have access to it (Wiles, 2021). In workforce education research, where sensitive information, such as educational history and employment position, can be revealed, the ethical duty to preserve participants' privacy is crucial. A failure to maintain confidentiality might result in potential harm and a decline in confidence in the research process (Babbie, 2022).

### ***Defense Against Injury***

It was my ethical duty to prevent any potential physical, psychological, or emotional harm to participants. According to the principle of non-maleficence, researchers should actively work to avoid damage, as Beauchamp and Childress (2021) recommended. This could involve performing initial assessments to identify possible risks and developing mitigation plans within workforce education research. Psychological risks can be managed, for example, by providing counseling options for individuals who might feel distressed by work-related issues (Duncan et al., 2021).

### ***Participation Voluntarily***

Research participation must be completely voluntary and free from undue influence or compulsion. Participants should be able to decline or leave the study without facing any consequences. Creswell (2021) asserted that preserving people's autonomy and the integrity of research depends on voluntary participation. Throughout the consent process, it is crucial to communicate that participation is voluntary.

### ***Equity and Fair Treatment***

All research subjects were entitled to equitable treatment, free from discrimination based on socioeconomic status, gender, color, or other characteristics. To ensure that the results accurately reflect the community, researchers should strive to include diverse populations in their studies (Harrison et al., 2021). This dedication to justice upholds ethical standards of fairness and strengthens the research's legitimacy.

### ***Institutional Review Board (IRB) Review***

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) evaluation ensured that research procedures adhered to ethical principles. IRBs evaluate research proposals to assess risks, benefits, and moral implications. According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2021), obtaining IRB approval is essential for protecting participants and ensuring ethical compliance. Before beginning the study, researchers must address any concerns raised by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

### ***Accountability and Transparency***

Transparent research techniques foster accountability and trust. Researchers must be transparent about their funding sources, methods, and possible conflicts of interest (Khan et al., 2021). Findings from ethical research must be carefully shared so that participants and stakeholders become aware of the research's implications. This approach enhances the study's legitimacy, enabling the community to make informed decisions.

Overall, research in workforce education at community colleges must be conducted with ethical safeguards. I can preserve the integrity of their studies and benefit the communities they serve by prioritizing informed consent, confidentiality, protection from harm, voluntary participation, fair treatment, IRB review, and transparency. In addition to strengthening the

research's legitimacy, these ethical issues may promote cooperation and trust between community colleges and the communities they want to uplift.

### ***Positionality***

As a Black person with personal and professional experience in community college settings, I recognize that my identity and background shape how I approach this study on the roles and perspectives of Black students in workforce education. My lived experiences motivated me to center the voices of students who are often marginalized in the educational system. While I am aware of the potential for bias, I view my insider perspective as a valuable asset that helps build trust and cultural connections with participants. Czerniawski (2023) explained that teachers' involvement in educational research enhances their professional development, enriches the profession's knowledge base, and ultimately improves teaching and learning. Therefore, I am committed to remaining reflexive throughout the research process and constantly examining how my positionality influences data collection and interpretation. Through this study, I aim to highlight how community colleges can more effectively empower Black students and contribute to broader goals of community uplift and equity.

### **Summary**

Through workforce education, community colleges strengthen communities, particularly for Black students who face additional challenges and obstacles during their academic careers. These establishments might equip students with the skills they need for fulfilling work and provide easy access to higher education. However, despite their talent, Black students often encounter structural barriers that can prevent them from succeeding. Fostering successful learning environments that empower Black students and advance the community might require understanding these obstacles and the opportunities within community institutions.

## Section 2: Methodology and Design

This study utilizes a qualitative methodology, incorporating purposive sampling and thematic analysis, to explore the complex experiences of Black students in workforce education programs. This research will use in-depth interviews and focus groups to elucidate the intersectional barriers, such as financial, institutional, and cultural, that impede access and success for these students. This approach facilitated a thorough understanding of the challenges encountered and aligned with the recognized need to empower marginalized communities through targeted educational strategies.

Workforce education was pivotal in societal development, evolving from local institutions, such as the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), to community colleges (D'Amico et al., 2022). These institutions served as foundational steppingstones for individuals seeking to enhance their employability, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas. As technological advancements and market demands evolve, community colleges were increasingly vital for equipping individuals with the skills needed for competitive workplaces (Cohen & Brawer, 2021). The American Association of Community Colleges (2022) noted that workforce education offers diverse programs for adult learners, underrepresented groups, and individuals transitioning into new careers. College administrators prioritize skill development to bolster community economic well-being and individual aspirations.

Despite its potential, workforce education faces challenges in engaging community members, particularly those facing employment and educational barriers such as financial constraints and transportation issues. Baker (2021) identified critical problems that hinder program efficacy, with research indicating that financial limitations and inadequate support

services disproportionately affect marginalized groups. Addressing these challenges was crucial for enhancing workforce education and community empowerment.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem to be addressed was that, despite the critical role of community colleges in workforce education, significant barriers persist that limit access and effectiveness for marginalized populations (Rana, 2024). Recent literature indicated that financial constraints, inadequate support services, and a misalignment between educational programs and labor market demands contribute to these barriers. For example, Johnson (2022) found that nearly 40% of adult learners cited financial difficulties as a primary reason for not enrolling or completing workforce programs. Smith and Lee (2023) highlighted that many community colleges fail to adapt their curricula to meet the evolving needs of local industries, resulting in graduates who are not adequately prepared for available jobs. Numerous community colleges have established financial aid programs and career counseling services; however, these initiatives often lack sufficient funding and resources to reach all students. Moreover, a continual disparity between educational institutions and local enterprises might hinder the advancement of pertinent training programs.

A qualitative research methodology might address the unresolved issues of empowering communities through workforce education and the role and impact of a community college. The methodology might involve conducting comprehensive interviews and focus groups with students, educators, and local industry representatives to gather insights into the obstacles encountered and the effectiveness of existing workforce education programs. I intend to assess participants' perspectives and experiences about educational access, the significance of training programs, and the availability of support services. This qualitative approach, centered on

practical problem-solving, will yield a comprehensive understanding of the issues communities face and guide the development of actionable measures to enhance the effectiveness of workforce education programs at community colleges.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore Black students' experiences [JC1] and perspectives enrolled in workforce education programs at a community college. The study might seek to understand these students' challenges, the factors contributing to their success, and how workforce education programs might be improved to serve Black students better. This research provided actionable insights that might inform the development of more inclusive and supportive workforce education programs, empowering Black students and enhancing their chances of success. By examining the experiences of students enrolled in the program, this research aimed to uncover how workforce education enhances economic mobility, fosters social empowerment, and impacts local communities. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Before data collection, the interview and focus group questions were field-tested with individuals who had characteristics similar to those of the study participants but were not included in the final sample. The purpose of the field test was to ensure the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the questions with the research objectives. Data were then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns across participant responses. Triangulation was achieved by comparing and corroborating findings across multiple data sources, including individual interviews and focus group discussions, to identify consistent themes and strengthen the credibility of the study's findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Triangulation was achieved by comparing and corroborating findings across different data sources, including individual interviews and focus group discussions, to identify consistent

patterns and strengthen the credibility of the study's findings (Meydan & Akkas, 2024). The research was conducted in a metropolitan area within the northeast region of the United States, where community colleges serve diverse populations. The target population comprised adult learners enrolled in workforce education programs, with a sample size of eight [JC2] participants selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2021). By identifying key barriers and potential solutions, this study aimed to make a significant contribution to educational practice by providing community colleges with actionable recommendations to enhance their workforce education programs and to empower more [JC3] individuals within the community to achieve their academic and career goals (Baker, 2021).

### **Design and Method**

Choosing appropriate techniques, designs, and methods for conducting practice-based educational research was essential to effectively addressing the study's problem, objective, and research questions. According to Flick (2022), qualitative techniques, case study design, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups were well-justified choices for conducting practice-based educational research. The options available to researchers enable them to investigate the complexities of educational practices and capture the experiences of educators and students. To develop significant insights that contribute to the field of education and inform educational practices, I must match the technique, design, and method to the study's problem, purpose, and research questions. The chosen methodology consisted of qualitative research. Mey (2022) explained that a qualitative research approach aims to understand the experiences, perceptions, and meanings individuals relate to their educational practices. Observations, interviews, and focus groups are among the methods used in this exploration approach, which aims to collect rich, detailed data.

Qualitative methodology was well-suited for practice-based educational research, as it facilitates an in-depth exploration of complex educational phenomena. It allows me to capture educators' and learners' subjective experiences, providing insights into their challenges, motivations, and the context of their practices. This depth of understanding was essential when examining educational practices, as it can reveal how contextual factors influence teaching and learning outcomes (Mey, 2022). Due to its capacity to facilitate in-depth investigations of complex educational phenomena, the qualitative methodology was a suitable choice for field-based educational research. The ability to record educators' and learners' subjective experiences was provided to researchers, allowing them to gain insights into the obstacles they face, the reasons that drive them, and the context in which they practice. This level of expertise was crucial for analyzing educational methods, as it can shed light on how contextual factors influence teaching and learning outcomes.

A case study was conducted with an in-depth investigation of a specific case or instance within the context of its actual occurrence in the real world. This design used multiple data sources, including interviews and focus groups, to provide a comprehensive view of the case under investigation. Due to its ability to provide a thorough understanding of a specific educational environment or practice, the case study approach is a suitable choice for practice-based educational research. By examining a particular example, scholars can explore the relationships and dynamics that determine the outcomes of educational endeavors (Mishra & Dey, 2022). This strategy was appropriate when the objective was to understand how specific practices are applied and their impact on learners. Furthermore, case studies can help identify the best practices and inform the development of future educational initiatives.

## Population and Sample

The population of this qualitative study consists of Black students currently enrolled in community colleges. A total of 12 participants were recruited to gather diverse perspectives on the issue. Community colleges in the Hudson Valley region serve a diverse student body and play a vital role in workforce education, making them an appropriate setting for exploring the roles and perspectives of Black students. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify participants capable of providing in-depth, relevant insights into the phenomenon under study. Although 12 participants were recruited, eight took part in individual interviews and focus group sessions. Participant attrition is common in qualitative research, especially among community college students who often juggle academic, employment, and family responsibilities (Creswell & Poth, 2021). Despite the smaller sample size, the final group of eight was sufficient to meet the aims of qualitative inquiry, which emphasize depth, meaning, and contextual understanding over statistical generalization. Chatters et al. (2024) explained that studies are primarily conducted on limited populations, restricting the scope of individuals they can reach. Nonetheless, the eight participants who completed the interviews and focus group provided rich, detailed narratives that facilitated a thorough exploration of shared experiences, challenges, and perceptions. The participation of these eight learners did not undermine the study's credibility; rather, it enabled detailed, in-depth interviews and a focused, interactive group discussion, both aligned with the study's purpose. This sample size aligns with the methodological recommendations for comprehensive qualitative research, prioritizing the collection of rich, nuanced narratives over statistical generalization (Subedi, 2021). Therefore, the new sample size of eight was sufficient to achieve data saturation, the point at which no additional themes or insights emerge from the data (Douglas, 2022). Participants were selected based on specific

inclusion criteria relevant to the study's topics and conceptual framework. This focused recruitment strategy guarantees that every participant possesses the requisite lived experience to offer significant insights into the study. The objective is not to attain representativeness but to investigate various opinions within the chosen community. By explicitly establishing a recruiting objective of eight participants, the study delineates reasonable anticipations for data collection, analysis, and timeline while preserving methodological rigor and depth of insight.

To obtain meaningful insights into the experiences of Black students in workforce education programs, it was essential to align the research methodology with the study themes (Creswell & Poth, 2021). These techniques will work together to provide a comprehensive picture of the participants' opinions on their educational experiences, challenges, and the importance of workforce education in their personal and professional development. This method ensures that the research is thorough and competent in addressing the complex issues faced by Black students in community institutions. To ensure participant diversity, I employed several strategies that promote a wide range of perspectives, such as stratified sampling within a purposive sampling framework. This method involves deliberately selecting participants from diverse groups according to specified criteria to ensure that all subgroups within the population are represented. The study aims to investigate the experiences of Black students in community colleges, so I would attempt to include participants from various program types to ensure that each subgroup's opinions are represented. Thematic analysis is a crucial qualitative research technique that may be employed to investigate the experiences of Black students in community college workforce education programs, addressing, identifying, and analyzing this topic. This section will explore key themes, including financial constraints on program completion, the role of career counseling in student success, the impact of faculty support, and the influence of peer

relationships. For example, financial constraints impacting program completion may influence students' ability to complete their workforce education programs. Many Black students may face economic hardships that hinder their educational pursuits.

Recruiting participants for qualitative research may be challenging, particularly when the study focuses on specific populations, such as Black students in workforce education programs at community colleges. Awareness of these possible obstacles is essential to ensure strong involvement. This section will describe tactics for overcoming financial and logistical constraints, explore ways to offer rewards, and outline methods to encourage hesitant participants to share their experiences. To ensure participants are willing to take part in the study, it is essential to have flexible interview scheduling and diverse focus groups. Considering participants' schedules, flexibility was a priority when arranging meetings, as many students have diverse schedules due to classes, jobs, and personal commitments. This process might involve offering interview options in the evening or on weekends and using virtual platforms to facilitate participation. When students choose their schedules, it can significantly reduce logistical hurdles, allowing them to engage without interfering with their everyday responsibilities (Baker, 2022). I increased participation rates and collected more complete data by accommodating students' availability, as they are more likely to participate when it fits their schedules. Choosing the right sampling strategy was crucial when conducting qualitative research, as it enables you to gather rich, relevant data that addresses the topics you are investigating. Several qualitative sampling approaches were used to examine the experiences of Black students in workforce education programs at community colleges. Providing a safe and supportive environment was crucial to encouraging participants to share their experiences without hesitation. I adequately explained the research's goal and assured students that their

participation would be kept confidential and treated with respect. Individuals disclosed their honest experiences when they believe their opinions are respected and safeguarded (Shrader et al., 2022). When students felt more comfortable addressing sensitive topics, trust increased, participation increased, and the quality of the collected data improved.

In qualitative research, purposive sampling, also known as purposeful sampling, was commonly used as a nonprobability sampling technique (Douglas, 2022). This strategy involves selecting participants based on specific features or attributes that align with the research objectives. In this situation, the aim was to collect information from Black students participating in workforce education programs. For example, Thomas (2022) explained that homogeneous sampling may help choose participants with comparable traits, such as Black students enrolled in a particular educational program. This can help gain a better understanding of the experiences they share. Maximum variation sampling aimed to gather a wide range of viewpoints by enrolling individuals from different backgrounds within the target group, including variations in age, academic standing, and past educational experiences.

Furthermore, Ahmad and Wilkins (2024) described purposeful sampling as beneficial for qualitative research because it enables researchers to gather detailed information from individuals with firsthand experience of the topic under examination. This method helps understand the contextual aspects that shape participants' perspectives and captures the details of their experiences. According to Ahmad and Wilkins (2024), when conducting qualitative studies that employ purposive sampling, a sample size of 10-15 participants is recommended. This range can enable a wide variety of experiences to be represented while providing sufficient depth in the data collected. Saturation can typically be reached within this range, especially in studies focusing on homogeneous groups where participants share similar traits and experiences.

Ensuring that the sampling processes were aligned with the chosen design and method was essential. This was important because it ensured that the data obtained effectively addressed the research questions and provided in-depth insights into the phenomenon being examined. In examining the experiences of Black students in workforce education programs at community colleges, purposeful sampling aligned with the case study design and theme analysis method. This section describes the relationship between various sampling processes and qualitative study design, highlighting the significance of data saturation (Dahal et al., 2024). According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022), data saturation in qualitative investigations is typically achieved through systematic data collection and analysis. For example, data saturation usually happens when the sample size is between 10 and 15 participants in inhomogeneous group studies. However, Ahmed (2025) explained that saturation serves as a benchmark for methodological rigor in qualitative research, guaranteeing that the investigative process is comprehensive, rigorous, and representative of varied participant experiences. Therefore, this finding was significant for the current study, as the experiences of Black students in workforce education programs may share similarities that can be adequately documented within this sample size. Douglas (2022) stated that the sampling strategies employed in this qualitative study were similar to those used in case study design and in thematic analysis. Purposeful sampling enabled the selection of individuals who can provide detailed, pertinent information about the experiences of Black students in workforce education programs. In addition, I can ensure their findings are thorough and accurately reflect the participants' experiences by following best practices for achieving data saturation. The combination of these components adds to the overall rigor and validity of the qualitative research.

## **Instrumentation**

The trustworthiness of the data gathered in qualitative research depends heavily on the choice of instruments and materials. This included the methods and instruments used to collect data. Interviews and focus group guides were just a few examples of the items that must be employed by the study, given its particular context and goals. Furthermore, the apparatus must enable a thorough comprehension of the experiences, viewpoints, and interactions of individuals within the phenomenon being studied. According to recent research, carefully crafted tools that align with the qualitative paradigm are crucial. For example, Creswell and Poth (2021) emphasized that qualitative tools should be adaptive and flexible to the changing nature of qualitative inquiry, enabling researchers to follow emerging themes while staying focused on the research objectives.

Field testing in qualitative research was a crucial phase that enhances the reliability and validity of the study by allowing researchers to assess the effectiveness of their materials and instruments in real-world contexts (Singha & Yogesh, 2025). This process involved testing data collection instruments, including interviews, focus groups, and/or questionnaires, on a limited sample of participants before the primary study (see Appendix A). I identified potential issues, refined methodologies, and ensured that instruments accurately captured the intended data. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a deeper investigation of individual perspectives, whereas focus groups highlight everyday experiences and issues people face together. This study can employ qualitative tools to gather comprehensive narratives that represent Black students' lived experiences in workforce education programs. Each instrument was chosen to correspond with the objectives of a case study design, ensuring depth, relevance, and methodological rigor. The principal instruments comprised a semi-structured interview protocol, an informed consent

document, and a reflexive notebook kept by the study's personnel. According to Singha and Yogesh (2025), this phase is significant because comprehensive field testing enhanced the robustness of findings and bolsters the credibility of qualitative research. This iterative method can improve the quality of research instruments and foster greater engagement with the participant population, thereby enriching the qualitative data collected.

Upon concluding field testing, the interview methodology might be evaluated and enhanced based on comments and observed participant reactions. Modifications were implemented to improve clarity for specific inquiries, optimize sequencing, and ensure that prompts accurately aligned with the study's research objectives and conceptual framework. The adjustments were integrated into the final version of the interview instrument and subsequently utilized for formal data collection (Naz et al., 2022). This procedure ensured that the instrument was methodologically robust and adept at extracting substantial and pertinent data from participants in the primary trial.

### ***Semi-Structured Interview Protocol***

The protocol consisted of open-ended inquiries corresponding to the research topics and conceptual framework, examining themes such as institutional support, obstacles to success, community impact, and perceptions of empowerment through workforce education. Each participant can receive a transcript of their semi-structured interview to examine as part of my member checking process. In this step, participants can confirm that their answers are accurate, provide clarification on any statements, and make sure that their viewpoints are accurately represented. They will be allowed to offer revision suggestions, clarify any misunderstandings, or provide additional context for any points they believe require it. Participants can either set up a quick follow-up conversation or submit their feedback via email. Participants are actively

involved in interpreting their narratives, which strengthens the study's legitimacy and reliability. McKim (2023) described the purpose of the member-checking process as enhancing the credibility of the data.

The interview guide can be crafted to maintain uniformity among participants while permitting them to expand on their experiences in personally significant ways (see Appendix A). This methodology can effectively capture the study's qualitative characteristics, emphasizing depth rather than breadth and highlighting the participants' language, context, and interpretation of events (Creswell & Poth, 2021). The procedure provided a planned framework but was flexible enough to incorporate follow-up questions and unexpected revelations throughout the interview. This ensured that the data obtained was pertinent and comprehensive, encompassing each participant's distinct viewpoints. The application of this instrument directly facilitated the generation of comprehensive, thematic data that encapsulated the intricacies of student experiences in community college workforce programs.

### ***Consent Form***

A detailed informed consent form was used to ensure ethical compliance and build participant trust. The form outlined the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, and participants' rights to withdraw at any time. It also included information about audio recording and data use.

### ***Reflexive Journal***

During the research, maintain a reflexive notebook to record decisions, insights, emotions, and biases (McGrath, 2021). This journal served as a methodological tool for maintaining self-awareness and transparency throughout the data-gathering and analysis process. It would justify reflexivity due to their dual status as insiders and advocates in the research

context. The journal might alter participant data; however, maintaining analytic clarity and ensuring findings are grounded in participants' narratives was crucial. In the journal, as mentioned in the positionality above, as a Black person with personal and professional experience in community college settings, I recognized that my identity and background shape how I approach this study of the roles and perspectives of Black students in workforce education. The notions of my reflexivity and acknowledgment of positionality were becoming increasingly important in evaluating the quality of qualitative research methods (Sibbald et al., 2024).

### **Instruments for Qualitative Research**

In qualitative research, selecting appropriate tools to capture the depth and richness of participants' experiences accurately was crucial. The study, which focuses on the experiences of Black students in workforce education programs at community colleges, would use a combination of semi-structured interviews and focus group techniques. Guest et al. (2023) explained that focus groups and in-depth interviews were among the most prevalent qualitative research methods. Individual interviews were used to collect personal narratives from individuals (See Appendix A). The purpose of these interviews was to gain an understanding of processes and/or to elicit a participant's experiences, beliefs, or opinions on a particular subject. They are performed one-on-one and may take thirty minutes to one hour.

This section provides information about the instruments, including their origins and evidence of their reliability and authenticity. For example, the semi-structured interview guide included open-ended questions to encourage participants to provide detailed responses about their experiences, financial issues, and perceptions of workforce education programs. The guide enabled me to remain flexible and explore new issues throughout the conversation (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). In qualitative research, the tools and resources used are crucial in determining the

caliber and breadth of the results. I may effectively capture the intricacies of human experiences and make significant contributions to their disciplines using research-relevant tools and procedures.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Qualitative research relies heavily on data gathering and analysis as the foundation for comprehending social phenomena and intricate human experiences. To capture the subtleties of participants' viewpoints and produce insightful findings, a methodical approach to data collection and analysis was crucial when researching the experiences of Black students in community college workforce education programs. Focus groups, interviews, and observations were just a few of the techniques commonly used in qualitative data gathering, which aims to collect detailed, descriptive information that captures participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2021). In addition to semi-structured interviews, focus groups were used to record classroom interactions and engagement as the primary data collection strategy for this study.

The six-phase Braun and Clarke (2022) theme analysis was conducted on semi-structured interview data. This method was ideal for studying how participants interpret their experiences and for identifying patterns that address the study's primary research objectives on Black student empowerment, access, and equity in workforce education. To familiarize myself with the material, they transcribed all interviews verbatim and reviewed them several times. In the second step, tagging data segments with relevant concepts or recurring ideas (e.g., lack of representation, family as a motivator, financial strain) yielded initial codes. These descriptive and interpretive codes can be based on participants' language and study questions.

In the third phase, these codes were grouped into potential themes. For instance, feeling unseen by instructors and curriculum does not reflect culture, which can be considered an

institutional disconnect. This categorization will reduce and arrange data while maintaining analytical depth. These preliminary themes will be reviewed for relevance throughout the dataset and in relation to participants' narratives in the fourth phase. Themes can be revised or merged to avoid overlap and provide cohesion (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The final themes were defined and named in the fifth phase to reflect participants' responses to the study's goals. These concepts were carefully explained to answer research questions. Finally, themes were woven into a coherent narrative in the sixth phase, using direct participant quotes, to present analytically robust and real-world findings on student experiences. This interpretive approach connected emerging themes to the study's conceptual framework, community empowerment, and educational equity discourse.

Finding themes, patterns, and insights in the gathered data was a key step in analyzing qualitative data. Recurring themes related to academic experiences, a sense of belonging, access to resources, and participation in learning activities will be identified through systematic coding and categorization of the data using thematic analysis, a widely employed qualitative research technique (Lim, 2024). According to the analytical technique, relevant interpretations were drawn from the data, and connections were established between personal experiences and the educational context. Additionally, reflexivity, the critical reflection on researchers' biases, assumptions, and the influence of their positionality on the data interpretation process, is emphasized by thorough data analysis in qualitative research (Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024). The data-gathering and analysis procedures of this qualitative study aim to provide a detailed understanding of Black students' experiences in the workforce education program. The study aims to provide important insights into the complexities of these people's academic journeys and

make essential contributions to educational justice through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and theme analysis (See Appendix A).

### ***Strategies for Data Coding and Analysis***

According to Lim (2024), effective data coding and analysis were crucial in qualitative research to address the identified problem and answer research questions. A methodical approach to data analysis was used for this study, which studies the experiences of Black students in community college workforce education programs. Thematic analysis and qualitative data analysis tools can also be used. This section describes the software tools, coding techniques, and analytical approaches employed to ensure reliable and significant results (Mey, 2022). The coding and analysis techniques used in this qualitative study were designed to ensure that the research questions are effectively addressed and that the conclusions provide a meaningful resolution to the stated issue. The study will use rigorous coding procedures and qualitative data analysis software to provide a comprehensive and nuanced perspective of Black students' experiences in workforce education programs.

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions were fundamental in determining how qualitative research was designed, conducted, and interpreted. They were the basic ideas and expectations I needed to gather: the nature of reality, the setting of the investigation, and the connections between the participants. Understanding and reflecting on these assumptions were critical to ensure that qualitative research was accurate and reliable (Pryce-Miller et al., 2023). This was especially true when investigating complicated social phenomena, such as the experiences of Black students in workforce education programs at community colleges. A key assumption in qualitative research was that knowledge can be created via social interactions and experiences. I believe that reality is

subjective and that participants' opinions provide valuable insights into their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2021). This constructivist approach emphasized the importance of understanding the context and the interpretations people assign to their experiences. The assumptions that underpin qualitative research significantly shaped how I conducted the studies, interacted with participants, and analyzed data. I improved the rigor and relevance of their work by critically scrutinizing these assumptions. This method ultimately contributed to a deeper understanding of the experiences of marginalized groups, such as Black students in workforce education programs.

This study was motivated by a dedication to empowering the people I served. By prioritizing the perspectives of Black students, we gained a deeper understanding of their challenges and the qualities they bring to their educational experiences. I recognized that my position entails specific assumptions, including the conviction that workforce education should serve as a means for economic and social advancement. I practiced continuous critical reflexivity to ensure that the readings accurately reflect participants' experiences, rather than being influenced by my preconceptions. I kept a reflexive notebook to record thoughts, feelings, and analytical conclusions. I also conducted regular peer debriefings to obtain feedback and assess bias during data analysis. The measures preserved the study's credibility and integrity, ensuring the findings arise legitimately from participant narratives rather than from prior professional or personal convictions. This transparency was not meant to diminish my stance but to make it apparent, recognizing that information is collaboratively created in qualitative research. My objective was to elevate the narratives of Black students by facilitating opportunities for their experiences to inform educational practices, institutional policies, and broader discussions on equality and empowerment.

## **Limitations**

Qualitative research has inherent limitations that might impact the study's design, implementation, and interpretation (Köhler et al., 2022). It was essential to acknowledge these limitations to preserve the integrity and honesty of the research process. I explained the findings and the context in which they are situated, while they were aware of the limitations and potential biases. This section would review the limitations of qualitative research and highlight how they impact studies examining the experiences of Black students in workforce education programs. It was crucial to understand and acknowledge the limitations of qualitative research to contextualize results and enhance the study's legitimacy. When investigating the experiences of Black students in workforce education programs, it was essential to consider several key factors: subjectivity, generalizability, time constraints, ethical considerations, and challenges in participant recruitment. Ultimately, I contributed to the ongoing conversation on educational justice and support for marginalized groups by openly addressing these limitations and offering a more in-depth, nuanced analysis of their findings.

### ***Subjectivity and Researcher Bias***

Two of the key disadvantages of qualitative research were subjectivity and researcher bias. Qualitative researchers often interact directly with participants, which can influence their interpretations through participants' perspectives, experiences, and biases (Pryce-Miller et al., 2023). This subjectivity could affect data collection, processing, and interpretation, leading to outcomes that reflect the researcher's opinions rather than participants' experiences. Reflexivity helped reduce these biases, but it might not eliminate them. This means that the study's conclusions were not entirely objective.

**Ethical Considerations.** In qualitative research, ethical considerations pose particular challenges that might limit the scope of studies. It was essential to address informed consent concerns diligently and in accordance with ethical research standards. It can ensure that participants understand the study's goal and their rights. Another vital issue was confidentiality, as it was necessary to keep participants' identities secret to protect their privacy and build trust. Furthermore, I must consider the potential effects of the research on participants, particularly when investigating sensitive subjects that may evoke emotional reactions. For instance, if a participant shared experiences of discrimination during an interview or focus group, I paused, checked in with them, and offered follow-up resources as needed. These ethical constraints may limit the types of questions that can be asked and the depth of the investigation, ultimately affecting the quality of the data obtained and the overall conclusions (Drolet et al., 2023).

### **Delimitations**

In qualitative research, delimitations refer to the limits I set to establish the scope and focus of the investigation. These boundaries were established to indicate what the study will and will not explore. It focused the research on specific features of a phenomenon while ignoring others (Marx, 2023). For example, I limited my study to Black students currently enrolled in the workforce program at a large public university in the state of NY. Delimitations were vital because they would help keep the research manageable and valuable. They also help guide the study's design, methods, and interpretation of results. This section explained the idea of delimitations in qualitative research, highlighted their importance, and included academic references from contemporary literature. Delimitations provided a framework that guided the study, enabling me to make deliberate decisions about aspects such as the population and sample size, research questions, and data collection methods (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

## Summary

It was essential to have a solid methodology and design for a qualitative study that investigates the experiences of Black students in workforce education programs, ensuring that the findings are credible and thorough. This section outlined the most critical aspects of the methodology and design, emphasizing their importance in addressing the research questions and achieving the study objectives. The methods and design of the study have been carefully developed to consider the experiences of Black students enrolled in workforce education programs. While the design is intentional, relying solely on self-reported experiences can limit the generalizability of findings. The research aims to provide detailed insights that inform practice and policy by employing a qualitative approach, including purposeful sampling, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, thematic analysis, and consideration of ethical implications (Verhage et al., 2024). These methodological choices were based on the current qualitative research literature, ensuring the study is relevant and rigorous.

### **Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations**

This qualitative case study explored the viewpoints and lived experiences of Black students enrolled in workforce education programs at a community college. To understand how participants perceived their experiences with access, equity, and personal growth in the context of workforce education, the research employed a phenomenological approach. Hossain et al. (2024) rationalized that the phenomenological study methodology, data gathering techniques, and analysis, together with the manner and context in which saturation is attained. The phenomenological approach has been utilized to investigate stakeholders' perceptions by sharing their experiences. Consequently, the data uncovered was the result of a thematic analysis of the focus group's responses, the collected material, and the members' own accounts of their educational experiences.

#### **Organization of the Section**

The findings of this qualitative phenomenological study aligned with its objectives, research inquiries, and methodological framework. According to Aguas (2022), qualitative researchers, especially phenomenological investigators, can benefit from this perspective, given the significance of dialectical chaos as an unlimited source of knowledge and methodological alternatives across various disciplines. This section begins with a summary that reiterates the question and discusses the analysis of interview and focus group data to identify emerging themes. The results were presented in thematic categories that summarize the essence of the participants' lived experiences. These groupings encompassed systemic and financial obstacles, cultural disparities, insufficient representation, resilience and collective accountability, institutional deficiencies in assistance, and aspirations for generational progress. These themes were designed to address the research questions that directed the study and illustrate how

participants in career education programs interpret their experiences. Mishra and Dey (2022) explained that themes are central to any qualitative research methodology. Themes were not observable; they exist as perceptions, experiences, sentiments, values, and emotions within the minds of research participants or responders. To elicit the themes, which were intangible impressions and experiences ingrained in the respondents' minds, the researcher must pose inquiries. Consequently, in-depth interviews or focus group discussions facilitated the identification of themes more effectively. A researcher may only consult secondary data sources after gathering information through interviews, focus group discussions, or both.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences and perspectives of Black students enrolled in workforce education programs at a community college. The study might seek to understand these students' challenges, the factors contributing to their success, and how workforce education programs might be improved to serve Black students better. This research provided actionable insights that might inform the development of more inclusive and supportive workforce education programs, empowering Black students and enhancing their chances of success. By examining the experiences of students enrolled in the program, this research aimed to uncover how workforce education enhances economic mobility, fosters social empowerment, and impacts local communities. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Before data collection, the interview and focus group questions were field-tested with individuals who had characteristics similar to those of the study participants but were not included in the final sample. The purpose of the field test was to ensure the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the questions with the research objectives. Data were then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns across

participant responses. Triangulation was achieved by comparing and corroborating findings across multiple data sources, including individual interviews and focus group discussions, to identify consistent themes and strengthen the credibility of the study's findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Triangulation was achieved by comparing and corroborating findings across different data sources, including individual interviews and focus group discussions, to identify consistent patterns and strengthen the credibility of the study's findings (Meydan & Akkas, 2024). The research was in a metropolitan area within the northeast region of the United States, where community colleges serve diverse populations. The target population comprised adult learners enrolled in workforce education programs, with a sample size of eight participants selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2021). By identifying key barriers and potential solutions, this study aimed to make a significant contribution to educational practice by providing community colleges with actionable recommendations to enhance their workforce education programs and empowering more individuals within the community to achieve their academic and career goals (Baker, 2021).

### **Practice-Based Problem**

Black students in workforce education programs encounter enduring financial, cultural, and institutional obstacles that limit their ability to fully access, remain in, and benefit from these programs. Financial constraints and limited resources have hindered the expansion and sustainability of adult education initiatives. Due to financial constraints, most of these programs were unable to provide comprehensive services or reach larger audiences (Edwards-Fapohunda, 2024). The challenges, including financial hardship, cultural conflict, low representation, and uneven support services, indicate a disparity in practice, suggesting that the workforce education environment was inadequately organized to address the requirements of Black learners. Joseph et

al. (2023) explained that educational inequities associated with financial resources and social standing negatively affect disadvantaged Black students. Social class disparities were asserted to be present at nearly every phase of learners' educational experiences.

### **Limitations Influencing the Interpretation of the Results**

Several factors and limitations might influence the interpretation of the study's results. First, the findings were based on a relatively small sample of Black students who voluntarily participated in the focus group and interview session. Since participation was voluntary, individuals with stronger opinions might have been more motivated to respond, potentially limiting the breadth of perspectives captured. Furthermore, the data relied entirely on self-reported experiences, which might shape participants' memories, emotional states, or personal interpretations of events. While phenomenology values subjective lived experience, self-report data can introduce natural variability that cannot be independently verified. Hossain et al. (2024) stated that in qualitative research, phenomenology was a well-established approach focused on obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the essence and significance of everyday experiences. Although phenomenological research has a long history, there is no standardized protocol for its conduct.

Additionally, the study reflects the perspectives of Black learners within a specific moment in time. Wilkerson and Hodge (2022) clarified that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were participating in workforce development programs by cooperating with urban populations. Currently, few analyses utilize a funds-of-knowledge conceptual framework to investigate the viewpoints of urban community workforce providers and participants. Therefore, the participants' experiences were explained to be shaped by financial stress, work obligations,

family responsibilities, cultural identity, and systemic pressure, which can evolve or differ under other conditions.

In this study, my positionality may have influenced data interpretation, as my professional role and prior engagement with the workforce education context shaped how I understood participants' perspectives, identified themes, and made sense of the findings throughout the research process. Qualitative researchers must engage in critical reflection and articulate the positionality of their work to the readers. This account can be straightforward; nevertheless, there were instances when the process of thinking and delineating one's positionality became far more complex (Gurr et al., 2024). Consequently, although reflexive, phenomenological analysis requires me to bracket personal biases and assumptions. Despite these limitations, the findings provide meaningful insights into the structural, cultural, and psychosocial factors that influence the educational experiences of Black adult learners. The themes reflect consistent patterns across participants and provide a meaningful foundation for understanding the supports, barriers, and transformative potential inherent in workforce education programs. Mishra and Dey (2022) highlighted that the themes arise from the interviewees' unconscious thoughts and feelings, and that the researcher must "ask" questions to access them. Finding themes was easy when conducting in-depth interviews or focus group discussions. Secondary sources of data can only be used after interviews, focus groups, or both have been used to gather primary data.

## **Findings**

A focus group and semi-structured interviews were conducted with Black students enrolled in workforce education programs at a community college. Chand (2025) explained the goals, processes, strengths, and weaknesses of interviews, focus groups, observation, and

document analysis. Focus groups reveal collective meanings and social norms, whereas interviews explore individual opinions and lived experiences. Observation enables researchers to record real-world behaviors, interactions, and environmental factors that participants may overlook. This section offers a more detailed, analytically rich interpretation of the data collected from these events. The findings illuminate how financial restrictions, institutional frameworks, cultural affirmation, and perceptions of workforce education influence student persistence, engagement, and aspirations for economic mobility. The study's social justice framework guided these findings. Despite only eight participants in interviews and focus groups, the depth and consistency of their narratives achieved sufficient data saturation, allowing for the emergence of meaningful themes.

Within the broader scholarly discourses on workforce education, equity, and community college access, the findings, which align with qualitative research, prioritize participants' voices and their lived experiences. Student narratives align with current literature, and both convergence and divergence with previous studies were revealed through the themes described below. These themes go beyond surface-level description to offer interpretive meaning. Villamin et al. (2025) further explained that the flexibility of qualitative descriptive design can lead to confusion, perhaps constraining the research scope and diminishing the quality and significance of the findings. When applied correctly, qualitative descriptive design is a valuable qualitative method that yields high-quality, pertinent findings through proper research methods.

This qualitative phenomenology study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of Black adult learners participating in workforce education programs at a community college. The study aimed to comprehend the challenges, supports, perspectives, and developmental effects affecting the participation of eight adult participants in workforce training through a single focus

group. The data analysis included a multi-step coding procedure comprising open coding, axial coding, and topic development, culminating in seven themes corresponding to the study's three research questions. Wilkerson and Hodge (2022) explained that the writers used a critical-qualitative method to examine the experiences of providers and participants. This chapter presents the findings using an objective, descriptive methodology aligned with phenomenological reporting, emphasizing participants' own expressions while excluding the researcher's interpretation or inference.

### **Participant Demographics**

Eight adults engaged in the focus group and interview session. All participants were aged 18 years or older and self-identified as Black or African American. Gender data was not gathered to ensure anonymity. Participants exhibited diverse experiences in workforce education programs offered by a community college, including health care, technical training, continuing education, and career progression pathways. No specific program type, employment status, or personal attribute was associated with individual participant codes. All demographic information was described in detail to prevent inadvertent identification of individuals, given the limited sample size.

### **Demographic Table**

Table 1 displays the indexed demographic features of the participants. No demographic variables were linked to any particular participant code.

**Table 1**

## Participant Demographic Characteristic

Demographic Category	Description	Frequency	Notes
Age Range	Adult learners (18+)	8	All participants were adult learners
Race/Ethnicity	Black / African American	8	Represents the study participant population
Gender	Not collected	8	Not collected to protect participant identity and confidentiality
Program Context	Workforce Education	8	Participants enrolled in workforce education programming
Data Source	Focus Group	8	Data collected through a structured focus group protocol

*Note.* All participants were adult learners enrolled in workforce education programming.

Consistent with the study's ethical and confidentiality protocols described in Section 3, gender data were not collected to reduce the risk of participant identification and to maintain focus on workforce education experiences.

### Organization of the Findings

The findings have been arranged according to the three research topics that served as the basis for this study. During the focus group discussion and interview session, themes and matching codes emerged from participants' viewpoints. These themes and codes were used to address each research topic. The findings reflect how Black students view their experiences in workforce education, the significance of these programs in their personal and professional

growth, and the problems they face while participating in them. Quotations from participants were used to exemplify each theme and, to maintain confidentiality, are presented using participant identifiers. This chapter provides a descriptive report of the data; it does not include any explanation or analysis

### ***Research Question 1 Findings***

***RQ1:*** What were the perspectives of Black students regarding their experiences in workforce education programs at a community college?

The participants described their experiences in workforce education as complex and complicated. Participants' involvement and dedication in their programs were influenced by a range of factors, including financial commitments, cultural dynamics, and emotional pressures. These external factors shaped these experiences. The participants' perceptions, interpretations, and strategies for navigating their daily experiences in workforce education environments were collectively illustrated by three themes that emerged from the interview and focus group.

#### **Theme 1: Systemic and Financial Obstacles Influence the Workforce Education Experience**

Throughout the study, participants consistently expressed their experiences through the viewpoint of competing with life commitments and financial obligations. “I am trying to learn, but at the same time I am in survival mode” (Participant 3). Many individuals stated that their participation in workforce education occurred concurrently with employment, family duties, and economic hardship, all of which affected their ability to devote their full attention to their academic pursuits. “It is hard balancing work, kids, and school all at once” (Participant 6).

#### **Theme 2: Cultural Conflict and Lacking Representation Impact Sense of Belonging**

Within the context of workforce education environments, participants reported feeling a cultural gap. “I feel like I have to switch how I talk just to fit in” (Participant 1). To be

understood or taken seriously, many people have expressed a need to transform their behavior or implement a code of conduct. Participant 4 explained, "There are not many people who look like me teaching these programs". The lack of representation among personnel and instructors contributed to a sense of not being fully seen or understood.

### **Theme 3: Emotional and Mental Stress Is a Part of the Experience**

As part of their path toward workforce education, participants reported experiencing stress, overwhelm, and self-doubt. Participant 5 said, "There is a lot of mental weight on my shoulders." The pressures applied were frequently associated with external responsibilities and internal expectations to succeed. "It is difficult to keep up with everything," said Participant 2. The experience can be viewed as overwhelming.

#### ***Research Question 2 Findings***

**RQ2:** What perspectives do Black students have on the position of workforce education in their personal and professional development?

Despite the stated difficulties, the participants consistently considered workforce education a meaningful and purposeful path to personal development, professional advancement, and long-term transformation. Participants in workforce education programs were seen as able to improve their overall life situations, learn new skills, broaden their job prospects, and expand their career opportunities. Participants found that their involvement in these programs went beyond earning credentials and contributed to changes in their self-perception, motivation, and confidence. Two themes emerged, both reflecting how the participants understood the role workforce education played in building their personal confidence and strengthening their professional identity.

### **Theme 4: Workforce Education Leads to Opportunity and Advancement**

Participants viewed workforce education as an essential means of enhancing their lives and fostering better futures for themselves and their families. “This program provides opportunities that were previously unavailable to me” (Participant 8). Numerous participants indicated that long-term objectives and the advancement of future generations drove their involvement. “I am undertaking this program to provide my children with exposure to diverse experiences” (Participant 7).

### **Theme 5: Engagement in Workforce Education Enhances Confidence and Identity Formation**

Participants described changes in their self-perceptions as learners and professionals. “I previously believed I was incapable of this, but now I recognize that I am” (Participant 2). Participation in workforce education enhanced confidence, self-efficacy, and a growing sense of belonging within professional environments. “I now perceive a sense of belonging in these environments” (Participant 4).

### ***Research Question 3 Findings***

***RQ3:*** What challenges do Black students describe that they face in workforce education programs?

Participants recognized multiple interrelated challenges related to institutional frameworks, communication methods, and the program's overall design. These challenges frequently led to confusion, restricted access to timely information, and diminished participants' ability to navigate program requirements effectively. Two themes emerged from the thematic analysis, highlighting barriers that affect engagement and persistence in workforce education programs.

### **Theme 6: Perceptions of Institutional Support as Inconsistent or Difficult to Access**

The participants expressed difficulties with unclear communication and limited awareness of available resources. "I did not become aware of the services available to me until I was already having a hard time" (Participant 6). Even though support services were available, participants frequently reported that they were not adequately explained or offered proactively. One of the participants, number 3, stated, "They say there is help, but nobody tells you where to find it."

### **Theme 7: Adult Learners Face Obstacles Due to Program Structure**

Participants identified challenges with the program, including inflexible scheduling, insufficient academic support, and a lack of mentorship. "The timing is incompatible with employment" (Participant 5). The structural issues were considered especially challenging for working adults and students with family obligations. "Having a guide to assist you through each step would be beneficial" (Participant 1).

**Table 2**

Themes, Codes, and Participant Quotes

Theme	Codes	Example Participant Quotes
Systemic & Financial Obstacles	Financial strain; survival mode; work–school conflict	"I am trying to learn, but at the same time I am in survival mode." (Participant 3)
Cultural Conflict	Code-switching; lack of representation	"I feel like I have to switch how I talk to just fit in." (Participant 1)
Emotional Stress	Overwhelm; stress	"It is difficult to keep up with everything." (Participant 2)

Opportunity & Advancement	Generational advancement; persistence	“I am undertaking this program to provide my children with exposure to diverse experiences.” (Participant 7)
Confidence & Identity Formation	Confidence; self-belief	“I now perceive a sense of belonging in this environment.” (Participant 4)
Inconsistent / Difficult Support Systems	Unclear resources; inconsistent support	“They say there is help, but nobody tells you where to find it.” (Participant 3)
Program Structure Challenges	Scheduling; lack of mentoring	“The timing is incompatible with employment.” (Participant 5)

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*Note.* Themes and codes were developed through qualitative analysis of focus group data.

Participant quotations are presented verbatim to center participant voice and align with the study’s social justice and workforce education conceptual framework described in Section 3.

### **Trustworthiness of the Data**

The data's trustworthiness was enhanced by using systematic data-gathering methods and maintaining consistent documentation throughout the investigation. Credibility was established through the accurate representation of participants' opinions and the utilization of direct evidence from their responses. Dependability was improved by preserving a transparent audit trail of data gathering and analytical judgments. Haq et al. (2023) explained that the trustworthiness of qualitative data remains contentious, but it enjoys substantial support from its proponents. Nonetheless, the significance and value of qualitative data cannot be diminished. The trustworthiness of qualitative research can be assessed by guaranteeing the credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability of the study design, process, and actions.

Ultimately, confirmability was ensured by reducing researcher bias through reflexivity and meticulous alignment between the data and the study's conclusions.

### **Credibility**

Credibility was demonstrated by the consistent alignment of participants' replies with the themes identified during coding and thematic analysis. During data analysis, participant narratives were re-examined to confirm that emerging themes accurately reflected common patterns across participants' experiences rather than individual remarks. Direct quotations from participants were deliberately included to preserve their voice and ensure the findings accurately reflected their lived experiences in workforce education programs. Ahmed (2024) explained that to obtain reliable and useful results, thematic analysis needs to be conducted in a planned way, with careful records of the choices made during interpretation, and should not rely on a merely surface-level look at the data.

All members of the focus group were given equal opportunities to participate in the discussion. The facilitator used structured guiding questions while allowing participants to expand on their experiences, fostering equitable participation and reducing the likelihood that dominant voices would steer the discussion. Chand (2025) clarified that focus groups enable interactive discussions in which shared views emerge through dialogue, making them useful for examining shared experiences. This method facilitated the representation of diverse perspectives, hence enhancing the credibility and reliability of the results.

The credibility was strengthened by sustained interaction with the data. Transcripts were carefully examined numerous times to ensure precision and to capture subtleties in participant meaning, tone, and emphasis. The iterative review approach facilitated the development of themes and ensured that findings were anchored on participant narratives rather than researcher

assumptions. Consequently, the incorporation of direct participant quotations enhanced trustworthiness by providing clear evidence linking participants' responses to the selected themes. The inclusion of direct participant language facilitated confirmability and enabled readers to independently evaluate the relationship between the data and the study's conclusions. Noble and Smith (2025) explained that all qualitative researchers need to use methods that make their studies more reliable both in planning and in carrying them out.

Measures were implemented to mitigate researcher bias. As a practitioner-researcher in workforce education, I maintained reflexive awareness throughout data collection and analysis. Decisions were informed by participant data, known qualitative research methodologies, and consistency with the study's conceptual framework. This reflexive methodology ensured that interpretations were anchored in participant experiences rather than the researcher's positionality. These measures collectively improved the authenticity, correctness, and reliability of the study's findings. Thus, trustworthiness in this study refers to the extent to which the conclusions accurately reflect participants' experiences and the workforce education phenomenon under examination (Lim, 2024).

### **Transferability**

The transferability of the findings was enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the participants, the research context, and their educational experiences in the workforce. Drisko (2025) explained that transferability refers to the process of abstraction that enables the application of information derived from specific individuals, contexts, and time periods to other instances that have not been directly examined. The contextual detail provided enables readers to assess the potential applicability of the findings to other community college or workforce education settings. Demographic characteristics were summarized to safeguard participant

confidentiality while ensuring contextual relevance. This method facilitated significant comparison while preserving confidentiality.

### **Dependability**

Dependability was established by maintaining a clear and systematic audit trail that documented coding procedures, theme development, and data organization. Ahmed (2024) also explained that dependability refers to the consistent, stable nature of study findings over time. To ensure trustworthiness, researchers accurately document their methodologies, data collection strategies, and analytical procedures. All analytical decisions were documented and evaluated to ensure consistency in the data analysis process. An organized and transparent qualitative analysis procedure enhanced the stability of the findings. This documentation ensured that the research process was traceable and methodologically rigorous.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability was achieved by reducing bias through self-awareness and by suspending assumptions during the investigation. The findings were based solely on participants' statements, without my preconceptions or judgments. Results were presented descriptively, ensuring that interpretation did not exceed the data in this chapter. This methodology ensured that the conclusions reflected participants' viewpoints rather than my bias. To ensure the trustworthiness of a study, research must satisfy the following criteria: credibility, or confidence in the findings; dependability, or the consistency of the findings; confirmability, or the degree to which the findings are devoid of researcher biases; and transferability, or the applicability of the research to analogous contexts (Bingham, 2023).

## **Evaluation of the Outcomes**

This section assesses the study's outcomes by examining the extent to which the findings address the practice-based issue and fulfill the study's objective. The conversation is structured by research inquiry and synthesizes the conceptual framework and pertinent material outlined in Sections 1 and 2. Consideration was given to the alignment of the findings with existing research, their contribution to the scholarly literature, and credible explanations for unforeseen or different outcomes. Lim (2025) explained that qualitative approaches have become essential tools for obtaining deep insights and understanding intricate processes. The guide aims to clarify the process of qualitative research by providing a thorough overview and practical guidance on navigating its complex aspects.

### ***Evaluation of Findings by Research Question***

Each research question is compared with the findings to further analyze them. This evaluation arrangement enables a targeted examination of how participants' experiences and the themes identified directly address the study's guiding questions. This method clearly aligns the research objective, thematic development, and participant votes, strengthening the link between the qualitative findings and the study's stated purpose. Assessing results against the research question also encourages open interpretation and provides a methodical framework for understanding how the information as a whole relates to the workforce education issue under study. Creating precise and targeted research questions is an essential first step in social science research, as they shape the study's overall design, methods, and analysis (van der Waldt, 2025).

#### **Research Question 1**

Findings about Research Question 1 indicated that Black students perceived workforce education as challenging, influenced by structural and financial barriers, cultural discord, and

insufficient representation, as well as emotional and psychological strain. These findings directly address the practice-based issue by demonstrating that institutional and socioeconomic factors limit students' capacity to participate in workforce education programs fully (Bailey et al., 2021; Baker, 2021). The results aligned with the existing literature, which identifies financial instability, time constraints, and conflicting obligations as major obstacles for adult learners in community college environments (Joseph et al., 2023; Tariq, 2023). The participants' experiences with code-switching and insufficient representation correspond with critical race theory and community cultural wealth literature, which underscore belonging and institutional climate as crucial to student involvement (Acevedo & Solórzano, 2023; Stephens & Rock-Vanloo, 2022). This study significantly highlights emotional and mental stress as an institutional effect rather than an individual shortcoming. Participants associated stress with uncertain procedures and insufficient culturally relevant assistance, building upon previous research by emphasizing how institutional design aggravates psychological distress (Wilkerson & Hodge, 2022).

### **Research Question 2**

Results about Research Question 2 indicated that participants regarded workforce education as a significant avenue for opportunity, self-assurance, and the development of professional identity. These results aligned with research identifying workforce education as a means of facilitating economic mobility and empowering adult learners (Bailey & Morest, 2021; Smith & Lee, 2023). This study enhances the literature by highlighting generational motivation and identity repair as significant effects of workforce education participation. Participants conceptualized workforce education as a mechanism for altering family paths, an aspect that is insufficiently explored in workforce education research (Tariq, 2023).

### **Research Question 3**

Results for Research Question 3 revealed that inconsistent institutional support, unclear communication, and rigid program frameworks hindered participation and persistence. These findings align with the research indicating scattered support systems for workforce and noncredit students (Bailey et al., 2021). Ahmed (2024) and Drisko (2025) explained that this study builds on prior research by distinguishing between the availability of support resources and students' capacity to use them, emphasizing the importance of proactive communication and directional frameworks.

### **Implementation and Recommendations for Practice**

This section contains practice-based conclusions and recommendations that have been drawn from the findings of the study and are supported by the literature that was evaluated in Section 2, as well as recent scholarship on workforce education. To avoid overstating the situation, the recommendations have been deliberately phrased to avoid implying any causal relationships. As an alternative, they offered evidence-based techniques that educational institutions may consider enhancing the educational experiences of Black adult learners in the workforce. Tisdell et al. (2025) explained that qualitative research is a well-established discipline with a dedicated body of literature, academic journals, specialized interest organizations, and routinely organized conferences. Like a tree with multiple roots and branches, the domain of qualitative research is complex.

#### ***Institutional Navigation and Onboarding Structures***

A notable and persistent finding of this study was the participants' challenges in navigating institutional structures and obtaining support services. Despite the availability of services, students frequently expressed confusion about where to receive support and how to

comprehend program requirements. This discovery indicates that institutions could gain advantages by adopting centralized onboarding and navigation frameworks designed explicitly for workforce education students. The current study underscores the significance of explicit processes and organized supervision for adult learners. Bailey et al. (2021) contended that institutional complexity disproportionately impacts nontraditional students, whereas Gamble and Hewlett (2025) highlighted that navigation aids improve transferability and persistence. Recent national data indicate that adult learners are more likely to continue when institutions minimize procedural uncertainty through deliberate onboarding (VanZoest et al., 2025). This study's findings suggest that schools should appoint a dedicated workforce education navigator or develop explicit process maps detailing expectations, timetables, and available resources. These recommendations are derived directly from participants' articulated requirements and should be executed judiciously, with continuous assessment.

### ***Culturally Responsive Workforce Education Environments***

The participants' experiences of cultural discord and insufficient representation underscore the need for culturally responsive educational environments in the workforce. Research on code-switching and feelings of invisibility indicates that institutions should investigate how cultural norms and pedagogical techniques affect students' sense of belonging. The literature shows repeatedly that culturally responsive methods enhance engagement and persistence among Black students (Acevedo & Solórzano, 2023; Stephens & Rock-Vanloo, 2022). Nonetheless, the present study expands this literature by demonstrating that comparable dynamics occur in workforce education environments as well as in traditional academic programs. Institutions could examine professional development centered on culturally sustaining education and inclusive communication. This study does not imply that representation alone

addresses disparities; instead, the data suggest that culturally affirming contexts may reduce emotional distress and increase engagement.

### ***Program Structure, Flexibility, and Adult Learner Fit***

Research on program structure indicated that rigid scheduling and insufficient mentorship presented considerable obstacles for adult learners managing work and family obligations. These findings align with adult learner research highlighting the need to consider flexibility in workforce education programs. Research indicates that flexibility should be systematically organized rather than implemented, planned to facilitate persistence. Bailey et al. (2021) and Boutros et al. (2025) highlighted the ability of predictable timetables, linked design, and integrated support for adult learners. Participants' requests for guidance reinforce the need for purposeful program design.

### ***Communication, Mentorship, and Guided Support Models***

Communication has become a fundamental factor in students' ability to engage successfully with workforce education programs. Participants identified unclear or inconsistent communication as an obstacle to obtaining support and sustaining involvement. Current scholarship underscores the importance of proactive, consistent communication for adult learners, especially in noncredit workforce settings (American Association of Community Colleges, 2022; Lim, 2025). This study builds on previous research by demonstrating that communication failures impair emotional distress and institutional distrust. Institutions can enhance communication by establishing regular touchpoints, engaging in proactive outreach at critical milestones, and implementing mentorship or coaching frameworks. These recommendations are based on the findings and should be executed progressively to evaluate their effectiveness.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Subsequent research should build on this study by examining workforce education experiences across various institutional contexts to enhance the transferability and applicability of the results. This study offered comprehensive insights into participants' experiences in a particular workforce education context; however, further research across community colleges, technical training providers, and workforce development agencies would yield comparative insights into the structural and systemic factors affecting student persistence and completion. Future research could adopt a more impartial stance and examine additional contexts to improve generalizability (Sivarajah et al., 2024). Researchers should investigate spatial disparities across rural, suburban, and urban workforce education settings to identify location-specific obstacles and support. Broadening research across several labor program categories, such as healthcare, transportation, technology, and skilled trades, may clarify whether the challenges identified in this study are unique to certain programs or systemic. Moreover, subsequent research should examine how policy changes, such as the introduction of the Workforce Pell and state-specific workforce funding frameworks, affect student access, enrollment, and completion rates over time.

A forthcoming qualitative study should investigate the lived experiences of workforce education students who successfully completed programs, compared with those who withdrew or discontinued before completion. Using a phenomenological or narrative inquiry methodology, researchers may conduct in-depth interviews to gain deeper insights into persistence decision-making processes, financial navigation techniques, and the use of support systems. Hossain et al. (2024) explained that in qualitative research, the semi-structured interview and phenomenological technique help to answer "how" and "why" questions in addition to "what"

questions. Having a thorough understanding of how and why to answer these questions gives researchers a clear idea of how respondents feel about the research being conducted.

Subsequently, purposeful sampling may include students from several funding sources, including self-pay, employer-sponsored financing, workforce agency vouchers, and federal or state training funds. The selection of cases that offer rich information for the study of interest is called purposeful sampling (Bouncken, et al, 2025). Data gathering may involve several interview stages, including program intake, halfway, and post-program follow-up, to document shifts in student perspective and involvement over time. Results from this study could guide the development of specialized student support interventions to address significant attrition points highlighted by participant narratives.

A forthcoming quantitative study should investigate the correlation between access to financial assistance and workforce education completion outcomes. Researchers may use institutional enrollment and completion data to analyze relationships among funding sources, funding levels, payment structures, and student persistence. Variables may encompass scholarship amount, voucher processing timelines, payment plan structure, employment status, and hours worked during enrollment. In quantitative research, variables are quantifiable and measurable. Statistical equations are often used to express relationships between variables, which can be classified as independent and dependent (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). Statistical techniques, including regression modeling, may be used to identify which financial variables best predict completion outcomes. Results may bolster evidence-based policy and institutional decision-making concerning scholarship distribution, payment plan formulation, and workforce funding collaborations.

A mixed-methods study should investigate the efficacy of integrated student support models in workforce education environments. Creswell and Inoue (2025) explained that employing mixed approaches, conducting data analysis, engaging in debates, and suggesting advanced measures for the analytical process. This method entails pinpointing a study issue, gathering diverse data, choosing a mixed-methods framework, integrating the data within the framework, employing joint displays for analysis, and deriving overlays. A resulting explanatory design may be employed, commencing with a quantitative study of student success results in programs that utilize improved student support models compared to those that implement conventional service models. The qualitative phase may encompass focus groups or interviews with students and staff to gain a deeper understanding of how support services affect student engagement, sense of belonging, and persistence behaviors. Researchers could explicitly investigate the effects of career guidance, financial coaching, case management, and culturally responsive student support approaches. Mixed-methods research may yield quantifiable results and contextual understanding to inform the reform of workforce education programs and policy recommendations.

In addition to these study methods, future research should examine time-based outcomes of workforce education, including employment placement, pay advancement, and career mobility after program completion. Ongoing tracking may yield essential insights into the long-term return on investment for workforce education initiatives and funding frameworks. Furthermore, research should examine the impact of culturally sensitive program design on student engagement and persistence among historically underrepresented adult learners. Future research may investigate how company partnerships enhance workforce education retention through tuition aid, flexible scheduling, and experiential learning. These study directions collectively

offer a framework for enhancing scholarship, policy formulation, and workforce educational practices. In addition to highlighting current shortcomings, these findings can provide a cohesive view of the dispersed service design field, helping researchers develop and propose more integrative, internationally relevant conceptual frameworks for further research (Marvi et al., 2026).

### **Summary**

The results of this study offer practice-oriented knowledge that goes beyond simply recording the real-life experiences of Black adult learners in workforce education and instead provides guidance for strategic action and institutional change. The themes point to specific areas where workforce education programs can improve practice, such as proactive and consistent communication, culturally sensitive learning environments, structured onboarding and navigation systems, and program designs that account for the realities of adult learners juggling work and family obligations. These results provide institutions with evidence-based recommendations to help them make decisions about creating policies, distributing resources, and designing student support models. Braun and Clarke (2025) explained that the development and design of qualitative research evaluation tools must be such that the research community may use them to evaluate qualitative research on its own terms, so enhancing rather than degrading the quality of the research. Therefore, the findings provide community colleges and workforce education providers with a framework for implementing specific interventions that could enhance overall program efficacy, completion rates, and student persistence. Additionally, by highlighting the importance of equity-centered program design in driving economic mobility and student achievement, this study advances workforce education practices. The research supports the applied aspect of the doctoral work by translating participants' experiences into workable

institutional solutions and provides stakeholders with useful information that can be applied in real-world workforce education contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This conclusion establishes the assessment of results and practical implications discussed in this chapter and underscores the study's significance for workforce education practice. The study examined a significant practice-oriented issue with Black students' access, participation, and retention in community college workforce education programs. Qualitative approaches that explore issues related to Black children, youth, and education frequently reinforce deficit narratives (Rahman & Johnson, 2025). The findings indicated that systemic, cultural, emotional, and institutional elements profoundly influence student experiences. The assessment and suggestions underscore the necessity for deliberate program design, culturally attuned approaches, and integrated support systems. The report provides evidence-based recommendations to enhance workforce education practices while avoiding exaggerating the results.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Protocol for Black Students**

This appendix outlines the semi-structured interview protocol used to gather data from Black students at a large public university in the state of NY. The interviews aimed to explore their experiences, perspectives on workforce education, roles within the college and the broader community, and their understanding of how the college contributes to community empowerment.

#### **Introduction (Interviewer Script):**

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. My name is Javon Joslyn, and I am conducting a case study on the experiences of Black students at a large public university in New York State, examining how the college supports community empowerment through workforce education. Your insights are valuable to this research. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to answer questions. All responses will be kept confidential, and your identity will be deidentified in the final report. Do you have any questions before we begin?

(Obtain Verbal Consent)

#### **Part 1: Background and College Experience**

Could you tell me a little about yourself, such as your program of study and how long you have been a student at a large public university in the state of NY? (Explore: What motivated you to choose this program/college?)

What are some of the reasons why you decided to pursue workforce education at this community college? (Explore: Career goals, skills development, accessibility, affordability?)

How would you describe your overall experience as a Black student at a large public university in the state of NY?

May you describe any specific experiences, positive or negative, that have shaped your time here? (Explore: Interactions with faculty, staff, other students, and support services?)

## **Part 2: Perspectives on Workforce Education and Community**

1. What does workforce education mean to you personally? (Explore: Skills development, job readiness, career advancement?)
2. How do you think your education at a large public university in the state of NY will prepare you for future employment and your career goals?
3. In what ways do you believe your education and future career may contribute to the Black community or the broader local community?
4. Do you believe that the large public university in the state of New York actively works to empower the local community through its workforce education programs? If so, how?
5. What role do you think Black students play in connecting the community college to the Black community?

## **Part 3: Challenges and Opportunities**

What challenges have you faced, or do you believe Black students might face, in accessing or succeeding in workforce education programs? (Explore: Financial barriers, academic preparation, representation, cultural understanding?)

What opportunities do you see for a large public university in the state of NY to better support Black students in their workforce education journeys and their contributions to the community?

From your perspective, what are some of the key strengths and assets that Black students bring to the community college and its workforce education programs? (Probe: Diverse perspectives, cultural understanding, resilience, community connections?)

**Part 4: Future Aspirations**

Would you like to share your experiences as a Black student at a large public university in NY, or your perspectives on workforce education and community empowerment?

Thank you for your time and valuable insights.

## **Focus Group Protocol: Appendix A Qualitative Case Study**

Appendix: This appendix provides demographic information, contextual data on the community college, students' backgrounds, and the community being served. Through this focus group, we aim to explore how these broader contextual elements align with the experiences of other Black students.

Focus Group Goal: The purpose of this study is to investigate how the broader contextual factors that are presented in Appendix A (such as community demographics, college resources, and student background characteristics) influence the experiences and perspectives of Black students attending the community college, and to determine whether or not these factors resonate with the students' backgrounds and observations.

Target Participants: Black students currently enrolled at the community college. Aim for 6 to 8 participants per focus group. Multiple focus groups may be conducted to ensure diverse representation while accounting for potential contextual variations.

Duration: 60-75 minutes

Materials:

The focus group discussion guide (see below) addresses the contextual factors outlined in Appendix A.

Forms of consent (IRB approved)

Participant demographic questionnaires

Audio recorder and backup recording device

Flip chart or whiteboard and markers (for visualizing community aspects or brainstorming resources)

Refreshments (water, snacks)

Thank you gifts or small stipends to participants (if applicable and approved)

Roles:

Moderator: Facilitates the discussion, guides participants to reflect on the broader context of their experiences, ensures all voices are heard, and maintains a respectful environment.

Note-taker (Optional): Observes and takes notes on how participants connect their individual experiences to the broader community and college context, noting any recurring themes or insights that emerge.

Procedure:

### **I. Introduction and Welcome (5-10 minutes)**

Moderator:

Welcome participants and thank them for their participation in this critical discussion.

Briefly introduce themselves and their role as the facilitator.

Explain the purpose of the focus group: to understand how the broader environment of the community college and the surrounding community influences the experiences and perspectives of Black students, particularly regarding their education and future opportunities.

Explain that the discussion will cover some of the broader contextual factors in a more extensive study without revealing specific details about the case study. The goal is to understand if these broader aspects resonate with their observations and experiences.

Emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers and that their unique perspectives on these contextual factors are valuable and essential.

Review the consent form to ensure participants understand the confidentiality of the information and their right to withdraw. Collect signed consent forms.

Explain the audio recording process and its purpose. Reassure participants that their identities will be kept confidential.

## **II. Icebreaker (5-10 minutes)**

Moderator:

Engage participants in a brief icebreaker that relates slightly to the community concept or their background. Examples:

Share one thing you appreciate about the community surrounding this college.

What is one hope you have for your community's future?

## **III. Discussion Questions (45-55 minutes)**

Moderator: Guide the discussion using the following semi-structured questions, designed to elicit discussion about the contextual factors likely presented in Appendix A (e.g., community demographics, college resources, common pathways for Black students in the region). Be flexible and allow for natural conversation flow, probing for connections between individual experiences and the broader context.

### **A. Exploring the Community Context**

Given the community surrounding this college, what are its key characteristics, particularly as they relate to the Black community living here? (Explore: demographics, economic opportunities, social dynamics, and cultural resources)

How do you think the opportunities and challenges within the local community affect your educational journey and future career aspirations?

What kind of connections do you see (or would like to see) between the community college and the Black community in this area? (Explore: outreach efforts, partnerships, addressing community needs)

Do you feel that the college adequately understands or serves the needs of the Black community in the surrounding area? Why or why not?

### **B. Examining the College Context and Resources**

What are your perceptions of the resources and support available at this college, specifically for Black students? (Explore: academic support, mentorship programs, cultural centers, representation among faculty and staff)

How well do you feel the workforce education programs at this college align with the needs and opportunities within the local and regional job market for Black individuals?

Are there any specific resources or programs you believe the college should offer or enhance to better support Black students' workforce education pathways better?

How does the overall campus climate and culture impact your experience as a Black student pursuing workforce education at this institution?

### **C. Connecting Personal Backgrounds to the Broader Context**

Moderator: I am also interested in understanding how students' backgrounds connect with the broader community and college environment. Reflecting on your background and experiences, how do they influence your perspectives on education and your future career?

Moderator: Do you see any common threads or shared experiences among Black students here that might be linked to the characteristics of the surrounding community or the resources available at the college?

### **D. Recommendations and Future Directions**

Based on your understanding of the community and the college, what key steps could the college take to empower Black students through workforce education better better?

What role could community partnerships play in strengthening the connection between college, workforce education, and the empowerment of Black communities?

Do you have any other insights or observations about the broader context that you believe are important to consider when understanding the experiences of Black students in workforce education?

#### **IV. Conclusion and Wrap-up (5-10 minutes)**

Moderator:

Thank participants again for sharing their valuable insights and perspectives on the community and college context.

Briefly summarize the key themes that emerged regarding the influence of the broader environment on their experiences, if appropriate and if time allows.

Reiterate that their responses will be kept confidential and explain how their information will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the research subject matter.

Answer any remaining questions participants may have.

Distribute thank-you gifts, if applicable.

Provide contact information for the researcher(s).

Dismiss participants.

#### **V. Post-Focus Group Notes (Immediately after the session)**

Moderator and/or Note-taker:

Review notes and audio recordings.

Document key themes and connections between participants' experiences and the broader community and college context.

Note any insights that either confirmed or challenged assumptions about the influence of these contextual factors.

Reflect on the effectiveness of the discussion guide in eliciting information related to the likely content of Appendix A.

**Ethical Considerations:**

Obtain informed consent.

Ensure confidentiality.

Create a safe and respectful environment.

Be sensitive to potential challenges or inequalities within the community and college context.

Allow participants to decline to answer any question and withdraw at any time.

This focus group protocol aims to contextualize the individual case study by exploring how the broader community and college environment, likely detailed in Appendix A, shape the experiences and perspectives of other Black students. The data gathered will provide a deeper understanding of the systemic factors and contribute to a more nuanced analysis of how workforce education may genuinely empower communities.