Employability: A Comparative Case Study Examining Teaching Soft Skills in Employment Focused Certificate Programs for Adult Learners

Jacinth V. Hanson
jacinthhanson@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd

Recommended Citation

Please note that the Recommended Citation provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations.

This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd/451 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
Employability: A Comparative Case Study Examining Teaching Soft Skills in Employment Focused Certificate Programs for Adult Learners

Abstract
It is acknowledged that proficiency in soft skills is necessary for career success; however, employers say that new graduates lack these skills. Nevertheless, there is scant agreement on what they are, how they are developed, and how they are measured. In addition, the literature on soft skills acquisition is limited to high school or college students and graduates; there is not much information on adult learners. The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to examine how soft skills are defined, taught, and assessed in adult workforce development training. The population in the study were instructors and program administrators in state-funded programs in urban communities throughout New York State. Data were collected through a survey, documents, and semi-structured interviews, and analyzed against three employability learning frameworks. The findings of the study indicated that the soft skills considered important to prepare adults for employment were related to communication, professional traits and behaviors, and teamwork. The skills were taught through coursework, career development workshops, experiential learning, and student advisement. Competence was assessed primarily by course and program completion and less so by placement into employment. Recommendations for practice include developing student learning outcomes and assessments with input from industry, standardizing curriculum content and delivery, creating opportunities for practice and reflection, and providing training and support for staff. Recommendations for future study include developing an instrument to pretest and posttest student soft skill gain, incorporating the voices of students and employers, and investigating how to teach soft skills in a virtual environment.

Document Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department
Executive Leadership

First Supervisor
Dr. Anthony P. Chiarlitti

Second Supervisor
Dr. LaTasha-Hamlett Carver

Subject Categories
Education

This dissertation is available at Fisher Digital Publications: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd/451
Employability: A Comparative Case Study Examining Teaching Soft Skills in Employment Focused Certificate Programs for Adult Learners

By

Jacinth V. Hanson

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Anthony P. Chiarlitti

Committee Member

Dr. LaTasha-Hamlett Carver

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

August 2020
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents: Icylin, Lloyd, and Monica, who made me who I am. To my family and friends: thank you for your love and support even as I had less and less time to spend with you. Your strong belief in me and your encouragement are greatly appreciated. I love you all beyond measure.

To my UCCA team (Alana, Nadjete, Ramón, and Tameka), you made this journey easier. I admire each of you for your perseverance and your commitment to social justice. I always looked forward to our weekly conference calls, and later, to our video chats. You have been a great support and I thank you for your collegiality and friendship.

I thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Chiarlitti and committee member, Dr. Hamlett-Carver. Your expectations gave me the initial push to get going and keep going. I also thank Dr. W. Jeff Wallis, my advisor, for his support; faculty member, Dr. Gilbert Louis, for the title of my study; my executive mentor, the Rev. Cynthia Reggio, for our chats; and the Rev. Dr. Janice Lee Fitzgerald, my coach, who helped me to see that I was ready.

To the advisors, instructors, and administrators who participated in my study: The work that you do to prepare adults for new opportunities and career pathways is truly transforming. I am grateful for your willingness to share your perceptions, beliefs, commitment, and even your frustrations, as you help students gain employability skills and a more secure future.

Lastly, I thank God for my life and the opportunity to be open to new possibilities, to act with boldness, to serve with gladness, and to be compassionate.
Biographical Sketch

Jacinth Hanson is currently the executive director of an adult academic and workforce development center in Brooklyn, New York. Ms. Hanson attended Adelphi University and earned a Bachelor of Science degree magna cum laude in 1983 with a double major in Education and Spanish. She received her Master of Arts degree in Latin American studies with a concentration in Economic and Political Development from Georgetown University in 1985. Ms. Hanson came to St. John Fisher College in spring 2018 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. program in Executive Leadership at the New Rochelle, NY site. She pursued research in teaching soft skills to adult learners in employment focused certificate programs under the direction of Dr. Anthony P. Chiarlitti and Dr. LaTasha Hamlett-Carver and received the Ed.D. degree in 2020.
Abstract

It is acknowledged that proficiency in soft skills is necessary for career success; however, employers say that new graduates lack these skills. Nevertheless, there is scant agreement on what they are, how they are developed, and how they are measured. In addition, the literature on soft skills acquisition is limited to high school or college students and graduates; there is not much information on adult learners.

The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to examine how soft skills are defined, taught, and assessed in adult workforce development training. The population in the study were instructors and program administrators in state-funded programs in urban communities throughout New York State. Data were collected through a survey, documents, and semi-structured interviews, and analyzed against three employability learning frameworks.

The findings of the study indicated that the soft skills considered important to prepare adults for employment were related to communication, professional traits and behaviors, and teamwork. The skills were taught through coursework, career development workshops, experiential learning, and student advisement. Competence was assessed primarily by course and program completion and less so by placement into employment.

Recommendations for practice include developing student learning outcomes and assessments with input from industry, standardizing curriculum content and delivery, creating opportunities for practice and reflection, and providing training and support for
staff. Recommendations for future study include developing an instrument to pretest and posttest student soft skill gain, incorporating the voices of students and employers, and investigating how to teach soft skills in a virtual environment.
# Table of Contents

Dedication ................................................................................................................................... iii  
Biographical Sketch .................................................................................................................. iv  
Abstract ....................................................................................................................................... v  
Table of Contents ........................................................................................................................ vii  
List of Tables ................................................................................................................................ x  
List of Figures .............................................................................................................................. xi  
Chapter 1: Introduction .............................................................................................................. 1  
  Soft Skills .................................................................................................................................. 2  
  History of Adult Education and Training .............................................................................. 3  
  Career and Technical Education .............................................................................................. 5  
  Noncredit Certificate Training ................................................................................................. 6  
  Problem Statement .................................................................................................................... 7  
  Theoretical Rationale ............................................................................................................... 10  
  Statement of Purpose .............................................................................................................. 13  
  Research Questions .................................................................................................................. 14  
  Significance of the Study ......................................................................................................... 14  
  Definitions of Terms ................................................................................................................ 16  
  Chapter Summary .................................................................................................................... 18  
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature ......................................................................................... 21  
  Introduction and Purpose .......................................................................................................... 21
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1.1</td>
<td>General Employability Skills Categories from the Frameworks</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1</td>
<td>Center Statistics: Programs and Enrollment in Workforce Development</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.2</td>
<td>Center Statistics: Workforce Development Programs</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.3</td>
<td>Interview Questions Aligned with Research Questions</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.4</td>
<td>List of Interview Participants</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.5</td>
<td>Research Question 1: Themes, Categories, Codes</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.6</td>
<td>Research Question 1a: How Centers Determine the Skills to Teach</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.7</td>
<td>Research Question 1a: How Employers, Advisory Boards, Industry Standards Contribute</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.8</td>
<td>Research Question 2: How Soft Skills are Taught</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.9</td>
<td>Research Question 2: Themes, Categories, Codes</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.10</td>
<td>Employability Skills: Soft Skills Aligned with Framework</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.11</td>
<td>Research Question 2a: How Academic, Advisement, Job Development Areas Collaborate</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.12</td>
<td>Research Question 3: Assessing Soft Skills</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.13</td>
<td>Research Question 4: Themes, Categories, Codes</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.1</td>
<td>Center Ratings in Teaching Specific Soft Skills</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

In the United States, the world of work has changed in the last 50 years from mass production and manual labor to a postindustrial knowledge economy. That shift has changed the skills needed for workers at all levels and in most industries, from manufacturing to health care, and in business, security, teaching, and technology (Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Stone, Kaminski, & Gloeckner, 2009).

Policy makers, businesses, and educators have observed that the 21st century workforce needs employees with the ability to read, compute, think critically, communicate, and collaborate with their co-workers effectively (Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills [SCANS], 1991; Van Roekel, 2012). The skills needed for 21st century work are not new. In fact, Claxton, Costa, and Kallick (2016) note that skills such as problem solving and relating well to others have been important since the beginning of human history and most likely will continue to be important into the 22nd century. What is indeed new is the degree to which changes in the economy and around the world are affecting how individual and group success are dependent on having those skills (Rotherham & Willingham, 2010).

Fast growing occupations including allied health and computer technology require a high degree of interpersonal interaction (Deming, 2017) and as more employees work in these industries, there is a growing need for them to communicate with customers and colleagues by speaking and listening well (Carnevale & Smith, 2013). In addition, as noted in Kraebber and Greenan (2012), many skills that were previously associated with
managers including leadership, negotiation, analysis, and decision-making, are now required for all levels of employees, including those at entry level.

**Soft Skills**

The Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education of the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) informs us that individuals seeking to enter employment are expected to have technical expertise and academic knowledge, as well as a set of general abilities called employability skills (USDOE, 2012). Employability skills, mainly known as soft skills, are the skills and attributes necessary to gain and maintain employment and are required in all industry sectors. Acquiring soft skills is important for all levels of graduates: high school, postsecondary certificates, and degreed candidates (USDOE, 2012) as they allow individuals seeking employment to demonstrate the professional attributes that businesses say they look for in new hires (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2018; Ricker, 2014).

Yet employers report that new employees do not have the appropriate soft skills to succeed in the workplace (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Ellis, Kisling, & Hackworth, 2014; Robles, 2012). The most basic of these skills are showing up to work on time, following instructions, and being courteous (Alic, 2018) and they can be learned in various ways including from work experience, community or military service, or through education (National Network of Business and Industry Associations[NNBIA], 2014).

Although the literature addresses the perceived lack of soft skills in high school graduates and college students seeking employment (Ellis et al., 2014; Wilson & Mehta, 2017), there is a dearth of articles on the graduates of adult education and job training programs. These training programs are of interest because of the level of funding by
government and private organizations (Greenstone & Looney, 2011; USDOE, 2015). Adult career development or retraining is part of the federal government’s workforce development expenditure through programs that include the Carl D. Perkins Act (Perkins) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). In fiscal year 2018, $1.193 billion was allocated to Perkins (Hyslop, 2018) and in 2016 more than $10.5 billion was allocated to WIOA (Counts, 2017).

**History of Adult Education and Training**

The federal government has been the major funding source of adult education and training for over 100 years (Dougherty & Lombardi, 2016), beginning in 1917 when the Smith Hughes Act created the Federal Board of Vocational Education to provide training in agriculture, industry, and schools. Rounell, Salajan, and Todoran (2018) identify the three main phases of adult and vocational education in the United States as the 1800s to 1950s, 1960s to 1990s, and 1990s to 2014. The phases are shaped by historical, social, and economic changes, beginning with the industrial revolution. Highlights include the response to the Depression in the 1930s to prepare adults to transition back to work, and training after World War II through the GI Bill to integrate veterans returning from the war. The postwar period is followed by the Civil Rights era during the mid to late 1960s when antipoverty legislation under President Lyndon Johnson included addressing racial inequities in education and training.

Federal policies in the 1980s focused on retraining adults who had lost jobs; the major related legislation is the 1982 Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) under President Ronald Reagan, to prepare youth and unskilled adults for employment. The next major legislation is the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 which replaced JTPA under
President Bill Clinton. As a part of welfare reform, WIA established One Stop Centers, putting all services together and placing more responsibility on job seekers (Rounell et al., 2018).

In 2014, President Barack Obama signed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, which placed under one umbrella all types of education and training, from adult and youth employment, to adult basic education, including literacy and vocational rehabilitation. Public Law 113-128 states that WIOA is “to strengthen the United States workforce development system through innovation in, and alignment and improvement of, employment, training, and education programs” (WIOA, 2014, para. 1). One aspect of WIOA’s mandate is to integrate basic skills, adult education, and English language preparation with occupational skills training (Brown, 2015).

One of the strategic goals of the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) is to support the ability of all Americans to find good jobs (USDOL, 2017). As a result, the department’s Employment and Training Administration oversees the American Job Center network authorized by WIOA to provide comprehensive assistance to job seekers. One aspect of the Labor Department’s overall strategy is to support work-based learning, skills development, and work readiness through sector-based strategies (USDOL, 2017). Sector-based training is intended to match the skills of workers to the demands of employers in a local or regional area, focusing on a partnership among educators, employers, and local industry (Holzer, 2015).

The government’s role at times is to create labor market policies to influence employment in particular industries or locations (Holland, 2015). Therefore, the federal departments of education and labor, as well as state governments, promote sector-based
training through grants and other funding in order to create career pathways for
individuals. Sector training is usually nondegree programs in industries that include
health care, manufacturing, information technology, construction, transportation, and
hospitality (Holzer, 2015).

**Career and Technical Education**

legislation supports career and technical education (CTE) in high schools, adult
programs, and colleges, to prepare students for in-demand jobs in high growth industries.
In 2018, the act was reauthorized as the Strengthening Career and Technical Education
for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V). Perkins V, aligned with WIOA (Rosen, Visher, &
Beal, 2018), took effect in July 2019 and is administered in New York State by the
Education Department. As noted in the act, the purpose is to develop academic,
technical, and employability skills (New York State Education Department [NYSED],
2019b), increasing the employment opportunities for populations who are unemployed or
underemployed.

In New York State, there are more than 1,100 career training programs serving
over one million students in high schools, Boards of Cooperative Education Services
(BOCES), and postsecondary institutions (NYSED, 2019a). The Board of Regents and
the New York State Education Department have recognized a shift in demographics in
the state as more adult learners need to be career ready (NYSED, 2013). That shift is
evident in New York City where the New York City Employment and Training Coalition
(NYCETC), an advocacy organization which supports workforce development, access to
skills, training, and education, has more than 150 member organizations (NYCETC,
Many of its members are workforce training providers and educational institutions providing mainly workforce industry-recognized credentials like certificates and 2-year degrees. The members include private, public, and community based organizations.

**Noncredit Certificate Training**

The technological changes brought on by the postindustrial age and by globalization have increased the need for jobs that require more than a high school diploma as blue collar middle wage jobs have decreased (Brown, 2015). In spite of this, pursuit of a 4-year degree is not an option for everyone and the completion rate for 2-year degrees is low (Greenstone & Looney, 2011; Holzer, 2013), as only 25% of all community college students graduate in 3 years (Hawkins, 2019). In fact, the U.S. Department of Labor has noted that credentials that can be earned in 6 months to 2 years provide shorter and less costly options than 2 or 4-year degrees (USDOL, 2010). Certificate training that takes less than 2 years to complete can provide good economic returns for students (Burillo, Slate, & Combs, 2011; Kim & Tamborini, 2019; USDOL, 2014; Xu & Trimble, 2016), and helps to develop human capital (Bishop, 2019).

Lower income students face obstacles in getting educated or trained beyond high school as they lack the funds to enroll in higher education (Brown, 2015). The National Center for Education Statistics reports that lower and middle income students enroll in college the fall after their high school completion at 20 percentage points lower than higher income students (Rosen et al., 2018). Therefore, for adults with no training beyond high school, employment training certificate programs may be of educational and economic value as they seek to enter or reenter the workforce. According to 2017 census
data, 27% of adults 25 years and older only have a high school diploma (Hawkins, 2019), and thus could benefit from postsecondary training. In addition, The College Board reported that between 1995 and 2015 people with only a high school diploma experienced the second highest rate of unemployment, second only to individuals who dropped out of high school (The College Board, 2016). Therefore, training beyond high school expands employability options for individuals and improves their chance of employment stability.

Adult job training and placement in employment is of professional interest to this researcher who is employed in the field of adult education and workforce development. The researcher has observed that the political environment regarding training through the use of government resources has undergone various shifts over recent decades. For most of the 20th century, federally funded adult education concentrated on basic education, literacy, civic education, as well as job training (Belzer & Kim, 2018; Rounell et al., 2018). Since 1998 though, federally funded adult education has become more closely aligned with career development and workforce preparation, as increasingly, the federal government requires people receiving benefits to be trained for jobs and to utilize fewer resources (Belzer & Kim, 2018; Milana & McBain, 2014).

**Problem Statement**

Research indicates that employers would like to hire well trained, prepared graduates and that public policy makers want to increase and improve the number of skilled workers in the economy (Carnevale & Smith, 2013; USDOL, 2014). The world of work has changed due to globalization and changes in job requirements (Greenstone & Looney, 2011; Holzer, 2013) and as work has become more service oriented, more
teamwork and communication are needed. Nonetheless, there are gaps in the preparation of graduates as employers report that new employees lack the soft skills required to succeed in the workplace (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2013; World Economic Forum, 2014).

Some employers rate the most important of these soft skills as communication, integrity, and courtesy (Robles, 2012). Other employers report that the soft skills they value most are motivation, appropriate use of language, interpersonal relations, and managing emotions (Carmochan, Taylor, Pascual, & Austin, 2013). In a 2014 survey for Career Builder, employers ranked their top soft skills as work ethic, dependability, positive attitude, motivation, and team orientation (Ricker, 2014). In its Job Outlook Survey for 2019, the National Association of Colleges and Employers listed the top three attributes being sought by employers as written communication, problem solving, and ability to work on a team (NACE, 2018).

Although there is no consensus on the soft skills needed for employment, research shows that people who demonstrate effective interpersonal and communication skills achieve more personal and professional success during their careers (Morreale & Pearson, 2008; Reinsch & Gardner, 2014; Wyant, Manzoni, & McDonald, 2018). Some studies further indicate that individuals with technical (hard) skills, combined with competence in soft skills, gain additional economic benefits in the labor market over time (Borghans, ter Weel, & Weinberg, 2014; Deming, 2017). However, most of the literature deals with students or graduates of degree programs; there is not much empirical research on soft skill acquisition in adult graduates of certificate training programs. Little is
known about how students in employment-focused certificate programs are taught soft
skills and whether the curriculum is aligned with any state, federal, or industry
framework.

Skills development and job training are important for businesses, educational
institutions, public policy makers, including regional economic development
organizations, and the federal government (Brown, 2015; Stone et al., 2009; USDOE,
2013). Career and technical education provide career development, vocational training,
and education to improve employment outcomes of enrolled students (USDOE, 2013).
Since the primary responsibility of government-funded training programs is to prepare
unemployed youth and adults for employment, evaluating the readiness of their
graduates for employment is one way to evaluate program outcomes.

This current study explored how the program administrators and instructors of a
state-funded group of adult workforce development education centers located in New
York State design and teach courses in soft skills development, and how they assess that
students have acquired the skills. From the perspective of Rotherham and Willingham
(2010), the focus on 21st century skills should be on teaching students so that their
outcomes improve. Therefore, the study evaluated and analyzed the programming and
curriculum to compare how different centers define soft skills and how they teach the
skills to their students.

Carnevale and Smith (2013) suggest that “The learning curve is gentlest when
these skills are introduced to students within a practical framework and appropriate
context” (p. 501). Therefore, in order to understand the context of the adult workforce
development center, this study explored the perceptions of the instructors and program
administrators in designing and teaching a soft skills curriculum. Further, the researcher also sought to identify possible best practices involved in teaching and preparing the students to demonstrate soft skills.

**Theoretical Rationale**

The theoretical framework guiding the study was learning frameworks.

“Learning frameworks are tools that specify learning outcomes and/or competencies that define, classify, and recognize educational, learner, and industry expectations of knowledge, skills, and abilities at increasing levels of complexity and difficulty” (Travers, Jankowski, Bushway, & Garrison Duncan, 2019, p. 3).

**Learning frameworks.** Some of the theoretical frameworks that have been used to measure workforce readiness include the Michigan Employability Skills Employer Survey, 1989; Workplace Basics: The Essential Skills Employers Want, 1990; New York State Education Department Basic and Expanded Basic Skills, 1990; and the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991 (O’Neil, Allred, & Baker, 1992). These frameworks were developed toward the end of the 20th century in response to the global changes and economic concerns regarding the changing workplace and lack of methods to assess skills identified as needed by workers (O’Neil et al., 1992).

Since then, other related frameworks have been developed, including the Partnership for 21st Century Skills Framework, developed by educators, education experts, and business leaders. Endorsed and supported by the National Education Association, the target audience is mainly the K-12 education system. The areas of skills include life and career skills; learning and innovation skills; information, media and technology; and key subjects and 21st century themes (Partnership for 21st Century
Learning, 2011) and are expected to prepare high school graduates to be college and career ready.

There are various online resources and frameworks, curricula, and reports on employability skills for high schools, community colleges, state programs, and work readiness (job search) programs (College and Career Readiness and Success Center, 2016; Pathways to Prosperity Network, 2012). The resources range from workbooks to online virtual training. Some of the resources are free; others have a per person cost, while others have a subscription fee (Pathways to Prosperity Network, 2012).

Three of the available frameworks were used to guide the study. The first is the Employability Skills Framework (ESF) developed by the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education of the U.S. Department of Education in collaboration with adult education, workforce development, businesses, and federal agencies. The second is the Equipped for the Future Work Readiness Profile (WRP) developed by the National Work Readiness Council in collaboration with front line supervisors and entry level employees of businesses from across the country. The third is the Common Employability Skills (CES) of the National Network of Business and Industry Associations. It was developed with major business sectors including a variety of industries to identify fundamental skills that employees need in the workplace.

The ESF focuses on the areas of applying knowledge, effective relationships, and workplace skills. It shows the skills employees need to be career ready, to get and keep a job, and can be applied across all levels and sectors of employment (USDOE, 2012). The WRP focuses on four essential skill areas in communication, interpersonal, decision making, and lifelong learning (National Work Readiness Council [NWRC], 2019). The
CES areas of concentration are applied knowledge, workplace skills, personal skills, and people skills (NNBIA, 2014). The skills organized in the three frameworks are usable across industries and were used to compare and evaluate the soft skills curriculum of the centers. Table 1.1 organizes the general employability skills by categories for each framework.

The three frameworks were selected because they have the skills appropriate to the student population of concern - adults enrolled in certificate programs. Some of the frameworks that were not selected are geared to a high school or young adult population. Other frameworks considered for the study were those of the Competency Model Clearinghouse from the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL, 2018). However, they were sector-based frameworks and currently only have competency models for some industries.

Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employability Skills Framework¹</th>
<th>Common Employability Skills²</th>
<th>Work Readiness Profile³</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effective relationships</td>
<td>People skills</td>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace skills</td>
<td>Workplace skills</td>
<td>Decision making skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied knowledge</td>
<td>Applied knowledge</td>
<td>Lifelong learning skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal skills</td>
<td>Communication skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Learning theories. The theories that underpin this study relate to the following:

(a) adult experiential learning - how students build on previous knowledge and learn
through practice based exercises; (b) theories of self - how students view themselves and their capabilities, and respond to setbacks; and (c) emotional intelligence - how students understand their emotions, regulate themselves, and relate to other people. Since soft skills are related to personal and interpersonal skills (Robles, 2012), theories related to learning, behavior, and social skills have relevance. As Greene (2009) noted, since skills are learned, understanding learning processes is important to understanding skills development.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research study was to examine the soft skills adult workforce development programs teach in their career training programs, and how those skills align with the U.S. Department of Education’s Employability Skills Framework, the National Work Readiness Council’s Equipped for the Future Work Readiness Profile, and the National Network of Business and Industry Associations Common Employability Skills. The Department of Education framework describes employability skills as a set of general, nontechnical skills needed to gain and maintain employment (USDOE, 2012). The Equipped for the Future profile displays the skills that new workers in entry level jobs need to be able to do to perform critical tasks (NWRC, 2019). The National Network frames its competencies as “the skills employees need, no matter where they work” (NNBIA, 2014, p. 1).

To fulfill this purpose, a qualitative comparative case study was conducted using a survey, interviews, and documents. The population was a purposeful sampling of instructors and program administrators of state-funded adult career training programs in urban communities throughout New York State. Some of the centers in the study are also
participants in the federally funded Carl D. Perkins (Perkins) or Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) training programs.

**Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What do instructors and program administrators think are the main soft skills needed for employment by adult career students enrolled in their training programs?
   a. How do they determine the skills to teach? Are employers, advisory boards, industry, state, or federal standards involved in the development of a template or curriculum?

2. What are the ways in which career program students acquire or improve their soft skills?
   a. Is there academic, career advisement, and job development collaboration?

3. How do instructors determine or assess if students have acquired the soft skills or have met established competencies?

4. What best practices in adult soft skills training can be developed from these findings?

**Significance of the Study**

The focus of this study was to determine how the employability skills related to soft skills are acquired by adult students enrolled in career certificate programs. Although educators, businesses, and policy makers have determined that these skills are important (OECD, 2013; Robles, 2012; Van Roekel, 2012), there is no consensus on what the skills are or how to measure them. Assessing certificate program students’
preparation in soft skills as a sign of readiness and preparedness for employment is of interest since the goal of workforce development programs is employment of graduates (Brown, 2015; Holland, 2015). Preparation that increases the likelihood of graduates being hired may contribute to improving the outcomes and effectiveness of the programs. Additionally, the study produced information on best practices regarding teaching soft skills that will add to the scholarship on the topic and benefit other adult training centers.

The study may be of interest to those involved in adult education, workforce training, and economic development since there are gains from equipping workers with better skills. The gains may include social benefits related to health improvements and civic participation (Belzer & Kim, 2018). Also, individuals who earn credentials beyond high school, including certificate training in vocational education, improve their probability of employment (The College Board, 2016; Xu & Trimble, 2016) and over time demonstrate higher cumulative earnings than those with only high school education (Kim & Tamborini, 2019).

Additional economic benefits to be considered include increased tax revenue, less dependence on government benefits as adults become self-sufficient, and gains to society as families and communities are improved (Greenstone & Looney, 2011; Holland, 2015). When new employees lack soft skills, employers have to provide their own training (Robles, 2012), but some employers do not want to spend training funds on soft skills. In fact, Alic (2018) posits that much of the complaining about skills gaps and shortages is due to employers wanting the public to pay; instead, he suggests that the employers should be increasing wages and providing their own training.
Holzer (2013) concurs that employers in the United States do not invest much in training nonprofessional and nonmanagerial employees. Yet, workers need “opportunities to learn on the job and receive continuing training” (World Economic Forum, 2014, p. 20). In fact, Ton (2014) discovered that companies that focus on operational excellence and on training all of their employees lower their costs and increase their profits.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Adult* – An adult is an individual with characteristics that may include children or others to care for, financial responsibilities, a job, and life stresses (Cummins, 2014). For the purpose of this study, adults are those 16 years and older who are not enrolled in high school or in a training program targeting youth.

*Adult career training* – is occupational or vocational training for adults. Youth employment training is for those aged 16 to 24 years.

*Adult education* – also known as continuing education, is defined by the U.S. Department of Education as adult literacy through secondary level, adult vocational training, and noncredit postsecondary education (Rounell et al., 2018).

*Career and technical education* – for the purpose of this study is defined as a set of programs that provide technical and occupation specific skills, offered in high schools, postsecondary certificate, and degree (college) programs, previously referred to as vocational education. Effective CTE programs are aligned with college and career readiness, meet the needs of employers, industry, and labor, and provide work-based learning opportunities (USDOE, 2013).
Career pathway – is defined as education, training, and services that prepare people for success in secondary and postsecondary education and includes advising, training, and assistance to advance in a specific occupation or career (WIOA, 2014).

Communication – “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior” (Merriam-Webster, 2020, para. 1). It is broad and complex, covering many areas of interaction (Morreale & Pearson, 2008). Communication is also closely related to collaboration; for example, when working with teams (Van Roekel, 2012).

Employability skills – a set of general skills that prepare graduates to be college and career ready. The Employability Skills Framework lists examples in the categories of applying knowledge, effective relationships, and workplace skills, including communication, teamwork, conflict resolution, responsibility, self-discipline, integrity, and professionalism (USDOE, 2012).

Experiential learning – is learning through practice, by doing or experiencing an activity rather than reading or hearing about it.

Internship – is a learning experience that provides an opportunity for a student to perform practical work related to an occupation or career in order to gain experience and skills.

Interpersonal skills – skills that people utilize in their interactions with each other. Robles (2012) found communication, integrity, and courtesy to be the most important interpersonal skills for success in employment.

Perkins – The Carl D. Perkins Act provides federal funding to high schools, colleges, and universities for technical education. First authorized as Vocational

Postsecondary – education beyond high school. Training could be certificate or degree (2 or 4 year).

Skills gap - is the difference between the skills needed by employers and the available skills of employees. The gap can be addressed through education and training (Greenstone & Looney, 2011).

Soft skills - a general set of knowledge, abilities, and attitudes related to personality and behavior. Robles (2012) describes them as personal and interpersonal. The U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability and Employment Policy cites soft skills as including professional work attitudes, teamwork, ethics, problem solving, critical thinking, and communication. (USDOL, 2012).

Workforce development - a program that provides learning or training to improve skills, provide career development, or train for a new job. Brown (2015) stated that from the perspective of workforce development, the main responsibility of education is to prepare people for work.

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act - a law enacted in 2014 that superseded the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. It brought together all types of employment and training for youth and adults, including adult education, literacy, and vocational rehabilitation (Shin & Ging, 2019).

Chapter Summary

Soft skills are general skills related to communication and interpersonal skills; they enhance technical skills, preparing students to be college and career ready. They
provide new employees with the employability skills to be successful in the workplace, to gain and maintain employment. The literature informs us that due to the changing world of work, the ability to demonstrate soft skills in the workplace is more important now than before (Greenstone & Looney, 2011; Holzer, 2013; NACE, 2018). However, most of the current research is about the levels of preparation and the readiness of graduates of colleges and high schools to enter employment; therefore, this study considered skills development in adult learners in workforce training programs.

Adults enrolled in workforce development programming need training or retraining that will result in real jobs. Credentialing beyond a high school diploma provides opportunities for these individuals to stay employed and increase their potential lifetime earnings (Greenstone & Looney, 2011). Therefore, examining adult preparation and readiness for employment has significance for leaders in education, public planning, and economic development at the local, regional, and national levels.

The purpose of the qualitative comparative case study was to examine the training of adult learners in a network of training centers in New York State. The researcher analyzed the perceptions of the staff who plan, teach, and assess soft skills training in order to develop best practices for adult education and training.

Chapter 1 introduced the topic of soft skills and provided the background to the soft skills gap existing in individuals entering the workforce. The lack of consensus on the defining, teaching, and measuring of soft skills was presented. The chapter also reviewed the history of adult education and training in the United States. The significance and purpose of the study were discussed and the research questions identified.
Chapter 2 reviews the empirical studies related to the topic, including the importance of soft skills to employers, the impact of soft skills on earnings, and emotional intelligence as a factor in workplace success. It also examines the literature on adult learners and provides a context for social learning theories related to self-concept, self-efficacy, and experiential learning. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology design, the population, data collection instruments, and the data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents the results of the qualitative comparative case study analysis, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications, and recommendations for practice and further study.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Workplaces need workers with the ability to read, compute, listen and speak, think critically, and use interpersonal skills to relate to their co-workers effectively (SCANS, 1991). As a result, graduates about to enter employment need to be competent in interpersonal and communication skills, in addition to technical skills (Coffelt, Baker, & Corey, 2016), as they need to be able to “manage, organize, and negotiate relationships” (Ellis et al., 2014, p. 435).

Research indicates that employers want well trained, prepared graduates and that public policy makers want a skilled workforce (Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Robles, 2012), but there are gaps in the preparation of those graduates (OECD, 2013); and not enough alignment between educational programs and local industry needs (Brown, 2015). Employers report that graduates do not demonstrate the interpersonal communication skills that workplaces need (Coffelt et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2014) and that the demand for these skills is expected to grow (Rosen et al., 2018).

Research also shows that people who demonstrate effective use of soft skills have improved career outcomes (Reinsch & Gardner, 2014; Rode, Arthand-Day, Ramaswami, & Howes, 2017). However, there is not much research on students and graduates of certificate training programs. For example, some recent dissertations address soft skills training and development in youth programming and college programming. Harris-Madden (2017) measured the effectiveness of an after school youth program to prepare
the young people in job readiness and soft skills for placement into a work experience program. Edwards (2018) studied how performing arts helped to develop soft skills in senior students enrolled at a historically Black 4-year college. Parker (2019) addressed soft skills training in community colleges, focusing on how 2-year colleges in the Michigan state system develop soft skills training. Therefore, to address the gap in the literature, this study focused on adults enrolled in workforce development training programs.

The purpose of this research study was to examine the soft skills taught in workforce development certificate programs for adult learners. To fulfill this purpose, a qualitative research study was conducted using a comparative case study approach. The population was a purposeful sampling of instructors and program administrators in state-funded adult training centers in urban communities throughout New York State.

This chapter presents an overview of the research studies related to soft skills. The categories for the literature review are organized as (a) the importance of soft skills to employers, including the centrality of communication skills; (b) emotional intelligence as a factor for success in the workplace; (c) social learning theory, self-concept, and self-efficacy; (d) an examination of the economic impact of social skills and education levels on earnings; (e) adult learners in workforce development programs; and (f) adult learning theories related to experiential learning.

**The Importance of Soft Skills to Employers**

As research indicates, the discussion on nontechnical skills needed for career success is not new. One hundred years ago, Charles Mann was hired by a committee on engineering education to review and report on the methods of training and preparing
engineers for work. He reported that a study of engineers and manufacturing companies noted that personal qualities were as necessary as technical knowledge and skill for college graduates to be successful professional engineers. In fact, in the survey, the engineers mentioned personal qualities 7 times as frequently as technical skills (Mann, 1918). As research shows, the discussion continues up to the present and although employers and educators may differ on the ranking of various soft skills, they agree that they are important, as they “have long-run value in a wide variety of careers” (Deming, 2019, para. 6).

**Defining soft skills.** Soft skills are described in multiple ways, as communication skills, people skills, social skills, or generic skills (Clokie & Fourie, 2016). Some researchers note that the essential elements of soft skills include interpersonal skills related to traits and behavior (Balcar, 2014; Robles, 2012). Additionally, the Office of Disability Employment Policy indicates that in the workplace, soft skills are demonstrated as professional work attitudes, teamwork, ethics, problem solving, communication, leadership, and adaptability (USDOL, 2012).

Even though employers and educators agree that soft skills are important, research suggests that soft skills are difficult to define, teach, and measure (Balcar, 2014; Gibb, 2014; Murthi, 2014; Robles, 2012; Stone et al., 2009). The difficulty in teaching and measuring soft skills is compounded by the varying definitions and the overlap and combining of the skills (Alic, 2018) and that they are qualitative by nature (Gibb, 2014). In addition, Holzer (2013) noted that employers cannot directly observe these types of general skills during the hiring process, even in an interview setting, including review of work experience and reference checks. On the other hand, technical skills, which are
related to education, experience, and expertise (Hewitt, 2006), can be measured and documented in various ways, including by industry certifications (Brown, 2015; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2018; Stone et al., 2009).

**Studies on employers’ views of soft skills.** To determine how employers rate soft skills, Robles (2012) conducted a study in which juniors in business communication classes asked two executives each to list the 10 most important soft skills needed in the workplace. Of the 23 skills listed over the course of three semesters, the findings from the qualitative study were that communication, integrity, and courtesy were the top three most important interpersonal skills cited. Robles (2012) noted that faculty were not taught how to teach or measure soft skills, so faculty development was needed to help instructors integrate the skills into their coursework.

Ellis et al. (2014) wanted to find out if what was taught in a community college’s office technology soft skills course was congruent with the soft skills that employers require for entry level employment. To determine this, they conducted a qualitative content analysis of the curriculum. They cited a 2006 survey by several federal agencies that found that 16% of employers said that community college graduates lacked people skills. In their review of the course content offered in 2007-2008 in the nine colleges in the South Carolina Technical College system, they found that most of the skills cited by the employers were covered in the courses. However, the textbooks did not give a lot of weight to some of the skills, including customer service. They also found that all of the colleges added information in areas like “professional dress, image, and etiquette” (Ellis et al., 2014, p. 440) to supplement material not covered in the textbooks.
The course content was from a convenience sample received from teachers who responded to the request to provide syllabi and textbooks; the employers were a purposive sampling. From a random selection of 423 employers, 139 completed the phone survey, detailing the soft skills that they needed in entry level employees. The researchers developed a list of 37 skills/competencies from SCANS by using information from the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce. After reviewing the employer responses, they narrowed the list to 23. The findings were that course information taught was congruent with soft skills employers required.

In another content analysis study, Coffelt et al. (2016) sought to determine what communication skills employers considered to be important. The participants were employers who were contacted by students enrolled in a business communications course. Two coders analyzed the responses on 165 skills; the findings were that the majority of the 52 employers who responded indicated oral communication most frequently as the most important skill.

Sackett and Walmsley (2014) studied the importance of personality attributes in the workplace. They wanted to know how the attributes affected job performance, what types of attributes employers were seeking in applicants, and what types of attributes were rated as important for performance. The attributes were from the framework of the big five personality traits of conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability, extraversion, and openness to experiences.

The researchers used meta-analysis to examine research literature on the big five, and examined the frequency that employers used the attributes to evaluate applicants in interviews based on various studies on job types. The researchers also used the U.S.
Department of Labor’s Occupational Information Network (O*NET) to determine attributes for various job types. They found that of the big five traits, conscientiousness (as in dependability) and agreeableness (as in cooperativeness) were most important for workforce readiness. Emotional stability (being calm) was important when viewing behavior and extraversion (sociability) was more important when viewing performance.

The study conducted by Sackett and Walmsley (2014) on factors that contribute to success in the workplace focused on the big five personality traits only. Since this was the framework used, other employer assessments of personality attributes were not considered. Also, other factors besides personality traits may contribute to success in the workplace.

The studies in this section indicate that employers have nontechnical skill requirements for hiring employees. Although the skills may vary by industry and the relative importance of the skills may vary among employers, the skills are commonly acknowledged to include similar elements related to communication, collaboration, and interpersonal relations.

**The centrality of communication.** Communication is the means through which individuals exchange information. The exchange may consist of symbols, signs, or behavior (Merriam-Webster, 2020). It has been suggested that people who communicate effectively are the most effective employees in organizations (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2012).

Group interactions create the possibility of misunderstandings, as groups face breakdowns in communication (Purkey, Schmidt, & Novak, 2010). Therefore, teaching team building and communication skills to students can improve their skills in class and
prepare them for workplace interactions. Patterson et al. (2012) contended that the skills needed to have difficult conversations are not hard to learn and that individuals can prepare for them by learning effective techniques in speaking and listening. The next set of studies review the importance of communication from various perspectives.

**Studies on communication.** Reinsch and Gardner (2014) conducted a study to determine if candidates’ communication skills were an important factor in their promotion and which communication skills were important. The participants were senior executives who had completed a survey on a polling site. In a secondary analysis, the authors used random sampling to select 303 responses, considering only decision makers. Using maximum difference scaling, they reviewed the rankings in different sets of questions. The findings were that older executives placed more importance on interpersonal skills than did younger executives. There was no difference found by gender.

In another study on communication, in a midsize Midwestern college, faculty, students, and employers were surveyed to determine their perceptions of the importance of communication skills. The students were juniors and seniors enrolled in business related courses. The faculty were from the School of Business and Technology and the employers were from local businesses. Lear, Hodge, and Schutz (2015) used a quantitative survey and analyzed the data using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Employers could respond online or by mail and faculty and students by paper. Participants were 39 faculty, 130 local employers, and 258 students. The analysis showed that faculty and students rated by order of importance - listening, oral, written,
and nonverbal communication. The employers rated listening, nonverbal, written, then oral communication by order of importance.

Student and faculty perceptions were closer to each other than to the perceptions of employers, so Lear et al. (2015) noted that faculty would have to be the ones to address the gap in perceptions. The researchers recommended that teachers could promote experiential learning through internships and employ interactive classroom techniques such as presentations and effective listening. They also noted that employers may want to include communication in employee training. It should be noted that technology and use of social media were not addressed by the study.

In a combined qualitative and quantitative study, Morreale and Pearson (2008), updated a study conducted in 2000 that annotated 99 articles from 1955 to 1999 on the importance of the study of communication for students’ personal and professional development. In addition to the annotations, the new study conducted in 2007 included additional themes. The authors found that an additional 93 articles had been written in the 9 years since the earlier study.

The review of articles did not determine the importance of the study of communication, although the increased number of articles demonstrated new themes. The four main themes in the study conducted in 2000 were related to communication and the individual. The two additional themes from the Morreale and Pearson (2008) study were more focused on society, on communicating in organizational settings related to health, crises, crime, and policing. The additional themes cited highlighted the increased interest in recent years in the development of communicating risk management and crisis interventions.
In a study conducted in New Zealand, Clokie and Fourie (2016) set out to determine how employers of their institution’s graduates perceived the role of a communication course and whether the curriculum was producing employable graduates. They surveyed local and national employers who hired their graduates and analyzed the first-year general communication course taken by all students to see if the content covered the required skills. Using purposive sampling, they sent 40 surveys, to which 30 employers responded. They asked four questions on communication and a fifth question on what students lacked. They analyzed the curriculum for the same types of communication listed by the employers.

Clokie and Fourie (2016) found that as in international research, the employers were not uniform or consistent regarding the skills that were needed, but they were aligned in the need for soft skills and communication skills. Most of the skills were being taught in the communication course, even if graduates were not demonstrating competence in the skill upon hire. Clokie and Fourie (2016) considered it to be impossible to teach everything that various employers may deem to be important.

Although the Clokie and Fourie (2016) study was conducted in New Zealand, it is included in this literature review because the programs offered were vocational or applied technology for diplomas (certificates) and degrees. In addition, the study cited similar concerns as in the United States regarding soft skills, communication skills, and generic skills being used interchangeably by researchers and in job advertisements.

The studies that included employer participation demonstrated the importance of communication skills to the employers. These studies illustrated that it is important to establish communication between education institutions and employers, and to
incorporate students into the discussion. Also, having students assess their own skills could be a useful career advising tool to help students prepare for employment.

**Emotional Intelligence and Success in the Workplace**

The concept of emotional intelligence was developed by John Mayer and Peter Salovey as a form of cognitive intelligence. Their definition of emotional intelligence is “the capacity to reason about emotions, and of emotions to enhance thinking” (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004, p. 197). Emotional intelligence was popularized to the general public by Goleman (1995), who in his initial model, described emotional intelligence as having self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. In further development of his model, Goleman (2001) posited that the framework of competencies for emotional intelligence could be viewed as regulating self or other, personal versus social, and that these competencies were essentially job skills and life skills that could be learned.

The concept of emotional intelligence was an appropriate construct to consider in the study since understanding and managing emotions in oneself and in others is essential to communication and interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Carnevale and Smith (2013) suggested that “Effective oral communication requires that workers have sufficient self-awareness to understand how they are perceived and what they hear” (p. 495).

**Studies on emotional intelligence.** Although career success is a combination of ability, personality, and opportunity, emotional intelligence has been shown to be an important predictor of work success (Rode et al., 2017). The following studies show that
emotional intelligence may have a positive effect on job performance and teamwork and may be more important among workers with direct customer contact (Mayer et al., 2004).

In a study of 44 analysts and clerical workers from a Fortune 400 company, Lopes, Grewal, Kadis, Gall, and Salovey (2006) found that after controlling for other factors, individuals with high emotional intelligence received greater merit increases and held higher rank. The study consisted of several parts; the participants completed the Mayer Salovey Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) inventory and a self-report on job satisfaction, their supervisors completed a Bar-On inventory, the participants’ peers completed a relationship inventory, and the researchers got salary, merit increases, and information on rank from the company records.

Lopes et al. (2006) analyzed the self, supervisors, and peer ratings to test the theoretical associations between emotional intelligence and job satisfaction, relationships, and tolerance for stress. They found a positive and significant relationship between emotional intelligence and merit increases and job rank. Preliminarily, the study confirmed that the abilities measured for emotional intelligence were associated with positive work outcomes.

Another study explored the relationship between emotional intelligence, team learning, and team psychology (Ghosh, Shuck, & Petrosko, 2010). The researchers contacted people online through their organizations and conducted a web-based self-reporting survey of 48 participants, a convenience sampling, mainly in nonprofit organizations. The participants used three inventories to report on workgroups, team safety, and team learning. The researchers found a significant positive association between emotional intelligence in the work teams and team learning; that those who
understand how to use emotions in thinking and in managing relations develop advantages over those who do not, and that emotions in work groups can aid learning.

Results of the Ghosh et al. (2010) study may have been affected by the convenience sampling, the size of the sampling, possibly affected by the web-based format, the self-reporting, and the use of perceptions rather than a test. However, the employees working on teams believed that emotions mattered in their relations, so in the future, adding managers and customers, or adjusting the demographic makeup of the workers could provide additional data.

Since earnings in the travel and tourism industry had increased in recent years and continued to grow in the United States and abroad, Quinn (2013) set out to ascertain what employee competencies were being sought by the industry. In a quantitative study using SCANS competencies, 530 industry professionals were surveyed to gain their perceptions of the importance of the SCANS skills. Participants were contacted by email and given a weblink to complete a survey with a five-point Likert scale. Three hundred completed the survey, with 259 being usable. The demographic makeup of the group was wide ranging, spanning ages, ethnic backgrounds, and number of years of experience.

The results showed that across all segments of the industry, the consensus was that in terms of use of resources, use of time and human resources was more important than use of money and materials/facility. The most important interpersonal skills were dealing with clients and customers and team participation. Since satisfying guests is important in this industry, the results of the study were not surprising. Serving and managing customers and working well as a team member will produce successful outcomes for management and employees (Quinn, 2013).
The studies related to emotional intelligence show that the competencies used in emotional intelligence are related to job skills and life skills and that they can be learned. Workplace success in industries focused on working with people is closely related to managing interpersonal relations, regulating and controlling one’s emotions, and working effectively as a team member. Rode et al. (2017) recommended that learning about social-emotional skills in school could benefit people once they are employed and help them to advance in their careers. Deming (2019) also noted that soft skills may generate more economic value in the long term as people progress through their careers.

Social Cognitive Theory and Theories of Self

In a review of the development of his social cognitive theory of human behavior, Bandura (1977) stated that individuals develop and learn through a three-way interaction of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors. The three factors work together and influence each other in learning (Davidson Films Inc., 2011). Additionally, learning may also be influenced by students’ judgement of their own capability, one of the ways Bandura defined self-efficacy. As people develop self-efficacy, they develop a belief in their ability to achieve through their own doing. Since their knowledge, beliefs, and values influence their behavior and learning, people will participate in activities when they think that they can handle them successfully (Bandura, 1977).

As students make meaning of their learning, they are able to manage their learning more effectively. Furthermore, learning is influenced by the students’ views of themselves - their self-concept (Blustein, Kenna, Murphy, & Devoy Whitcavitch, 2006) and their beliefs regarding their ability to learn, grow, and change - their mindset (Dweck, 2000, 2012). How people view themselves also influences their behavior
(Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). Finally, students’ cultural values and differences also affect how they define themselves, how they learn, and how they relate to others (National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine [NASEM], 2018).

**Studies on self-concept and self-efficacy.** Noting the importance of a positive self-concept for individuals, Kraebber and Greenan (2012) examined the relationship between students’ self-concept and their self-ratings. The authors noted that many skills that were once associated with managers, including leadership, negotiation, analysis, and decision-making, were now required for employees in all capacities, so it was important to see how students rated their own preparation. In a small 2-year career and technical college, 90 students were surveyed, and the data coded to analyze students’ perceptions of their skills. When compared by gender, age, and years of education, only years of education showed any difference; the number of years of education had a positive impact on self-concept. However, the results showed low correlation between self-rating and self-concept.

The instrument used to measure self-concept may have been limited since it was based on students own reporting, so other assessments should be included. Kraebber and Greenan (2012) suggested further study on a larger scale, including how adult self-concept is shaped. They also suggested that the results might be useful for career counseling.

Using the theory of self-concept as part of career advising is intriguing. Integrating it into adult career advising might be useful in career and technical certificate training to help students choose career pathways, as the shift in the economy and
workforce trends have changed career counseling and assessment (Cummins, 2014; Russell, 2011).

A study on self-efficacy was conducted in a public midwestern university in an abnormal behavior and society class with two sections of students (Fritson, 2008). The participants were 41 undergraduate psychology student volunteers, aged 19-44, 29 females and 12 males. The purpose of the study was to determine how self-efficacy and locus of control impacted journaling. Locus of control is the individual’s perceptions about underlying causes of life events (Fritson, 2008).

In the Fritson (2008) study, one group of 25 students got a weekly 10-minute introduction on cognitive behavior theory (CBT) and the other group of 16 did not. Both classes used the same syllabus and textbooks and both groups completed their weekly journal, reflecting on their learning. All students completed various assessments at the beginning, midterm, and end of semester, including a self-efficacy questionnaire, a locus of control scale, demographic information, perceptions of instructors, and course evaluations.

The results, a 2x3 mixed design ANOVA to examine the effects at various points in the term, showed significant positive change in students’ self-efficacy. There was no difference between those who had the weekly 10-minute CBT introduction and those who did not; therefore, the increase in efficacy is attributable to the journaling (Fritson, 2008).

This study on journaling could be conducted with any group of students since its reflective nature could help them view their learning and behavior and make changes. Although demographic data was collected, there was no mention in the findings of any effect by gender, age, academic year, or any other demographic data elements.
Carter et al. (2018) conducted a study to determine how simulated instruction improved the self-efficacy and readiness of students in a social work program at a university in Edwardsville, Illinois. The students were juniors who had just declared their social work majors in the middle 6 weeks of the semester. The study was a mixed method with a quantitative posttest, as well as student focus group after the simulation.

To offer more realism to the course, instead of role playing between students, faculty interviewed and hired actors to engage with the students in a lab setting. As the students interacted with the actors, they were videotaped while being viewed by the other students, faculty, and teaching assistants. Thirty-three of 60 invited students from three classes participated. The students completed a General Self-Efficacy Scale and also participated in focus groups of three to seven students facilitated by a faculty member who had not taught the course. The focus groups were also recorded to allow for refining of coding the themes for the data analysis. SPSS was used to process the quantitative data.

The results showed a positive correlation between self-efficacy and the skills being practiced; also, students reported being able to master interviewing skills, manage emotions, and engage in culturally competent practices. However, it was not possible to tell if students were honest in their self-reports (Carter et al., 2018).

The Carter et al. (2018) study demonstrated that if the right clients are recruited for the simulation, who are able to enter character well, this could be a useful tool to add to the practical training of students. It is similar to using actors in hospitals with medical students and interns to help them develop their interviewing and diagnosing skills. However, it could prove costly, although the researchers did not state the cost of hiring
the actors. In addition, it takes time to find and train good actors and to incorporate different demographic groups.

The studies in this section of the review contemplated how students view themselves and how their learning and development are influenced by those views. As students make meaning of their learning, they are able to manage their learning more effectively. Self-efficacy can impact learning positively as students gain confidence in their capability to be successful.

The Economic Impact of Social Skills and Education Levels

Hewitt (2006) noted that soft skills are “nontechnical, intangible, personality-specific traits that determine your strengths as a leader, listener, negotiator, and conflict mediator” (para. 3). Soft skills are related to social skills and when they are well developed can provide opportunities for economic advancement for those who demonstrate them. Consequently, the studies in this section of the literature review focus on how social skills may impact income.

**Impact of social skills.** In a study examining whether people jobs versus non/people jobs had an effect on gender wage gap and Black/White wage gap, Borghans et al. (2014) used longitudinal data from the United States, Britain, and Germany to look at the importance of people skills and noncognitive skills in wage growth. In the United States, the data analyzed were U.S. Census data from 1980 and 1990; U.S. Department of Labor, Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) from 1977 to 1991; and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in 1979 and 1991. The researchers posited that the rapid change in the increase in demand for people skills from the late 1970s to early 1990s
could help to answer why the gender wage gap decreased but the Black/White wage gap stagnated.

In the US, Borghans et al. (2014) examined job tasks by gender and ethnicity/race in 1980 and 1990. There was insufficient ethnic data from Britain. In all three countries, women predominate in occupations where people tasks were high. They found the following in the United States: the increase in people tasks benefited women and helped to explain the decline in the gender wage gap between the 1970s and 1990s; and the slowdown since mid-1990s was consistent with the slowdown in growth rate of people tasks. The wage gap between Black and White stagnated, primarily due to Black male unemployment; employment of Black women has been higher than Black men since the 1990s.

Using the data from the youth study, Borghans et al. (2014) found a positive relationship between youth sociability and people tasks as adults. For example, in high school, women reported being more effective in people tasks and belonged to more clubs. The researchers concluded that there was a demonstrated relation between people skills and labor market outcomes although they did not address the difference in wages between professional people jobs, like nursing, teaching, sales and administration, and lower pay direct care allied health workers.

Deming’s study on the importance of social skills in the labor market (2017) focused on the reason for the growth in cognitive occupations since they require interpersonal interactions and it is difficult to automate social interaction. He used similar, but more recent data than did Borghans et al. (2014). His longitudinal study accessed U.S. Census and American Community Survey data from 2000 to 2012, data

Deming (2017) developed a model to view the relations between low social skills and high social skills versus tasks of jobs. He found that workers with more social skills enter occupations where social skills are valued. Looking at the changes in task content in O*NET job tasks, he found that social skills occupations grew by 11.8% between 1980 and 2012. He concluded that workers with high social skills perform well in team settings.

Deming’s (2017) study measured changes across occupations, but not within. The study, like that of Borghans et al. (2014), focused more on managerial and professional jobs which probably would have shown an increase in wage returns, even without the social skills element. Also, additional research is needed to see the long-term impact of social skills on employment and earnings.

From a sociological lens, Wyant et al. (2018), used the occupational tasks in O*NET to study social work tasks and compared them using factor analysis to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (2003-2012) to develop a model to identify social skills over the careers of young, middle aged, and older workers. Noting that wage attainment models usually look at education levels, they wanted to focus on social skills development. The study did not address how workers develop social skills or how they vary across different parts of the workforce. They concluded that Whites, females, those who experience early exposure to social skills, and highly educated people do best over the course of their careers.
The Wyant et al. (2018) study, unlike the one conducted by Deming (2017), distinguished care work characterized by low skill and low pay from managerial social service skills. The researchers observed that care work was associated with soft skills and more disadvantaged groups, and managerial work was associated with social skills and higher education.

A concern regarding how soft skills are assessed in job applicants was indicated in some studies. Zamudio and Lichter (2008) posited in their study that soft skills can be used as a code to seek a particular type of worker (Latina/os) and discriminate against another type (native Blacks). They stated that when employers based their employment decisions on soft skills only and not technical skills that can be measured, they could base their choice on feelings about attitudes and personality and not on skill. The qualitative study was based on interviews with employers in hotels in Los Angeles, California, who hired unskilled workers for back-of-the-house jobs. The researchers used sample data from a 1992-1993 study. The initial study was on the competition between native Blacks and Latinos for low skilled jobs in several industries. Forty of the 240 interviews were selected to review the criteria the interviewers used to base their hiring decisions in the hotels.

Although the employers stressed that communication skills were important for jobs like housekeeping, cleaning, and laundry, the data showed that they hired non or limited English-speaking immigrants instead of Blacks who speak English. During interviews, some employers had negative views of Blacks (and sometimes native Whites). The researchers concluded that the main reason for hiring Latina/os was to control them and have workers who would offer little resistance and challenge. The
quotes from some of the interviews suggested that the soft skills that the employers said were needed for employment were not the ones for which they actually hired (Zamudio & Lichter, 2008).

From the literature review for their study, Zamudio and Lichter (2008) concluded that statistical discrimination by employers is based on economic decisions rather than actual people. Employers use preconceived ideas to discriminate against groups based on race, ethnicity, or class by excluding them from consideration for employment.

The studies in this section confirm that soft or social skills added to cognitive skills, present opportunities for individuals to be more successful in their careers. However, soft skills needed in low cognitive skills jobs are not as well compensated as in jobs that are more managerial. The economic impact of people jobs is of importance especially related to gender, race, and disadvantaged groups since women and minorities predominate in the lower skilled jobs. It appears that low skilled Black males are the most negatively affected by their earnings and level of participation in the workforce.

**Education levels and the labor market.** In his 1944 message to Congress on the new Economic Bill of Rights, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt stated that individuals have a right to useful and remunerative jobs and a good education (among other rights) and that they cannot be free without economic security (Rosenman, 1950). Education and training beyond high school increase the wages of individuals (Kim & Tamborini, 2019) and can help to provide economic security. This following set of studies considers the impact of education levels on the labor market.

Dougherty and Lombardi (2016) provided a history of the federal government’s funding to states to support education in developing the workforce. Besides a historical
overview from the 19th century to the present, they reviewed the empirical research on
the connection between secondary education and work. After searching the literature
from 1946 to present, they narrowed their search to 301 articles that they coded for 15
characteristics. They found that scholarship in the area had increased, especially topics
related to education and the labor market. In addition, there was greater emphasis in the
literature on disabilities and postsecondary transition.

In the 1980s and 1990s, after changes in federal laws increased enrollment in
special education in public schools, studies related to disabilities grew even more quickly.
As the first set of students affected by the laws transitioned to college and work, the
increase in studies reflected those changes as well. However, Dougherty and Lombardi
(2016) did not find much change in scholarship on the disengaged or low income and
other disadvantaged students.

Xu and Trimble (2016) conducted a study to compare students enrolled in
nondegree programs in Virginia and North Carolina. Administrative data sets were
provided by the colleges (170,000 from Virginia and 210,000 from North Carolina) for
23 and 58 community colleges respectively and matched against unemployment data.
They considered students 20 and older at initial enrollment. The researchers used linear
probability and logistic regression to examine the impact of certificates on probability of
employment and the impact of certification on actual earnings by looking at income
before enrollment, during enrollment, and after graduation. They found that there was
less increase in earnings for students who went to work in education and childcare, who
were mostly female. A possible explanation is that the females may have been trading
earnings for the flexibility of their work schedules due to family commitments.
There were variations in earnings across fields. Jobs like protective services, mechanics, and nursing had different earnings in both states. Overall, earnings in health care were strong in both states. Some of the differences were due to length of program and alignment to specific employer needs and that more students were enrolled in occupation programs in North Carolina (Xu & Trimble, 2016).

The article by Xu and Trimble (2016) provided data that confirmed that there is value to students to enroll in noncredit programming and that some community colleges are providing vocational oriented coursework that is placing graduates into employment in less than a year. More importantly, data exist that can provide researchers with information for longitudinal studies.

Regarding the state of jobs in manufacturing in the United States, Stone et al. (2009) proposed that though the skills required have changed, the jobs have not disappeared. Their study investigated whether there was a knowledge gap between industry and educational institutions regarding the skills needed by employers. Conducted in the Front Range area of Colorado of eight areas or towns, researchers used an online instrument to survey a nonprobability sample of manufacturing companies and ended up with 16 manufacturing respondents and 20 educational respondents, mostly from community colleges.

The analysis conducted by Stone et al. (2009) found that there was no significant difference between understanding of the attributes and skills needed for manufacturing \((p = .009)\). Communication between the educators and employers was mainly through advisory boards, as educators said that they did not have time to engage with the employers.
Identifying the types and levels of participants who responded helped to put the results in context. All seem to agree that there was need for a more flexible workforce, not skilled in one area or trade. It was noteworthy that the manufacturers wanted fewer and more skilled workers and were satisfied with high school graduates that they could train (Stone et al., 2009).

Kim and Tamborini (2019) studied the annual earnings, cumulative 20-year earnings, and earnings growth of a set of individuals to determine the relationship between their educational levels and earnings. Using longitudinal earnings from tax records from the 2004 and 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation, they followed people who had completed high school between 1972 and 1993, tracking to see up to 20 years of earnings post high school graduation. They disaggregated the data into those who had received an associate degree, dropped out of college, received a vocational diploma, or a certificate. Using multivariate analysis, they compared the degree earned, the field of study, and the earnings over time. They also examined high school coursework to see whether students had taken advanced placement courses, college preparation courses, or vocational courses.

Kim and Tamborini (2019) found that men had higher cumulative earnings than women; that the cumulative earnings for those who dropped out of college were higher than those who earned vocational certificates, for both genders; and that men with associate degrees and vocational diplomas in technical fields out-earned those with baccalaureate degrees in arts and humanities. They also found that graduates with associate degrees earned more over time than those with vocational diplomas, except in
electronics. High school graduates had higher annual earnings only in the first few years after high school as they started to work while others enrolled in college.

The studies on education levels and labor market returns show that although 4-year college degrees produce higher earnings over a lifetime, people with other credentials beyond high school can earn well too. Also, community colleges play a varied role in education, preparing students for degrees and noncredit certifications. Adults who enroll in certificate programs can begin a career pathway, using stackable credentials to improve their skills and income over a period of time (USDOL, 2014).

Noncredit training is a good starting off point for lifelong learning, a key element of Equipped for the Future Standards Work Readiness Profile (NWRC, 2019), one of the learning frameworks for this study. Kolb (2015) viewed lifelong learning as not limited to learning marketable skills, but as approaching life with an attitude of learning, as people continue to learn through all stages of their lives, including as adults.

The Adults in Workforce Development Programs

In 2013, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) conducted a study in two parts in 33 countries to measure proficiency in adults. This was the first international study to address the preparedness of adults for work and the 250,000 adults surveyed, aged 16-65, included residents of the United States. The adults were assessed on the skills needed for the 21st century, including the general skills of cooperation, communication, and time management. The results revealed a skills gap between the skills needed to gain employment and advance on the job, and the skills reported by working age adults (OECD, 2013).
To understand the needs of the adults experiencing the skills gap, the U.S. Department of Education requested that the OECD perform additional analysis on the population identified as low skilled in the United States. The results showed that of the 36 million adults with low skills, two thirds of them (24 million) were employed. They worked in industries including retail, hospitality, food service, health, and manufacturing. Although working, many earned low wages and would benefit from education and training to improve their economic wellbeing and boost the nation’s productivity (USDOE, 2015).

Adult learners in workforce development and training programs are usually enrolled in noncredit certificate programs. They are usually unemployed, underemployed, or returning to the workforce. They tend to be caring for others, have economic challenges, and have life stresses (Cummins, 2014). They need flexibility in scheduling, appropriate peer and staff support, and faculty with training and experience in adult education to improve their chances to be successful students (NYSED, 2013; Stevens, 2014).

Studies on adult students. A study by Russell (2011) looked at how employees of a One Stop Center used client stories to facilitate job search activities. One Stop Centers bring together career advisors, case managers, social workers, and tech assistants to put all job seeking support services in one place. The study’s research question was on how a government-funded center helped make sense of client narratives in order to facilitate their job search. The researcher interviewed a convenience sampling of seven employees in a rural area of a western state, using face-to-face recorded interviews lasting 20-30 minutes, asking them about the frequency of client narratives.
Two coders analyzed the data using Guetzkov’s U; a highly reliable U of 0.1 was found, as was a coding reliability of kappa 0.9. The results were that the job seekers’ narratives gave insight into their backgrounds, helped them identify barriers, gave insight into their emotional state, and helped them to process their experiences. Thus, the personal narratives helped to facilitate how services to them were allocated. It was recommended that the One Stop Centers may want to provide training to the staff to deal with and process their own emotions.

Losing one’s job is a traumatic experience and allowing participants to talk about their experience sounds practical. As a meaning making exercise, it allows both the participant and the staff member to become an individual and not just a statistic or a representative of a bureaucracy. Hearing the job seeker’s perspective of the interaction would also be useful.

Cummins’ study (2014) on older adults returning to school also addressed the problem of students who might be dislocated workers. The researcher posited that since the transition from work to retirement has changed, some older workers need retraining as they seek to reenter or continue in the workforce. The study looked at the characteristics of effective community college engagement with adults aged 50 years and older. Following a focus group at a conference, site visits were made to five community colleges and interviews conducted with staff at 14 colleges. The Delphi method was used to identify who to interview, with constant comparative method used, building on interviews so that later ones were informed by earlier ones.

The main topics were on outreach, retention, credentialing programs available, counseling, placement, and continuing education. Cummins used a pathway to success
model to evaluate the data, comparing the interrelation of the older worker and the community college response on an iterative and continuous basis. Several best practices were identified for each of the topic areas (Cummins, 2014).

The results of effective strategies to engage an older worker could be used for students of all ages, for example, flexible scheduling, supportive academic and student services including job placement, and establishing career pathways. The study articulated how to connect older workers to certificate and other credential training in a community college setting (Cummins, 2014).

Another study conducted by Ayers, Miller-Dyce, and Carlone (2008) focused on the experience of 17 job training participants in a suburban community college in the south of the United States. They were retraining as a result of economic shifting and were enrolled in a dental administrative assistant and a payroll specialist program which started in 2003 to work with those who had lost jobs. The method employed was to visit classes, interact with the students to make them comfortable, then conduct 1-hour interviews with them. The transcripts of interviews were reviewed through preliminary exploratory analysis. Although the questions were about current state and future expectations, the researchers had to revise their view of the needs of the students as some saw the present as a situation to overcome and the future as a place to avoid.

The group had 16 women and one man, which the researchers considered to be important, stating that work favors men in the service economy. Although many of the students were currently employed in service jobs, they were enrolled in their respective programs to gain job security; and at their workplaces, they wanted to restore their
dignity, participate in caring relationships, and find meaning in their work (Ayers et al., 2008).

As critical theorists, Ayers et al. (2008) stated that they wanted to bridge the gap between theory and practice in program development, giving the learners a voice when new programs are being considered. This may not be feasible as program planners have to balance competing interests between their institutions and business partners. However, finding opportunities to give adult learners opportunities to have a meaningful engagement in the planning and implementation of their learning should be considered when possible.

In a qualitative study, Carmochan et al. (2013) examined employers’ views on the soft skills of their employees subsidized through the Temporary Aid to Needy Families program. The workers were welfare recipients who were recently laid off and had to work to receive aid. The research showed that 80% of supervisors of subsidized employment had positive recommendations but the supervisors also noted attendance problems and the need for supervision.

An 11-member consortium of county Welfare to Work partners in Northern California provided the sites in 2009 to 2010. A random sampling of 370 employees resulted in 81 participants from for profit and nonprofit organizations. They were invited by phone and e-mail and engaged in semi-structured interviews. The researchers used Dedoose, a web-based qualitative analysis software program, to code. Eclectic coding was used to review the interview instrument, then close readings of the answers. Intercoder reliability was met through multiple rounds of reading, with kappa of .07 (Carmochan et al., 2013).
Employers discussed soft skills more than hard skills. They valued motivation, presentation of self, including use of language, and interpersonal relations, including managing emotions. They thought that the employees should have had some training by the county to prepare them for work in their settings (Carmochan et al., 2013).

It appears that the employers who did their own training or gave corrective feedback to the employees had better results. Perhaps the employers who did not train or give corrective feedback did not view the employees as real since they were subsidized and with them for a temporary period. It appears that orientation was probably needed for the employers as well as for the employees.

The studies on adult students indicate that employees who lose their jobs and need training or retraining have specific emotional needs that must be addressed whether they are engaged in job search, training, or new employment. The best practices noted in the Cummins (2014) article on older workers returning to community colleges can be used in various settings. One example of using previous participants for outreach to prospects could be adapted for other programs. In teaching adults, it is essential to be aware of adult needs and what they already bring through their prior learning and experience, principles adopted from Knowles (1973) and advocated by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (Stevens, 2014).

**Adult Learning Theories**

David Kolb’s four-part learning cycle of experiencing, reflecting, conceptualizing, and experimenting is a useful framework to understand how adult students learn. During the cycle, students take in information, then they integrate the information, followed by thinking about the information, and finally acting on or using
the information. According to Kolb (2015), experiential learning is an ongoing process, not an outcome. It is a model that considers “the critical linkages among education, work, and personal development” (p. 4), as learning is a lifelong development that occurs across all areas of life.

John Dewey, noted as one of the foundational educational philosophers of the 20th century (Aubrey & Riley, 2019; Knowles, 1973; Kolb, 2015), established that learning should be focused on the student’s practical experience and that teaching should present opportunities for reflection by both student and teacher (Dewey, 1916). Studies on experiential learning illustrate that simulations and practice followed by reflection reinforce and aid student learning and development (Fritson, 2008; Minei, 2016).

Malcolm Knowles, following in the tradition of Dewey, developed an adult learning theory that demonstrated that adult learners have different characteristics from children, as adults build on the experiences that they already have, and have a different orientation to learning and readiness to learn (Knowles, 1973). Further, his view of the adult is one who “wants to apply tomorrow what he learns today, so his time perspective is one of immediacy of application” (Knowles, 1973, p. 48). Knowles viewed adults as task oriented (Knowles, 1973); therefore, it is crucial that adult education programs seek ways to engage students in practical tasks.

**Studies on experiential learning.** Rotherham and Willingham (2010) noted that experience is not the same as practice. They defined experience as use of knowledge and practice as the means of trying to improve through receiving feedback. The following studies on experiential learning illustrate that journaling and simulations are useful tools to help students develop and reflect on their learning. They demonstrate how students
learn through experience and practice. After all, experiential learning connects the classroom to the real world (Brown, 2015).

Finch, Peacock, Lazdowski, and Hwang (2015) presented a case study that examined four hypotheses through content analysis of journals from a senior experiential course in a midsize undergraduate business school in Canada. Their purpose was to see how management competencies in interpersonal, critical thinking, workplace readiness, and professional confidence were developed. Using experiential learning theory, achievement goal theory, and control value theory, they examined how students managed their emotions while learning.

Twenty-eight students who were registered in the class had to complete a weekly journal reflecting on the course experience as they worked on a team project. The students also completed an online peer evaluation which was part of their course grade. The researchers used content analysis to code the weekly journal reflections. The students were not informed on the study until the end of the class; another faculty member gave the consent form, and it did not affect their grade (Finch et al., 2015).

Based on the first 2 weeks’ journal entries, the coders assigned students as seeking to develop mastery, or seeking to complete the goal – the course. Those assigned as mastery rather than goal oriented seemed to navigate negative emotions better as they were able to regulate their emotions. However, having negative emotions was not a liability to learning and showed that how students navigate negative emotions could be useful in the workplace. The four highest occurring emotions found were hope, pride, frustration, and anxiety (Finch et al., 2015).
The Finch et al. study was conducted in Canada; therefore, other settings or majors, or an increased number of people studied may have different outcomes. The personality of the students could have affected their coping with difficulties in their team and project. However, the journal reflection could be used in other types of experiential learning settings to further study emotions and goal orientations.

In another study, a semester-long project of urban college students participating in a small group communication class, Minei (2016) reported on having students spend the first 6 weeks of the semester in training on group communication, making decisions, solving problems, and resolving conflicts. In the next 6 weeks, they worked on their group projects. The aim was to teach the skills, then have the students demonstrate the skills through their group service project, which was to create a resource to benefit the community.

Minei (2016) reported that the students were able to learn skills that were transferable to the workplace since they participated in a project with real outcomes and applied theories to practical experiences. This structured class provided an example of how interpersonal and communication skills can be taught experientially.

Cox and Friedman (2009) addressed communication among cohorts and teams in a study of students in an organizational behavior class who participated in an exercise at midsemester. The participants had to review their performance on their team projects, examine their roles on their teams, and make changes before the semester ended. This exercise created the opportunity for the students to communicate about their team interactions and performance, and generate discussions on teams, roles, conflict, and
leadership. Students were able to learn by experience, including giving feedback to each other (Cox & Friedman, 2009).

Internships, a form of work-based learning, also provide experiential learning. In a qualitative study based on a survey and exit interviews, Barnett (2012) studied what student interns learned about work that they did not know before, and how they would use the new knowledge to advise future interns. The study was conducted at Loyola University in New Orleans, Louisiana. There were 59 interns from business majors participating in a required internship. The students completed open ended interview questions and reflection reports at the end of their course. Informed consent was not needed because the study was course based, but students were informed that their answers could be used in research, and only those who gave permission were used.

The answers to the questions and the reflections were coded; triangulation was used for reliability, by checking against the literature and having three former interns review the findings. The results revealed that interns noted the importance of communication, realized that campus culture was different from work culture, and that work could be beneficial. Some were surprised at how much they enjoyed working. Their advice to other interns centered on creating a good impression, making sure to talk to everyone at the site, and to network (Barnett, 2012).

The information provided by the interns could be useful for instructors, career advisors, employers, and site supervisors of internship programs. The self-reflection enabled the students to examine their own preconceptions against reality (Barnett, 2012). However, it is unknown how what they learned might influence their behavior upon placement in employment.
Fewster-Thuente and Batteson (2018) used a mixed methods study to examine a simulation case study looking at how attitudes and behaviors changed in students. They were examining the data to see alignment with Kolb’s (2015) experiential learning theory. The design of the study was based on Kolb’s four-part learning cycle of experiencing, reflecting, conceptualizing, and experimenting. The method was to allow students to demonstrate collaboration and teamwork in a simulation with a script written by faculty. The participants were 515 first year students from eight professional programs at a university in Chicago who were enrolled in an interprofessional course; they spent 90 minutes using a scripted and then unscripted scenario.

The data analysis was based on themes from the students’ responses recorded by a team leader. The results were that experiential learning theory provided a solid theory to teach interprofessional competencies to health care students. The competencies of values and ethics, roles and responsibilities, interprofessional communication, and teams and teamwork are required by accreditation bodies, but there is no agreed upon framework with which to teach the skills. The findings were that learning was exhibited in interprofessional communication and in teamwork. Since unlicensed students do not get to practice; simulation provided them opportunities to do so (Fewster-Thuente & Batteson, 2018).

Three of the four competencies were met through the simulated exercise; students learned from each other as they went through the four stages of experiential learning. Fewster-Thuente and Batteson (2018) concluded that the theory was a good foundation for interprofessional education, although a 90-minute simulation is limited in scope.
Since employers have increased their use of mediated interview experiences, including phone calls, e-mails, and videoconferencing, the researchers Hudak, Kile, Grodziak, and Keptner (2018) decided to use a communication course to examine the difference between students’ self-reported communication interview skills before and after using mock interview software. The students were enrolled in a basic communications course.

The study was conducted in five sections of a speech course at the Lehigh Valley campus of Penn State University. Of the 103 invited students, 77 participated. The study design selected interview questions from a prerecorded bank of questions, with five questions per student. The students were prepped on interview activities prior and could view themselves after the recording. After the simulation, students responded to a 25-item survey. The responses were entered into Qualtrics and the open ended questions were coded for themes and frequency. A majority of the students (88%) previously had employment related interviews prior to the study. The same percentage had also used a type of technology in an interview including e-mail and phone (Hudak et al., 2018).

After participating in the virtual mock interview, students reported that they felt more confident. They reported that after receiving tips, they performed better. However, only 48% of the students responded to the posttest. In addition, students were not asked about techniques learned in other classes. Also, only one tool was used for the simulation although there are other web instructional tools available. The ratings were all based on student responses (Hudak et al., 2018).

The studies on experiential learning provided examples of practical means for students to learn. Simulations and practice, followed by reflection, reinforce and aid
student learning and development. Several of the activities can be adapted for adult training programs as well, since they relate to teamwork, communication, and other workplace competencies. For example, although targeted to the K-12 general school system, Germaine, Richards, Koeller, and Schubert-Irastorza (2016) demonstrated how some of the Partnership for 21st Century skills could be integrated into a postsecondary curriculum. Using the Learning and Innovation Skills of the 4Cs of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity, they gave examples of resources to be used, so that communication and collaboration could take place at the same time as content coursework. They illustrated how in-class and supplementary assignments, including using electronic communication, could help in integrating the skills into the coursework.

Teaching soft skills. The literature on soft skills demonstrates that many soft skills can be taught through integration into the general curriculum, as part of a professional development course, or in career development workshops (Ellis et al., 2014; Germaine et al., 2016). Soft skills can also be taught in simulations or other experiential learning settings including internships, practical training, and integrating work-based and class-based instruction so that students are taught in context (Barnett, 2012; Lear et al., 2015; USDOL, 2014).

Learning as a social activity. Warner (2014), in his criticism of 21st century learning with its emphasis on technology, stated that teachers need to get back to Dewey’s (1916) concept for hands-on, experiential learning, and remember that learning is a social activity and not only about new machines. He cautioned that technology should be used to create more social interactions, not to decrease them (Warner, 2014).
Chapter Summary

Although soft skills are difficult to define and measure, the literature demonstrates that educators and employers agree that they are important for workplace success. The literature also shows that students can learn and practice soft skills through coursework, simulation activities, and practical internship experience. Some researchers found that graduates may increase their earning potential and career trajectory when their technical skills are complemented by their ability to communicate well, collaborate, and interact well with team members.

The theories of emotional intelligence, social cognitive learning, and experiential learning were examined in this study as they relate to adults, their approach to learning, and their prior experiences. Chapter 3 presents the research methodology design of the qualitative comparative case study. It provides information on the participants in the study, the research context, the data collection instruments and procedures, and data analysis.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

Each year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers conducts a survey to determine what skills and attributes employers are seeking for the next hiring cycle. Invariably, the skills that are ranked highly include requirements that are unrelated to technical expertise; instead, employers seem to value skills and traits that include communication, teamwork, and work ethic (NACE, 2018).

These skills or traits are among the soft skills that research shows are displayed by employees who are effective in the workplace (Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Robles, 2012). Effective employees demonstrate emotional intelligence; they are able to manage their emotions and themselves as well as their relations with others (Goleman, 2001; Rode et al., 2017). Recruiters say that employers seek new hires who communicate well, are adaptable, exhibit initiative, are able to solve problems, and work well with others in the workplace; employers see them as a good fit for their particular work environment (Ricker, 2014).

Problem statement. Today’s graduates seeking employment need a set of skills that demonstrate readiness to gain and maintain employment. These skills are described as professional skills or employability skills and include soft skills. Soft skills are related to the communication skills, interpersonal relations, and personal or professional attributes that employers require. They are transferable across industries and are not technical in nature (USDOE, 2012). They are the skills that employers declare that
successful employees display at work (Kraebber & Greenan, 2012). Yet, research indicates that employers are not satisfied with the soft skills of new graduates (Ellis et al., 2014). Most studies though refer to the preparation of high school and college graduates; there is not much mention of graduates of certificate programs.

**Research questions.** This study explored how job training programs that offer noncredit certificate coursework for adults are addressing the development and the acquisition of soft skills in their students. Preliminary questions of how soft skills are defined and whether and how soft skills are being taught must be considered. To that end, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What do instructors and program administrators think are the main soft skills needed for employment by adult career students enrolled in their training programs?
   a. How do the administrators and instructors determine the skills to teach? Are employers, advisory boards, industry, state, or federal standards involved in the development of a template or curriculum?
2. What are the ways in which career program students acquire or improve their soft skills?
   a. Is there academic, career advisement, and job development collaboration?
3. How do instructors determine or assess if students have acquired the soft skills or have met established competencies?
4. What best practices in adult soft skills training can be developed from these findings?
**Research design.** The research design was a case study. This qualitative study used a comparative case study approach. Qualitative studies are well suited for social and educational research as they focus on finding meaning in practices and processes to generate descriptive data that can be analyzed (Crossman, 2019). Qualitative studies also allow researchers to study contexts or settings by collaborating with the participants of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The case study design was selected because case studies provide for flexibility and adaptability, allowing a researcher to study all types of situations (Crossman, 2019; Timmons & Cairns, 2010). Case studies are also dynamic; they allow the researcher to consider different directions based on the reactions of the participants (Timmons & Cairns, 2010). The comparative case study design was the best fit for the research questions asked in the study and the number of centers that participated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, a comparative method is appropriate when a group is being studied to look for factors that explain patterns (Vogt & Johnson, 2016).

The researcher explored the ways soft skills are taught to adult students by collaborating with the program administrators and instructors who design and teach the courses in several centers in a state network. Timmons and Cairns (2010) note that “case study research can provide rich holistic data that contribute to the understanding of complex situations” (p. 102). Therefore, the researcher anticipated that the design of the study would allow the different perspectives from the participants to generate that rich data.

Although the centers share the same mission and have similar student populations, they offer different programming, are of different enrollment size, and are located in
different areas of the state. The case study approach allowed for the development of an
evaluation and analysis of the programming and curriculum to compare how the staff at
the various centers define soft skills and how they teach them.

**Research Context**

This study was conducted in state-funded training centers located in urban
communities throughout New York State. The centers are part of a statewide network of
adult academic and career training programs affiliated with postsecondary institutions (2-
year and 4-year colleges) to prepare students for career pathways. They have programs
of varying lengths, lasting from a few weeks to 1 year. The career program offerings
include allied health – emergency medical technician, pharmacy technician, medical
assisting, certified nursing assistant, and others; office technology including medical
billing and coding; culinary and hospitality; cosmetology and barbering; building trades;
security officer training; and other certification training. The majority of the students
enrolled in career programming are women; the gender breakdown is 66% female and
34% male. The centers are tuition-free; students are low income; and graduation and
employment are the expected outcomes. Some of the programming have state, industry,
or occupational certification requirements.

**Research Participants**

There are 10 centers in the statewide network that provide career training. One of
the 10 centers was excluded as it is the institution of the researcher. This exclusion was
to prevent the potential problems that may arise in studying one’s own workplace or
organization (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These problems include factors that could
influence the researcher’s data collection and interpretation, including the relationship
between the researcher and the participants. Of the remaining nine centers, seven received Perkins funding in 2018-2019 or in 2019-2020 as education service agencies under New York State Education Department Perkins V guidelines. Perkins funding is a small percentage of each center’s overall budget. Although Perkins funding was one criterion considered to select centers because of the requirements in its guidelines about students’ employability preparation, the study was not an evaluation of the performance of Perkins programs at the centers.

The centers were selected to participate based on the following criteria: location in Western New York, Central New York, or downstate and New York City; total student enrollment in career programs; and number of career programs offered. This selection criteria created variation in the participating centers based on geographic location, size of student body, and family of career programs, as defined by New York State Education Department (NYSED, 2019a). The population was developed through a purposeful sampling of instructors or program administrators who are knowledgeable about the career program curricula offered by their centers. The final sample size was five cases (centers); Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommends a sample size of four to five for comparative case studies. There were 10 interview participants.

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

Qualitative studies need multiple sources of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to generate rich detail for interpretation. To provide data for an in-depth understanding of the programming and practices, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), this study included an online survey, documents (syllabi and course outlines), digital materials including website information for each center, and interviews. Once approval was
received from the Institutional Review Board from St. John Fisher College (Appendix A), to conduct the study, the researcher began developing the online questionnaire which was the first phase of data collection.

**Survey.** The online questionnaire, developed by the researcher and administered through Qualtrics, had closed and open-ended questions. The survey began with questions on center demographics and contact information for the person completing the survey. It continued with how soft skills are taught, who teaches the skills, how the content is developed, and what soft skills are taught (Appendix B). The 20 specific soft skills addressed in the survey were identified from the literature review and employability skills frameworks selected for the study. Appendix C lists the general areas and specific soft skills and attributes selected from the frameworks.

**Documents.** The documents reviewed included digital materials from program information on the centers’ websites. They also included syllabi and course materials provided by the interview participants whose centers offer specific soft skills courses as part of their programming.

**Interviews.** The semi-structured interviews were in depth and one-on-one, intended to create an understanding of attitudes, behaviors, and interactions (Crossman, 2019). This type of interview allows for participants to share their perspectives about their everyday world (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interviews provided more detail to expand on the data gathered about each center from the survey so that the researcher could compare similar data points from various centers.
Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

The participants were recruited through a directors’ association to which the researcher belonged. Data collection took place in several steps:

1. An e-mail request was sent to the directors of nine centers introducing the study and asking them to identify staff members with the knowledge to respond to a survey on soft skills design and teaching at their center (Appendix D). When no response was received, follow up e-mails were sent. Over the course of 3 weeks, six directors responded with names of individuals.

2. A recruitment e-mail was sent to individuals identified by the directors as able to provide responses that reflect the soft skills activities at the center. They were invited to participate in the survey (Appendix E).

3. A link to an online survey, which included closed and open-ended questions, was sent to individuals who expressed interest in participating. A consent form was embedded at the beginning of the survey (Appendix F). The survey included background information on the centers regarding students served, what soft skills were taught, how they were taught, and how courses were developed. A question regarding availability of course syllabi and other course information for centers that have a professional development or specific soft skill courses was also included. Eleven individuals were contacted and eight completed surveys over a 4-week period.

4. While data from the surveys were being collected, the centers’ websites were reviewed. The researcher searched for program descriptions and for content on soft skills. Data collection of website material was completed in 1 day.
5. The final step included semi-structured interviews of representatives of five sites. The interviews were conducted by videoconference using Zoom technology, with audio and video recording. The interviews had been planned initially to be in person or by video; however, the social distancing and restrictions on travel caused by the coronavirus pandemic prevented all in-person interviews. Ten participants were invited to participate and upon accepting the invitation, were sent the informed consent form, and scheduled for the interview. The consent form described the study, indicated that participants met the criteria to be interviewed, that they could exit the interview at any time, and had to give informed consent to be interviewed and to be recorded (Appendix G). The interviews began 1 month after the surveys were completed and took place over a period of 3 weeks.

The same set of questions (Appendix H) was used for each interview as a conversation guide, as recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018). At the beginning of each interview, the participant was reminded that the interview would be recorded and would be kept confidential. Noting that Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) had determined that a “well-conducted research interview may be a rare and enriching experience for the subject” (p. 35), the researcher took care to listen intently and guide the conversation with sensitivity.

Ten interviews were conducted; they lasted between 26 minutes and 42 minutes and averaged 30 minutes. The researcher took handwritten notes during the interviews related to answers, tone, demeanor, and attitude of the participants. Nine of the interviews were transcribed by Zoom software and the 10th by Rev.com, a transcription
service. The researcher downloaded the transcribed text and then checked and rechecked the transcripts against the video, audio recordings, and research notes, making corrections as needed.

**Data analysis.** The transcripts were read over and over, in keeping with Saldaña’s (2016) advice that coding well means reading and rereading, coding, and recoding. To make sense of the information, the researcher coded the data to develop themes; the type of coding used was dependent on the research questions and the related questions and answers, as also advised by Saldaña (2016). A priori codes were used for some questions, informed by the literature review. In vivo coding was also used to feature the voices of the participants; this is a group that does not have a great deal of research reflecting their thoughts and their voices are not generally included in the literature. Pattern, process, and values coding were used for some research questions as well. Only one level of coding was used most of the time, which was appropriate due the research questions themselves (Saldaña, 2016).

In the initial coding, sections of the transcripts were highlighted in different colors, including words, phrases, and sentences. A grid of codes was created on a handwritten chart, then organized into categories and themes and transferred to an electronic spreadsheet to create a codebook. The codebook was developed into charts for each research question that was answered by interview questions to illustrate the themes, categories, and codes.

Website content for the centers was reviewed for references to soft skills. Document review also included content analysis of syllabi, checking against the content of the employability frameworks and work profiles. The frameworks were developed
with input from adult education, business organizations, career and technical education, entry level employees, federal agencies, and workforce development organizations (NNBIA, 2014; NWRC, 2019; USDOE, 2012).

**Validity.** Data accuracy and credibility are important in qualitative studies. Data validity was ensured by utilizing various data sources: survey, web content, syllabi, and interviews. Member checking was employed by reviewing with interview participants, the information from interview transcripts to check for accuracy. Researcher bias was addressed by acknowledging the researcher’s background and interest in the study and in taking care not to allow personal bias to influence collection and analysis of the data (Crossman, 2019). The researcher piloted the survey and the interview questions with peers from adult training programs that were not part of the study. To determine intercoder reliability, the researcher also requested that another colleague code sections of data on several transcripts. The codes were compared and discussed and found to be consistent. The themes were discussed and both coders reached agreement on them.

To ensure reliability, the researcher documented in detail all the steps and all the procedures. Although qualitative studies are not seeking to be generalizable in the ways that quantitative studies are (Crossman, 2019), accurate and detailed documentation, as well as careful analysis, are necessary so that a study could be repeated based on the detailed procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Timmons & Cairns, 2010).

**Data management.** Wallace (2010) informs us that when conducting research, protecting the identity of sites and participants is important. Researchers must balance the value of publishing against revealing identifying information. Therefore, researchers must be careful throughout the study regarding maintaining anonymity of site and
participant information, and safeguarding data collected. Although this may prove challenging, the researcher must be ethical and be aware of the challenges that qualitative data collection poses (Wallace, 2010).

For this study, the researcher ensured that the identities of the centers and the staff members who participated were kept confidential. Participants and the centers have been identified by pseudonyms. Results from the survey have been saved in a password protected file. Additionally, the audio recordings and transcriptions of the interviews have also been saved in password protected files. Printed materials with identifying details are being kept in a locked cabinet to which only the researcher has access. They will be kept for 3 years as per the required guidelines of St. John Fisher College.

Summary

This chapter described the method used to conduct a qualitative comparative case study on teaching soft skills in adult learning centers in urban areas of New York State. The researcher used several data collection tools to determine how soft skills content is designed, delivered, and assessed in these centers. The tools included a survey, online materials, course content, and semi-structured interviews. The interviews provided instructors, advisors, and program administrators the opportunity to share their experiences and perceptions of teaching and advising in an adult education and workforce development setting. The results of the study are reported and analyzed in Chapter 4. The analysis includes a review of responses from the surveys; content analysis of website materials, syllabi, and course information materials; and the themes developed from the coding of the interview transcripts.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Soft skills are the knowledge, traits, attitudes, and behaviors that help employees navigate the workplace successfully (USDOL, 2012). They include communication skills, interpersonal skills, professional behavior, and critical thinking skills (Balcar, 2014; Robles, 2012). It has been noted that employers report that new graduates entering the workplace lack essential soft skills (Ellis et al., 2014). Therefore, since the goal of career or occupational training programs is to prepare individuals for employment, this study examined how adult learners in workforce development programs are taught the soft skills needed to gain and maintain employment. The qualitative comparative case study informed the researcher of the perceptions of instructors and administrators, by exploring how they determine what to teach, what skills they teach, and how they assess student competence in acquiring soft skills in certificate programs.

Research Questions

The study answered the following research questions:

1. What do instructors and program administrators think are the main soft skills needed for employment by adult career students enrolled in their training programs?
   a. How do the administrators and instructors determine the skills to teach? Are employers, advisory boards, industry, state, or federal standards involved in the development of a template or curriculum?
2. What are the ways in which career program students acquire or improve their soft skills?
   a. Is there academic, career advisement, and job development collaboration?
3. How do instructors determine or assess if students have acquired the soft skills or have met established competencies?
4. What best practices in adult soft skills training can be developed from these findings?

**Data Analysis and Findings**

The researcher used several data collection tools: a survey, web content, syllabi, and interviews, since multiple sources generate richer details to interpret (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Also, seeking corroborating information by collecting data from varied sources is one of the strategies to ensure validity of a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Survey.** The researcher sent surveys to employees who had been identified as having the knowledge to answer questions regarding soft skills teaching at their center. Eleven survey links were sent to six sites; eight staff members from the six sites completed a survey and one staff member started and did not complete the survey. The eight participants who completed the study included one instructor, two advisors, and five administrators. Based on the responses to the survey, the researcher selected five centers for the study and invited additional staff members to participate in interviews. Table 4.1 gives the background on the centers selected to be a part of the comparative case study.

The centers in the study are located in Western New York, Central New York, Lower Hudson Valley, and New York City. One center served fewer than 250 students enrolled in career certificate programs; two centers served 250 to 499 students enrolled in
career certificate programs; and two centers served more than 500 students enrolled in career certificate programs annually. Four centers offered six to nine career programs and one center offered more than 10 career programs.

Table 4.1

*Center Statistics: Programs and Enrollment in Workforce Development*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Center</th>
<th>Student Enrollment</th>
<th>Programs Offered</th>
<th>Programs of 100 hours or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortland</td>
<td>500+</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>10+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire</td>
<td>250-499</td>
<td>6-9</td>
<td>6-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonamac</td>
<td>250-499</td>
<td>6-9</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macoun</td>
<td>500+</td>
<td>6-9</td>
<td>6-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pippin</td>
<td>Under 250</td>
<td>6-9</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Pseudonyms have been assigned as center identifiers.

The centers offer a combination of short-term and long-term programs. Two centers offered one to five programs of 100 hours or more; two centers offered six to nine programs of 100 hours or more; and one center offered more than 10 programs of 100 hours or more. In addition to the career programs, the centers also offered academic preparation and other adult education courses. Table 4.2 shows the clusters of programs offered by the centers as determined from the surveys and websites.
Table 4.2

Center Statistics: Workforce Development Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Center</th>
<th>Allied Health</th>
<th>Business/Office Tech</th>
<th>Building Trades</th>
<th>Cosmetology or Barbering</th>
<th>Culinary</th>
<th>Security</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortland</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonamac</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macoun</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pippin</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Digital documents.** In order to determine what centers say about soft skills, the researcher analyzed the content of the websites of the six centers that completed the survey. The following terms were searched: soft skills, professional development, career services, and employability. The content analysis showed that the five centers selected for the case study had some related reference to soft skills on their websites. For example, one center’s career page noted that students would be helped with interview skills and soft skills training. A second center’s career readiness course described developing soft skills as well as the technical skills needed to obtain and maintain employment. A third center’s description of its certified nurse assistant (CNA) program included communication, listening, interpersonal skills, teamwork, and professionalism as skills to be taught.

One online student handbook referred to an employment-related workshop skills course designed to improve career readiness. The four areas referenced were given the acronym RISE: resumes, interviews, soft skills, and employment. The researcher’s
review of the websites established that soft skills and employability skills were considered important elements of student learning and work readiness preparation at the centers.

**Interviews.** The third method of data collection was through interviews. The researcher invited participants to complete the consent form in order to participate (Appendix F). Table 4.3 illustrates the relation between the interview questions and the research questions.

**Table 4.3**

*Interview Questions Aligned with Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Aligned Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From your perspective, what are the soft skills that students preparing for employment should be able to demonstrate to show that they are ready to work?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think that the skills that you mentioned are important?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your experience, are any of them more important than others? Why? Why not?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What input do employers or advisory boards have on the curriculum?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you give me some examples of how career students are taught soft skills at your center?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do instructors, career advisors, and administrators collaborate in designing or teaching professional development or work readiness curriculum at your center?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do your career programs have internships, practical training, or any other kind of experiential learning, and if so, how do they help students gain soft skills?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about any challenges that your center has in teaching and preparing students to develop soft skills that will help them to succeed in the workplace.</td>
<td>2,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well do you think your center is doing in preparing students to work well with others in the workplace in terms of working on teams, managing emotions, and negotiating conflict?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students come to your center with varying degrees of skills; how do you utilize your students’ prior knowledge and their own sense of self in preparing them for employment?</td>
<td>3,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should your center be doing more or less of anything in terms of soft skills training? What are those elements?</td>
<td>3,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that your career graduates are prepared to get and keep jobs?</td>
<td>3,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think that?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research participants. After the five sites were selected for the study, the researcher invited six of the survey participants and an additional four participants who were involved in student soft skills preparation at their centers to participate in semi-structured interviews. The 10 participants were nine females and one male: two were advisors, three were instructors, and five were administrators from student services or academic affairs. Table 4.4 gives a breakdown on the interview participants’ experience in their current roles and in adult education and workforce development.

Table 4.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Years in Current Role</th>
<th>Years in Adult Ed/Workforce Dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christina</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridget</td>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duncan</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marjorie</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>16 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyce</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>25 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>22 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>19 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arlene</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>20 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants.

The interview participants’ years of experience ranged from 1 year to 20 years in their current role, with an average of 7 years of experience. They averaged 15 years in
adult education and workforce development, ranging from 2 ½ years to 25 years of experience. The instructors had the most years of experience in adult education and workforce development averaging 21 years; the advisors averaged 11 years in adult education and workforce development, and the administrators averaged 12 years in adult education and workforce development.

**Research Question 1.** *What do instructors and program administrators think are the main soft skills needed for employment by adult career students enrolled in their training programs?* The responses from the first three interview questions provided the answer for Research Question 1. Upon detailed reading and rereading of the interview transcripts, the researcher selected the soft skills mentioned by the participants as important to teach. They were highlighted, coded, organized into categories, and then into themes. The coding process was performed in the following sequence. First, excerpts of what the participants said were coded using in vivo coding. Second, the codes were organized into 14 categories and four thematic areas. Third, pattern coding using frequency was used to determine which skills were mentioned most often. Saldaña (2016) described pattern coding as looking for repeated or consistent occurrences.

**Themes.** The four themes that emerged from coding for the first research question were communication, professional traits and behaviors, collaborating and working with people, and critical thinking and problem solving. Table 4.5 shows the themes, categories, and codes for the knowledge, traits, and behaviors that constitute the soft skills that participants considered necessary for students to demonstrate when seeking employment.
### Table 4.5

**Research Question 1: Themes, Categories, Codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Effective communication</td>
<td>Good communication, how to communicate, what to communicate, nonverbal, body language, tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Write professionally, email communication, resume writing, good grammar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>Open mind, importance of listening, active listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Phone etiquette, voice mail, delivering message, interviewing skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional traits and behaviors</td>
<td>Responsibility/ reliability</td>
<td>Show up for work, show up on time, call when absent or late, be proactive, take responsibility, manage time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Flexible, adaptable, able to cope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>Respect, demeanor, temperament, patience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manage self and emotions</td>
<td>Self-regulate, triggers, emotional intelligence, difficult people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>Appropriate and inappropriate behavior, professional conduct, appropriate dress, values and ethics, work ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating and working with people</td>
<td>Working with others</td>
<td>Manage conflict, manage relationships, talk things out, resolve conflicts, getting along with others, building teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Customer/client relations</td>
<td>Engage with clients, talk to the public, interact with customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking and problem solving</td>
<td>Understanding context</td>
<td>Understanding social situations, making judgements, situational awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making decisions</td>
<td>Prioritizing, appropriate decisions, thinking critically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Solving problems</td>
<td>Problem solve, think out of the box, deal with situations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Skills, traits, behaviors noted by participants as soft skills to teach.

*Communication.* Communication was the most commonly referenced theme; 80% of the participants mentioned aspects of communication as important to teach. The
categories included effective communication, writing, listening, and verbal skills. Other aspects of communication that were shared included appropriate business writing, telephone and e-mail etiquette, leaving messages, speaking respectfully, body language, and tone. Christina explained that “You should be able to write in a professional sense of being able to electronically communicate with potential employers.” Being able to communicate through various means and to different audiences, including coworkers and supervisors, was a common related theme. As Marjorie emphasized, “You don't interact with your boss the same way you interact with your friends."

**Professional traits and behaviors.** Seventy percent of the participants cited skills that fit into professional traits and behaviors as important to teach. The categories for this theme were responsibility and reliability, adaptability, attitude, manage self and emotions, and professionalism. Several participants addressed demonstrating professional behavior and having a positive attitude. Bridget noted, "Students need to conduct themselves in a professional manner in the . . . building, refraining from particular language or attitudes or behaviors that would be seen as negative in the workplace." Ashley stressed, "If you don't have a good attitude, nobody would want to work with you, especially employers in this day and age." Several participants described appropriate behavior, professional conduct, and appropriate dress as necessary to demonstrate in the workplace.

Responsibility and reliability were common related themes. Eighty-six percent of the participants who considered professional skills to be essential mentioned time, punctuality, attendance, absence, lateness, or time management, using phrases like “you can’t not show up,” “call when absent or late,” “show up on time.” Arlene affirmed that
for clinical sites: "Being at work on time is the number one problem." Ashley, Christina, and Maria reported that internship sites and employers complained about students not showing up or not calling in.

Similarly, 86% of the participants who considered professional skills to be essential mentioned aspects related to self-regulation and emotional intelligence, including “learning to de-escalate,” not take things personally,” “deal with difficult people,” and understanding “hot buttons and triggers.” Having a positive attitude was also frequently mentioned, with 57% of the participants including it, citing “respect and attitude,” and “positive and happy demeanor.”

**Collaborating and working with people.** Fifty percent of all the participants noted that collaborating and working with people were essential skills. The categories for this thematic area were working with others and customer and client relations. Working with others included resolving conflicts. Marjorie stated that "If you can't handle the conflict within the classroom, you really are going to face it at a top level when you get on the job." The importance of talking through disagreements was echoed by Christina: "You need to be able to talk things out in a way that you're not offending others, in a way that you are expressing how you feel, but you are not placing blame."

**Critical thinking and problem solving.** Thirty percent of all participants gave examples for critical thinking skills as the main skills needed in the workplace. The categories were understanding context, making decisions, and solving problems. Lydia gave several examples of understanding context. From her perspective, context matters, as people need to be aware that “They can’t bring all parts of themselves everywhere.” Marjorie’s important skills for the workplace were related to making decisions:
prioritizing, making appropriate decisions, and thinking critically. Duncan noted the importance of knowing how to act in different situations.

**Importance of soft skills.** In discussing the importance of teaching soft skills, Bridget, an advisor, noted, "Those are skills you won't necessarily be taught at work. There are expectations that you're expected to know how to do these things from the first day." Yet, as Christina, an administrator, emphasized, “The feedback that we were receiving from employers was that our students didn't have those soft skills.” In explaining how having competence in soft skills can place certificate students on a career pathway, Arlene, one of the instructors, indicated that she shared with her students that "If you have good soft skills, you don’t have to have that degree. It will get you in the door and then you can continue to work on that degree."

When asked if some soft skills were more important than others, 50% of the participants answered affirmatively. Sixty percent of those who said yes named communication as most important, with one participant specifying listening as the most important skill. Duncan explained, "Without listening skills, there's no understanding. When there's no understanding, there's no comprehension. When there's no comprehension, there's no agreement. So at the core of it, communication is key.”

Fifty percent of the participants said that not one soft skill was more important than the other. Joyce commented that “They are all important.” Christina agreed, “I would say that most of them are equally as important,” and added, “All those things come together to build a package, to build you as a marketable person.” Maria noted that it was like having a toolkit, saying that “All are important because there has to be a balance and based on situations, one still may be necessary while another may not be.”
Research Question 1a. How do the administrators and instructors determine the skills to teach? Are employers, advisory boards, industry, state, or federal standards involved in the development of a template or curriculum? The first part of this question was answered by survey responses and the second part by interview responses. Table 4.6 highlights the survey responses.

Table 4.6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Center</th>
<th>Employer feedback</th>
<th>Advisory board</th>
<th>Industry requirements</th>
<th>Education framework</th>
<th>Work readiness</th>
<th>Prepackaged pub material</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortland</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonamac</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macoun</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pippin</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. From survey answers.*

The most common response to determining skills to teach was from employer feedback, industry requirements, education framework, and work readiness content. Eighty percent of the centers indicated those four inputs; 40% of the centers selected advisory board and prepackaged published materials as contributing to the development of course content.
The second part of the research question was answered by the interviews. Most participants noted ways in which employers, internship sites, and advisory boards contributed to the curriculum. Table 4.7 illustrates the responses.

Table 4.7  
*Research Question 1a: How Employers, Advisory Boards, Industry Standards Contribute*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Information reported during participant interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Employer          | Courses were developed in response to employer and instructor feedback  
Employers wanted “quality” people they could retain  
Employers said students did not have soft skills  
Employers gave feedback on how students dress and conduct themselves at interviews  
The center has employer roundtables  
Employers give feedback at job fairs and employer breakfasts  
Employers give feedback when person recommended for hire has been fired  
Job developer works with the partners (employers) – share curriculum  
Discuss what will make students more marketable |
| Internship site   | Internship sites gave feedback on punctuality, student absences, and students not getting along with each other or supervisors on internship assignments  
The instructor talks with internship sites regarding expectations and problems to train for  
Internship sites provide input that classroom cannot duplicate |
| Advisory board    | The advisory board reviews programs  
The advisory board gives feedback on curriculum |
| Industry          | Human Resources and representatives from other agencies (including health care and manufacturing) conduct workshops for students  
Use feedback from industry experts to develop curriculum, based on the industry  
Use National Work Readiness Credential as guide |
| Regulations       | Some programs have state mandated internships and clinical rotations |

However, two of the participants said that they did not know how employers were engaged since that was taken care of by career services staff. One noted that she was unaware of any formal engagement with employers or advisory boards. On the other
hand, Marjorie, an administrator, noted that the advisory board at her center consisted of a mixture of people from education, vocational backgrounds, healthcare, and from the center’s administering college and that the board provided feedback on curriculum.

Christina, an administrator from another center, declared that "I think being able to get feedback and information from industry experts is extremely important when we develop the curriculum for our workforce prep or in general." Participants explained that they worked with employers and partners through round tables, job fairs, employer breakfasts, visiting internship sites, and followed up on students placed into employment. They indicated that employers and internship sites gave feedback on student punctuality, attendance, dress, behavior, and attitude at interviews and after placement in employment.

**Research Question 2.** *What are the ways in which career program students acquire or improve their soft skills* was answered by responses to the survey, from the interviews, and from a review of syllabi and course content. Table 4.8 indicates that students were taught soft skills through orientations, workshops, simulations, integration into class content, or through work-based experiential learning of internships and clinicals.

**Themes.** Table 4.9 illustrates the themes, categories, and codes on soft skills delivery developed from the interviews. The researcher used a priori codes based on the literature, then grouped the codes by similar or related meanings to establish themes. Using predetermined codes can assist in answering particular research questions (Saldaña, 2016). The themes that emerged from these codes were coursework, experiential learning, and student development.
**Table 4.8**

*Research Question 2: How Soft Skills are Taught*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Center</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Workshop</th>
<th>Simulation</th>
<th>Integrated into classes</th>
<th>Specific course</th>
<th>Internship or clinical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortland</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonamac</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macoun</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pippin</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Specific course refers to a personal or professional development related course with soft skills curriculum and grading criteria. Answers are from survey.

**Table 4.9**

*Research Question 2: Themes, Categories, Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coursework</td>
<td>Specific class</td>
<td>Customer service, framework, career readiness, human relations, workforce prep, job search class, student success class, developmental class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Workshop or orientation</td>
<td>Graduation workshop, workshop, seminar, orientation, professional development workshop, pre-program workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General class</td>
<td>Class practice, discussion, role play, presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential learning</td>
<td>Course based</td>
<td>In-house experience, simulation, simulation lab, scenarios, vignettes, role play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work based</td>
<td>Clinical, internship, practice, partnership, rotation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student development</td>
<td>Advisement</td>
<td>One-on-one, coaching, face to face, modeling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* From interview responses.

**Coursework.** Under the theme of coursework, there were categories for specific soft skills classes, workshop or seminar series, or general classes with soft skills integrated into the coursework. The specific classes had a set curriculum, with textbooks
and grading. The workshop or seminar series were offered pre-program, mid-program or at the end of the program. Joyce described some as “We have workshops in regards to professional development, phone etiquette, effective communication.” Soft skills were also embedded in general classes as class practice, discussions, role play, and presentations. Some activities were described as “happens on a daily basis in the classroom,” “we have a lot of open dialog,” “work on vision boards,” and “role playing scenarios.”

**Experiential learning.** The categories for the theme of experiential learning were course based or work based. Course-based learning was in classes, in labs, through participation, and simulation activities. One participant described having “classrooms that look like a nursing home or hospital.” Another described “a faculty-supported learning in culinary” where the culinary practice classes, “serve four meals a week.” Participants gave examples of class activities that included the following: doing case studies, watching vignettes, presenting findings, and preparing a customer service video.

Work-based learning was through internships, clinicals, and practical training at external sites. One participant referred to a weeklong clinical for nursing assistants and another to partnerships with clinics and hospitals. Christina mentioned that some programs have internships and clinical rotations that were mandated by the state. However, experiential learning was so useful that she indicated that “We've included an internship in our medical billing and coding program, because we felt that it was so important for them to get that hands on experience in the field in order to really be marketable.”
**Student development.** The codes for this theme were grouped into one category: advisement. Advisement is done by instructors, advisors, and administrators. Staff members meet with students one-on-one or in groups to discuss their performance, behavior, and career plans. This includes “one-on-one coaching.” They do face-to-face sessions as counselors “shape and mold.” One instructor noted, “When I work with my students, we work with soft skills.” An administrator included that “Social interactions are modeled by the faculty member.”

Student development is an ongoing process, addressed in various settings. Christina explained what she tells students when she mediates student disagreements and conflicts:

Come with an open mind to listen, not just hear, and to be quiet, quiet your own voice and your own thoughts while the other person is talking. So, when it is your turn, you have listened and you can respond based on that and not just what you wanted to say from the beginning.

**Course content.** Three of the centers in the study indicated that they taught specific courses on soft skills through professional development, customer service, work readiness, human relations, or student success courses. Table 4.10 illustrates the soft skills topics that were covered in the courses matched against the skills selected from the employability frameworks (Appendix C) as the main soft skills to be addressed in this study. The frameworks, developed by federal agencies, businesses, industry, and education, list employability skills by categories. For the purpose of this study, 20 categories were selected. The topics noted in the table are from modules and learning
outcomes listed in the course materials submitted to the researcher by interview participants.

Table 4.10

*Employability Skills: Soft Skills Taught versus Framework*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employability skills taught</th>
<th>Centers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal/people skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict resolution/negotiation</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer service/client focus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for others</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork/collaboration</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/professional attributes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability and flexibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing emotions and self</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility and reliability</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to learn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active listening</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical observation</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding written communication</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and organizing</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* M is Macoun Center, E is Empire Center, and P is Pippin Center. The topics reviewed were selected from syllabi and outlines provided by the centers.
In the three courses reviewed, Customer Service for Cosmetology students, Human Relations for Medical Billing and Coding students, and Student Success Strategies for various programs, textbooks were the main source material, supplemented by instructor-produced materials. The content analysis review of the syllabi revealed that each course included skills from the four thematic areas: interpersonal and people skills, personal and professional attributes, communication, and critical thinking. Macoun’s course included 50% of the skills listed in the framework; Pippin’s course included 55%, and Empire’s course included 75% of the skills in the framework.

The three centers reported teaching other soft skills courses or workshops in addition to the courses reviewed. Marjorie described one series as:

The first week of classes is totally built around speaker series, professionals in the field coming in to just tell them a little bit about what you're about to embark on. During the course of the program, they always will have somebody come back in and talk about a particular topic.

Christina’s center (Pippin) also had a pre-program workshop series. “We start that from day 1, from orientation. We give them workshops on communication skills, on resume writing and career services. We give them lessons on time management.”

Sharon’s center (Macoun) had workshops at the end of programs: “We've got workshops that they must attend for graduation. One is ‘choices matter’ where they're looking at what's important to you as you get out into that workforce.”

**Research Question 2a.** The research question *Is there academic, career advisement, job development collaboration* was answered from the interview responses. The researcher read and reread the transcripts and coded using process coding to
determine how the staff collaborated to design soft skills courses. According to Saldaña (2016), process coding is useful to reflect routines and actions. Table 4.11 shows the process of collaboration and the frequency of collaboration. In general, most participants indicated that there was a collaborative process; however, two participants stated that the collaboration between instruction and career services could be stronger in order to link the roles of the departments to student success.

The main types of collaboration reported were regularly scheduled meetings where staff discussed information, reviewed challenges and recommendations, and sought how to adapt based on student and employer needs. The participants in the discussion included advisors, career services staff, faculty, and academic affairs administrators. Staff met weekly, monthly, quarterly, or at other scheduled times.

Table 4.11

Research Question 2a: How Academic, Advisement, and Job Development Collaborate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff planning and working together</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Coordinating meetings, discussing changes, outlining needs, working as a team, sharing information, discussing challenges and recommendations, reviewing curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Career services and academics, chairs and faculty, career advisors and academic counselors, committee, departments, team, staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td></td>
<td>Weekly, monthly, quarterly, regularly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 3. How do instructors determine or assess if students have acquired the soft skills or have met established competencies? This research question was answered from a survey question as indicated in Table 4.12. All of the centers
reported course completion and program completion as methods of determining soft
skills acquisition. Two centers indicated employment as an outcome used to determine
soft skills acquisition; one center listed pretest and posttest, and certification as
assessments.

Table 4.12

*Research Question 3: Assessing Soft Skills*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Center</th>
<th>Course completion</th>
<th>Program completion</th>
<th>Pre/posttest</th>
<th>Certification</th>
<th>Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cortland</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonamac</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macoun</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pippin</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* From survey answers.

**Types of assessments.** The interviews provided more details on assessments used
including verbal quizzes, course grading, observation of classroom behavior, evaluation
of internship experience, student self-assessment, and direct feedback through one-on-
one meetings with students. Sharon, an instructor, described one method of direct
feedback as “Throw out some questions and have the students answer them in kind of a
gun fire, pop, pop around the classroom.” Another instructor had the students design
poster presentations to demonstrate a skill set. One administrator described internships
and clinicals as interviews. Joyce described her assessment as “We also have check
sheets; we assess our students on professionalism in the classroom. We meet with the
student, just like you would do an evaluation.”
Several participants mentioned speaking to students regarding their skills, abilities, and interests in one-on-one advisement sessions. In discussing whether their students were prepared for employment, Christina affirmed that "At the end of the day, our job is to get our students jobs." However, when asked if graduates were prepared for employment, 50% of the participants said yes, 40% gave a qualified yes, and 10% said no. Ashley stated that “We do solid training.” Maria, in speaking of soft skills, said, “We drill it and drill it but there’s so many things that interfere.” Lydia stated that most students were prepared, but that some would never get hired, and should be preparing just to navigate social relationships, while Arlene was adamant that students were prepared. “Absolutely,” she declared. Bridget, who said no, indicated that the students had a lot of issues and that the center could do a better job of preparing them.

**Center performance.** Interview participants were also asked to rate their centers’ performance on preparing students in three specific soft skills areas: working with others, managing their emotions, and managing conflicts. The ratings are shown in Figure 4.1. Two participants rated their centers as performing at 50%; one participant gave a rating of 70%; five participants rated their centers at 80%; and two at 85%.

Lydia noted that her center was not where she wanted it to be, saying, “We have all these little pieces . . . we haven't aligned the pieces." She added: “This conversation is in and of itself a wake-up call.” Christina and Marjorie both indicated that their students were grouped in cohorts and thus got used to working on teams, even though sometimes faculty and administrators had to intercede during disagreements. Duncan described his center, Cortland, as a “high producing institution” and that “Given the resources that we have, I think we do an outstanding job.”
Figure 4.1. Center Ratings in Teaching Specific Soft Skills

Research Question 4. What best practices in adult soft skills training can be developed from these findings? To answer this question, the researcher used values coding to develop the themes. Values coding reflects participants’ values, attitudes, and beliefs (Saldaña, 2016). The values that emerged were related to beliefs and attitudes regarding students’ abilities and motivation as well as staff commitment to teach and engage with students. The first set of codes referred to the attributes of adult student learners as described by the participants. The first theme that emerged was student barriers and stressors. The second theme was student background and experience. The third theme was staff effectiveness and the fourth theme was program factors. The themes, categories, and codes are illustrated in Table 4.13.
Table 4.13

Research Question 4: Themes, Categories, Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student barriers and stressors</td>
<td>Life challenges</td>
<td>Health, mental illness, personal challenges, housing, academic deficits, addiction, basic needs, disability, parole and probation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Lack of control, emotional challenges, barriers, no filter, abuse, trauma, struggles, mental wellbeing, resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Poverty, homelessness, food insecurity, transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Childcare, domestic issues, parenting, different roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student background</td>
<td>Prior experience</td>
<td>Education, work experience, life experience, persistence, Self-awareness, self-worth, motivation, professional conduct, desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of self</td>
<td>Self-awareness, self-worth, motivation, professional conduct, desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning style</td>
<td>Traditional learner, academic level, learn differently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff effectiveness</td>
<td>Preparedness</td>
<td>Skill set, collaboration, lack of communication, silos, training, motivation, preparedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Help students figure out, talk to students one on one, model behavior, advise students, acknowledge student strengths, build relationships, create safe space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program factors</td>
<td>Emotional state</td>
<td>Frustration, enthusiasm, being matter of fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Alignment, length of program, industry relevance, program delivery, course content, soft skills course, developmental course, assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Course related</td>
<td>Class size, program hours, curriculum, textbook</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Student barriers and life stressors.** This theme emerged from the participants’ descriptions of the various barriers that adult learners face. The barriers included life, emotional, and financial challenges, as well as responsibilities. Ashley, recognizing the difficulties that students faced, expressed her belief in their capability, noting: “So we
ask them to reach deep into their inside and pull out all of their soft skills.” Maria acknowledged that there were challenges in teaching due to the stressors in students’ lives. She commented:

I think the biggest challenge we have is ensuring that the students are persistent and staying with our programs. If they trust us and do as we say, great things are going to happen. But the biggest challenges, their persistence and sometimes, just life that will happen. And one of the biggest things we've encountered most recently is mental illness. Folks who literally are on medication. Some folks who have not been diagnosed or misdiagnosed, not going through with the treatment plan. And generally, it's because of their finances or their lack of resources or services. They got cut off. And I'll just put that in one word, poverty.

Bridget, an advisor, noted that when students are focused on their basic needs, like living in a shelter, it is difficult to talk about soft skills because they are not the priority for them. Duncan described student issues as including food insecurity, transportation, and access to daycare. Yet, he presented a positive outlook as he thought that his center was helping students to address the barriers: “I've watched that building change lives every single day and that makes me look forward to going to work every day.” On the other hand, other participants realized that some students do not overcome the barriers, as Ashley stated, “The students who are unable to keep their job or complete their internships are the students with the challenges that we talked about earlier on.”

**Student background.** Students’ background also influenced their learning. These categories included prior experience, their sense of self, and learning styles. As Lydia explained, "I don't want anybody to leave our door thinking that they're stupid and many
of their previous educational experiences have been such that they may think that."

Students are challenged by their current circumstances and their past experience. They may have “been victims of trauma” or are “on probation or parole,” or had a bad work situation, but have not processed their experience.

Christina described this as “So when we explain it to them in class, they're able to make sense between their experience in the past and what's happening now and what they're learning in class." In acknowledging the center’s commitment to working with students, Christina stated that they encouraged students that "No matter what, we are not giving up on them and they should not give up on themselves.” The motivation and encouragement was echoed by Joyce, who shared that “We do get a lot of that, where individuals are very appreciative because you know they've changed the way that they behave.” She reminded students that "You are not born with soft skills. These are learned behaviors." Students bring a mixture of skills to the centers. Sharon’s view on this:

Sometimes in my class, I'll have students have varying abilities and I can feel like some other students are impatient with that; they feel they know this and let's get it on and I don't want to tolerate this person.

Maria reported that students are encouraged to talk about their prior knowledge and work experience. Arlene approached her students with a growth mindset, believing that they were capable. She stated, “We find lots of ways to tell our students, "Yeah, you are knowledgeable. Use your knowledge and share it with others." She had them do presentations in class for the other students. In Sharon’s class, they discussed prior experiences including conflict, disagreements at work, and ethical behavior. Bridget
noted that “We do have a lot of students who come in who have the soft skills . . . they conduct themselves in a professional manner, they communicate, they’re proactive.”

**Staff effectiveness.** The theme of staff effectiveness was developed from three categories of codes: staff preparedness, staff engagement, and emotional states. Building relationships with students was key to advising and teaching them. That included having students talk about their background, as well as their “interests, desires, and goals.” Lydia said, "One of the things that I think our vocational faculty members are especially strong in is identifying the strengths and who the students are and identifying a pathway." Yet, she was also concerned about the preparedness of some faculty, as she also shared that “I do have faculty members that trigger students. I know it.” One administrator, Maria, dealt with this concern by paying attention to staff recruitment: “When I hire my people, whether classroom instruction or support, I have to be very cognizant of those biases and those behaviors that can harm as opposed to help.”

Joyce also noted the importance of the interactions between staff and students, saying that “How we react and how we communicate with those individuals can also help them to heal emotionally.” Several participants stated that the employees at their centers could also benefit from soft skills training, commenting that “The staff need to go through it as well,” and “Some staff members do not model professionalism for students,” or “It’s too bad we can’t do it for staff.” They expressed concerns regarding staff preparation, training, and attitudes.

**Emotions of staff.** This category was derived from the participants’ reactions and views expressed in the interview and through the researcher’s observations, a method supported by Saldaña (2016) for qualitative studies involving interpersonal relationships.
The researcher also reviewed the videotapes, paying attention to tone, voice modulation, and body language. The emotional states exhibited were identified as frustration, enthusiasm, and a matter-of-fact perspective.

Twenty percent of the participants expressed frustration either with staff or the programming, noting that staff were not being good role models. One participant noted a lack of alignment between advisors and instructors. Another observed that there was no standardization of expectations of what behaviors were required of students, which made advising students more difficult.

Forty percent of the participants exhibited enthusiasm. One participant spoke in positive terms, emphasizing the emotional aspects of preparing students, quoting a graduation speaker who referred to working with low income adults as “heart work.” Another displayed a sense of humor, saying that some students take longer to learn the skills and were surprised when they finally got it. She recounted a story of a student that she confronted about rolling her eyes:

I actually demonstrated her skills, so that every time I was approached as the instructor, I would roll my eyes, and she didn't even realize that she was doing it.

So that self-awareness, it was brought to her attention and she began to change it. A third participant enthused about the holistic atmosphere created at his center, where student professional conduct was expected and encouraged and there was a concerted effort to address barriers to student success.

Forty percent of the participants were more matter-of-fact in their delivery and discussions, explaining themselves in pragmatic terms. A participant described how she understood what her students were going through in adapting to online learning because
she was also struggling with her own online coursework. She spoke about grooming students and working with whatever skills they brought. She appeared to accept that adult students had issues to be tackled. Another of the matter-of-fact participants said that students have a lot of interference, but they can succeed. Both of these participants also remarked on students’ “openness to dig deep” and “to reach deep into their inside.”

**Program factors.** Two categories emerged for this theme: curriculum and program related. The curriculum related themes that emerged were alignment of coursework, course content, industry relevance, and program delivery. Participants reported that “we don’t align enough,” and talked about “keeping up with the changes, keeping up with what the employers need,” as well as “tightening up the soft skills curriculum.”

Duncan explained that short programs had less time for workshops and presentations and longer programs had more time. In addressing the difficulties of fewer hours, Ashley noted that “It's hard to teach a group of people soft skills in such a short time, so they can be a success.” Yet, students still have to be taught, as Marjorie described:

> For us to continue that whole goal of making people accountable to themselves, we have to keep training them in soft skills. We have to pay attention to the job market. We have to pay attention to the partners’ demands. That's key. That should influence what we do in the classroom.

Bridget also stated that there was not enough time to deal with students and teach them soft skills in orientation sessions. That situation created a false sense in students of their own knowledge. She described the situation:
Well, nobody said anything to me about it, so I must be good at it. No, we did not say anything because we don't have time to talk to you about that because we have to talk to you about a million other things.

Bridget reported that her center did not have a developmental class to teach soft skills. She stated that if they had a class, advisors would not have to address so many issues one on one. If she were to create a class, she would include communication in the workplace, business writing, e-mail and phone etiquette, help students develop emotional intelligence, and teach them about professionalism and expectations for the workplace, including resolving conflict. She expressed frustration with the lack of a specific course or class to teach soft skills at her center.

**Summary of Results**

This study used a qualitative comparative case study design to gain insight into how instructors and administrators define, teach, and assess soft skills development in adult learners in their training centers. The researcher used several sources to gather data: a survey, website content, syllabi and course content, and semi-structured interviews. The use of multiple data collection tools provided richer details for analysis, allowing for corroboration of the data, and also increasing the validity of the data.

Four themes which aligned with the literature were developed to designate the soft skills that were important to teach to prepare students for employment. They were in order of importance: communication; professional traits and behaviors; collaborating and working with people; and critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Three themes emerged for how to teach soft skills: through coursework, experiential learning, and student development. The main methods of assessing student competence in soft skills
were found to be course completion, program completion, and to a lesser degree, placement in employment. In terms of possible best practices to adopt in order to teach soft skills to an adult population, the themes that emerged were related to understanding the student’s life and background, staff engagement and effectiveness, and factors related to program and curriculum development. Chapter 5 discusses the relation between the findings and the literature, presents limitations of the study, and also provides recommendations for practice and for further research.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of the study on how adult learners enrolled in employment training programs are taught soft skills and how those skills are assessed. The results from the data analysis in Chapter 4 are discussed. In addition to reviewing the findings on teaching soft skills, this chapter also considers limitations of the study. Recommendations for best practices for teaching soft skills in adult workforce development programs and for future research are also provided.

Overview

To be effective in the workplace, employees need to be able to perform specific work tasks related to technical aspects of a job (hard skills) and to exhibit a set of general skills (soft skills) that are consistent across all jobs (Coffelt et al., 2016; USDOE, 2012). Employers say that they value soft skills; educators agree that they are important, but both groups appear to differ on the preparedness of graduates seeking entry level employment (Robles, 2012). Although there is no single definition of soft skills in the literature, there is concurrence that soft skills are qualitative in nature and involve a combination of knowledge, skills, traits, and behaviors (Balcar, 2014; Gibb, 2014; Robles, 2012).

Also, the literature establishes some broad areas of agreement on soft skills (Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Ricker, 2014; Van Roekel, 2012). One area of agreement is effective communication: writing and speaking, email, and phone use. A second area of
agreement is professionalism: acting responsibly and reliably, and behaving appropriately in a workplace setting. Another area of agreement is working well with others: being a team player and being able to resolve disagreements. A fourth area of agreement is managing oneself and one’s relationships, being emotionally intelligent, and being able to deal with different types of people. Lastly, thinking critically, solving problems, and being able to make decisions are also considered to be skills related to performing well in the workplace.

The majority of adult education and workforce preparation programs are certificate programs lasting from a few weeks to less than 2 years (USDOL, 2010), and the goal of the training programs is primarily to prepare unemployed and underemployed people for employment (Brown, 2015). Adult training programs are mainly supported by state and federal funding (Belzer & Kim, 2018; Greenstone & Looney, 2011) as part of the public sector plan to develop human capital and narrow the skills gap (Bishop, 2019; USDOL, 2017).

The purpose of the study was to determine how adult learners enrolled in employment training programs are taught soft skills, how they are assessed, and whether best practices could be determined from how the centers prepared students. The population studied was the staff of training centers in urban communities in New York State to gain insight into their perceptions of the importance of soft skills and how they are taught to their adult students. Research confirms that to provide effective training, programs for adults must take into consideration the adults’ backgrounds, experiences, and life responsibilities as part of the planning and program execution (Ayers et al., 2008;
Cummins, 2014; Knowles, 1973). Consequently, the study also considered the staff’s attitudes towards their adult students and their understanding of the adult learner.

The theoretical rationale for the study was learning frameworks. Learning frameworks define educational and industry expectations of outcomes or competencies (Travers et al., 2019). Three learning frameworks that described employability skills were used to compare the soft skills taught in the centers to those created by several consortia of federal agencies, industry, and education groups. In addition, the following learning theories were applied: Kolb’s experiential learning (Kolb, 2015); Bandura’s social cognitive theory in reference to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977); and the theory of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995; Mayer et al., 2004). The theories were considered in the context of adult learning, experience, and training (Knowles, 1973).

**Implications of Findings**

**Finding 1.** Research Question 1 addressed the main soft skills considered important for adult students to learn and demonstrate in the workplace. The literature informs us of many types of soft skills needed for employment. Robles (2012) lists integrity, communication, courtesy, and responsibility as the top four skills selected by some business executives. Carmochan et al. (2013) finds the top skills from another set of employers to be motivation, appropriate use of language, interpersonal skills, and managing emotions.

The findings indicate that from the perspective of the staff interviewed, the most essential soft skills needed for employment by order of importance were (a) communicating effectively, including writing, speaking, listening, using email, and phone; (b) exhibiting professional behavior, including being reliable, acting responsibly,
managing emotions, behaving appropriately; and (c) collaborating and working well with others, including working with coworkers, clients or customers, and supervisors. At least 50% of the participants referenced these three thematic areas.

Eighty percent of all the participants viewed students’ ability to write, speak, listen, and use e-mail effectively as critical to their eventual placement into employment and their ability to maintain the employment. The importance of communication as a central soft skill was consistent with the literature (Morreale & Pearson, 2008; Reinsch & Gardner, 2014; Robles, 2012) as it is well established that it is a skill that is viewed as highly desirable by employers. This is evidenced by Carnevale and Smith (2013) declaring that “Communication is central to the smooth operation of all work environments” (p. 495). As well, Clokie and Fourie (2016) have found that graduates who show high competency levels in communication increase their possibility of securing employment. Furthermore, Reinsch and Gardner (2014) as well as Patterson et al. (2012) have shown that effective communication is a key component to advancing on the job.

The ability to navigate the workplace effectively by understanding how to speak about difficult things is also a factor that influences workplace success (Patterson et al., 2012). The study participants cited that students need to be prepared to have specific conversations with their colleagues and supervisors. In fact, they noted that the students had to be ready to communicate well even before they obtained employment, as they had to use effective communication skills in their classes and in the job search process. This researcher is interested in how students relate to each other and has observed that
misunderstandings between students in classes and between students and instructors is often due to misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Professional conduct was a common theme that participants referenced throughout their interviews. Professional conduct included the ability to understand appropriate workplace behavior, speech, and appropriate attire. Since the adult training centers are preparing students for employment, there is emphasis on the importance of soft skills and how soft skills complement hard or technical skills. Both these skill sets are needed in order to secure and keep employment. To confirm this point, an advisor stated, “I would say, in a nutshell, the hard skill gets you in the door, but the soft skill helps you to be a success in that environment.”

Alic (2014) observed that among the most basic of the soft skills is being on time. This observation was echoed by 60% of all the participants who referred to showing up to work and showing up on time as expectations that employers and internship sites mentioned most in their feedback to centers. Notably, some participants stated that some jobs are more socially demanding than others, due to the higher level of interaction with people. For those jobs that require a higher level of interaction with people, collaborating and working well with others take on greater importance. Managing oneself, one’s emotions, and one’s interactions with others are ways to display competence in emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2001; Rode et al., 2017). This is especially important in jobs that require customer service (Mayer et al., 2004) and in industries where working with people in a team and understanding relationships are important.

Some of the jobs that students at the centers are preparing to enter which include, but are not limited to, cosmetologist, medical assistant, and certified nursing assistant,
have high people interaction. The interactions are with customers and clients, other employees, and supervisors. Other jobs that students are preparing to enter, such as building trades and welding, require fewer social skills, not as much daily people interaction, and are also majority male.

Several participants of the study emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence as they discussed demonstrating self-control, being self-aware, and understanding the nuances of people’s behavior, especially when dealing with those from different cultures and backgrounds. They reported that being able to handle the emotional aspects of the job was an essential factor in maintaining employment, which is consistent with the research that managing and negotiating relationships is important in the workplace (Carmochan et al., 2013; Ellis et al., 2014).

One of the emotional aspects of a job is dealing with disagreements and conflict. As Watson and Stanley (2018) explain, conflict is not a positive or negative thing, but because “our perceptions create our emotional responses” (Patterson et al., 2012, p. 109), learning to manage perceptions and emotions influence how people view and handle conflict. Being self-aware and culturally aware are factors that affect how people handle conflict as well (Watson & Stanley, 2018). Helping students develop their emotional intelligence helps them improve their communication, conflict management, teamwork, and leadership skills (Goleman, 2001). This is noteworthy because although the primary goal of workforce development is to gain employment, the secondary goals are job retention and advancement. Therefore, students who are emotionally intelligent will be better prepared to maintain employment and advance in their companies.
One of the reasons that this researcher was interested in the study topic was due to the observation that some students seemed to be easily triggered and lose the ability to self-regulate when they disagreed with others. How adults handle disagreements and conflict and whether they could be taught coping skills and different approaches is of ongoing interest and is dealt with every day in adult education and in the workplace.

**Finding 1a.** Research Question 1a examined how the participants determine the skills to teach and whether external assistance was used. Holland (2015) tells us that workforce development is a system consisting of the students in training, the educational institutions, and the employers; therefore, successful programs must engage all three groups, giving voice to all. Brown (2015) also notes the necessity for alignment between educators and local industry partners to develop curriculum and validate the skills taught to students.

The findings indicated that the centers work in partnership with employers and advisory boards to get feedback and guidance on skills needed in the workplace. Some programs, for example allied health and cosmetology, have mandated hours, clinical requirements, and customer service elements due to state or industry requirements. Two centers utilized the National Work Readiness Council’s Equipped for the Future Standards, one of the frameworks used in the study, to determine soft skills competency areas. Therefore, the section of the research question related to whether employers, advisory boards, industry requirements, or frameworks contributed to the curriculum of soft skills being taught, was answered affirmatively.

However, the centers had varying levels of engagement with employers, work-based learning sites, and advisory boards. The findings suggest that most participants
had some knowledge of engagement with employers, but several were unaware of how advisory boards functioned at their center and their relationship to curriculum development. The role of the participant at the center appeared to determine the level of awareness of the work of the advisory board and the relationships with employers.

**Finding 2.** Research Question 2 addressed how soft skills are taught at the training centers. The findings from the surveys and interviews exposed that the centers teach soft skills in ways that are congruent with the literature. These include in specific classes related to professional development, customer service, or career readiness; in workshop and seminar series (Ellis et al., 2014; Germaine et al., 2016); embedded in career related courses and in general courses; in simulation and practice in class (Minei, 2016); in work-based settings (Barnett, 2012; Lear et al., 2015; USDOL, 2014); and during career advisement (Murthi, 2014).

Experiential learning, one of the theories employed for this study, is indicated in the literature as an important method of teaching adults. Like Dewey (1916), Kolb (2015) informs us that teaching and learning should focus on the practical learning experience of the student. Gavillet (2018), discussed the importance of experiential learning as a theoretical rationale and notes that adults benefit from putting theory into practice; this may be accomplished through simulation or internship assignments. Furthermore, Carnevale and Smith (2013) confirm that soft skills are best learned through practice.

Simulation instruction, including interactive activities in classes and labs, allow students to refine their skills (Carter et al., 2018), learn from each other (Fewster-Thuente & Batteson, 2018), and have opportunities to work on real world problems (Gavillet,
Cosmetology practice labs, culinary meal service on site, as well as role playing and student presentations in classroom settings reported by the study participants, illustrate examples of the effective ways that the centers teach soft skills. These examples are also indicators of how learners actively participate in their own learning (NASEM, 2018).

This study confirmed that the centers all used forms of practical and experiential learning. Students participate in experiential learning in building trades, culinary programs, business programs, and allied health programs at the centers or at work-based sites. An administrator indicated an internal example: “We have a model office where students in our med sec [medical secretary] program are involved with doing work for other classmates, or faculty or staff.” In addition, she noted that work-based learning sites “provide input that classrooms cannot duplicate.”

Three centers reported offering standalone courses on soft skills. In a content analysis conducted by the researcher of a course syllabus from each of the three centers, it was determined that each course covered topics from the learning frameworks used in this study. Each course had elements from each of the four thematic areas of the frameworks: communication, professionalism, teamwork, and critical thinking. All of the syllabi included the following framework topics:

- conflict resolution and negotiation,
- teamwork and collaboration,
- managing emotions and self,
- responsibility and reliability, and
- critical observation, which included nonverbal communication.
Furthermore, the findings also revealed that soft skills were acquired through student advisement activities delivered in one-on-one coaching sessions by academic or career advisors. Career counseling and advisement sessions allowed advisors to coach students as well as to model appropriate workplace behavior. Some of the participants spoke of the importance of faculty and staff being role models as they interact with students; two of them used their own behavior as examples. One administrator noted, “I try to model with students,” and an advisor stated, “For me, it’s a lot of modeling.” This method was most successful as a reinforcement mechanism to seminars, workshops, and classes. However, this method could become overwhelming for the staff, an advisor observed, if it is a primary means of helping students develop and demonstrate soft skills.

**Finding 2a.** Research Question 2a examined whether different departments work together to set the soft skills curriculum. The findings indicate various levels of collaboration between academic areas and career services. In some centers, there was consistent and structured collaboration, in others a more informal approach, or on an as-needed basis. For instance, two participants from one center gave similar responses regarding regularly scheduled monthly meetings that included curriculum discussion, while two participants from another center spoke of having interdepartmental meetings, but one shared that soft skills discussion was more of a byproduct and not a main topic of discussion. The center that reported no formal discussion of soft skills also reported not having a specific soft skills course.

The findings suggest that participants who reported ongoing collaboration among advisors, instructors, and administrators were more connected to the designing of soft skills content. Although the research question was answered in the affirmative, the
collaboration varied from a low level of informal discussion to a high level of organized and planned interactions.

**Finding 3.** One of the concerns that appears in the literature on soft skills attainment is the difficulty in assessing whether the skills have been learned (Balcar, 2014; Murthi, 2014). Research Question 3 explored how soft skills learning is measured in the centers. In this study, the survey and interview addressed this question. The survey revealed that 100% of the centers selected course completion and program completion as measures. However, only 40% selected employment and only 20% used pre and posttesting. Since only 60% of the centers have specific soft skills development courses, it is not clear what is assessed in general course completion.

The interviews provided more details on assessment: by observation, direct feedback to students, student self-assessment, and staff evaluation of students. In addition, several participants also expressed that some students would never become employed due to other factors including the fact that there is no selective admissions process at the centers. Therefore, the findings suggest that employment placement was not used as a main measure of soft skill acquisition.

It is understood that students’ technical abilities are a major reason for job placement. For students who are engaged in work-based learning experiences, however, being able to show their soft skills in action can assist them in gaining employment. An administrator explained: “And I can't tell you how many of our students have [been] hired from those experiences and those soft skills is what they [employers] go to right away.”
**Finding 4.** The purpose of Research Question 4 was to determine what best practices of teaching soft skills to adults could be determined by the study. Research indicates that to teach adults effectively, the backgrounds of the students, how they learn, their current challenges, and their responsibilities must be considered (Cummins, 2014; Stevens, 2014). The findings indicate that the interview participants were aware of the emotional, financial, and other stressors that may impede student learning; they made multiple references to barriers that their students face. These barriers include academic and technology deficits, health challenges, housing issues, and the responsibility of caring for others.

At the same time, the participants were aware of the need to “create a safe space,” to “acknowledge progress,” to “give voice and agency” to the students, and to help students get to the next stage of their lives. This study also found that the participants addressed staff preparedness and engagement with students, emphasizing that the attitudes and beliefs that staff have about their student population can affect how they relate to the students.

The literature indicates that adults approach learning differently from children since adults are more experienced (Knowles, 1973) and that adult learners are most successful with instructors who understand them (NYSED, 2013; Stevens, 2014). Also, the values and attitudes of adult learners influence how they learn and relate to others (NASEM, 2018), as does their mindset (Dweck, 2000). This study found that participants identified factors in the students’ backgrounds related to the students’ prior experience, sense of self, and learning style that influence their capacity to learn. One advisor explained that “Students come in in many different places in their lives” and
recognized: “being mindful of what they bring with them through the door.” In working with students, another advisor reported, “We talk about not so much what they're coming in to learn but skills that they already have within;” while an administrator stated that “We talk about the different roles they play in their lives and how those intertwine in the world of work.” Another administrator focused on student motivation, “finding the underlying motivating factors,” as one tried to “tap into that hunger to get a job.”

Finally, the participants laid out program-related factors that influence how soft skills are taught at their centers. They described course content and delivery: specific courses or curriculum, the number of students in a class, the number of class or program hours, and whether textbooks and supplemental materials were used. They discussed the challenge of not having enough time or not having a set curriculum to follow. They also discussed relevance and alignment of the coursework to employment. Therefore, the research question regarding whether best practices could be identified was answered positively.

In summary, the findings revealed the following best practices in use at some centers:

1. Recognizing and understanding the students who are enrolled; their backgrounds, needs, approaches to learning.

2. Planning, organizing, and standardizing a soft skills curriculum.

3. Providing opportunities for the students to practice using soft skills in classes, labs, simulations, and work-based settings.
4. Collaborating internally with different departments and externally with employers, advisory groups, and local industry sectors to determine soft skills training needs and to adjust training as needed.

Further discussion of the best practices will be provided in the recommendations section.

**Unexpected finding 1.** Seventy percent of the participants rated their centers as doing well in preparing students to work on teams, manage emotions, and negotiate conflict; they gave their center a grade of B or better. However, in judging whether their graduates were prepared for employment, the results were mixed: 50% of the participants answered yes; 40% indicated more or less; and 10% answered no. Preparing students to be employable involves more than soft skill acquisition, and those who did not give a firm yes saw room for improvement in staff collaboration, alignment of goals between departments, and helping to remove barriers that prevent students from being successful. The participant who answered no indicated that her center did not have a dedicated soft skills course, nor a set curriculum for orientation and workshops.

**Unexpected finding 2.** The four participants whose reactions during the interview were coded as enthusiastic reported that their students were prepared for employment. Even though they noted student deficits, they spoke positively about their work and the collaborations at their centers.

**Limitations**

This comparative qualitative case study examined how training centers that offer noncredit certificate coursework for adult learners are addressing the development and the acquisition of soft skills for those learners. Data analysis indicated that all the centers
had some soft skills training in different delivery modes; with some more structured than others. However, there are some limitations to the study.

The study was designed to compare centers; a comparison of centers that offered specific soft skills courses or centers that offered the same career programs might have allowed for more direct comparisons. Moreover, the varying descriptions of soft skills found in the literature were also evident in the study; the participants considered a wide range of skills to be important, naming 24 different skills.

Another limitation was the gender disparity in the interview participants; there was only one male in the group of 10. Although the literature does not indicate a difference in perspective on soft skills between males and females, it shows that women predominate in jobs where people skills and social skills are valued (Borghans et al., 2014; Wyant et al., 2018). Therefore, additional male voices might have provided different perspectives on the relative importance of various soft skills.

Lastly, the researcher is employed by a training center that is part of the network of centers in the study. Although the researcher’s center was not included, a few of the participants have a tangential relationship to the researcher that could have influenced their responses and the analysis. Future studies by individuals with no affiliation to the centers could reduce potential bias.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The analysis revealed that there are several factors that should be considered in determining best practice recommendations for teaching soft skills in adult workforce development training centers. These include: (a) establishing student learning outcomes and assessments, (b) standardizing course content, (c) structuring delivery to incorporate
practice and reflection, (d) providing training and support for staff, and (e) ensuring collaboration and commitment from center leadership.

**Student learning outcomes and assessments.** The findings and the research confirmed that there are many soft skills that employers and educators believe to be important. Some of the skills may be more important due to the nature of the job, requiring more social interaction, or more written communication. Other generic skills are necessary for all employees to display in order to get along with others and demonstrate professional conduct in the workplace.

It is recommended that each training center determine the expectations for soft skills learning for all of their enrolled students, including those enrolled in career programs. Program administrators and career service staff should collaborate with employers and internship sites to determine expected behaviors and attributes that the employers seek. The Employment and Training Administration of the U.S. Department of Labor (2017) states that “Results show that workplace education developed as part of industry sector strategy can increase earnings among low-income individuals” (p. 11). This illustrates how vital it is for adult training programs to partner with employers and industry groups in developing curriculum. A coordinated strategy would benefit the students in training as they prepare to enter the workforce as skilled workers.

Additionally, besides the ones used in this study, there are various learning frameworks on employability skills accessible through federal websites, industry, and educational organizations that can inform what skills to teach and how to determine competency. They include the College and Career Readiness and Success Center, Pathways to Prosperity Network, and the U.S. Department of Labor. These resources
may be used to inform a set of student learning outcomes that can be employed for all students enrolled in adult education at a training center, or for students enrolled in career programs, or for the students enrolled in particular programs based on industry sectors.

It is also recommended that methods be developed to evaluate how learning outcomes will be assessed. Students can participate in the assessment of their learning; they should be incorporated into the discussions since judging one’s own capabilities (self-efficacy) and one’s view of oneself (self-concept) are useful aspects of adult training and career advising. The literature indicates that successful adult learners develop and grow when they have confidence in their own knowledge and abilities (Bandura, 1977; Dweck, 2000).

**Standardizing course content.** The findings reveal that some centers have specific soft skills courses while others rely on workshops and seminars to deliver soft skills content. It is recommended that all courses, whether they are included in program hours or not, be standardized in terms of curriculum so that all students in the same program are taught the same set of skills. This would include pre-program, mid-program, and end-of-program seminars. Further, creating a library of resources that all instructors and advisors can access would expand the primary and supplemental academic and career materials available. While it may not be possible to have a dedicated soft skills course in each center, not having a specific course on soft skills does not prevent soft skills teaching. Short-term programs can have soft skills embedded into general coursework, with a focus on the skills deemed essential to learn for successful employment for graduates of those programs. Scheduled, ongoing collaborations and discussions among staff would also support all who design and teach soft skills content.
Structured delivery. The research reveals several ways that soft skills can be taught, including through coursework, simulation, and experiential learning. The findings indicate that the centers utilize various delivery modes: workshops, orientations, courses, lab settings, class-based, and work-based practical experiences. It is recommended that all forms of delivery be structured, be related to the overall program content, and involve practical application and instructor and student reflection in order to enhance learning. Experiential learning, where students practice by doing, then reflecting on the actions, reinforces what is learned. Career counseling can also be a part of the reflection since experiential learning is an ongoing process.

Training and support for staff. The research informs us that staff who teach and advise adults need training in adult education in order to understand the needs of adult learners (Knowles, 1973; NYSED, 2013; Stevens, 2014). The study found that participants acknowledge the context and background of their training centers, serving students who are low income, unemployed or underemployed, and who have adult responsibilities and challenges, but they expressed varying levels of frustration with what they are able to accomplish. This researcher has observed that recruitment for the right fit for an adult environment, ongoing orientation and training of staff, as well as performance evaluations that help staff to develop skills that help them to be successful with the population they serve, aid to lessen frustration.

It is recommended that staff have ongoing training and professional development on adult learners in general, and in soft skills training in particular. There are many online resources to support adult education. For example, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career,
Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) are two resources that provide context for adult training and success. OCTAE provides technical assistance in aligning adult education and workforce development to industry requirements.

**Collaboration and commitment of center leadership.** The findings indicate that the leadership of the center has to set the tone, clarify the expectations, and decide what outcomes are important. Effective soft skills training occurs in the classroom as well as through other center events and activities. It is recommended that the leaders determine clear expectations for student behavior and staff performance, establish the requirements for placement into internships, and ascertain how soft skill assessment is related to preparation for employment or actual job placement.

The leadership also has to determine the expectations for collaboration among the various departments and communicate them clearly throughout the center since the staff members have different perspectives based on their own roles. Clarifying the responsibilities of academic affairs and career services staff in preparing students is also recommended. The center leadership should be responsible for creating an environment that supports the learning and development of staff and students. Therefore, tackling the soft skill development of the staff, including their modeling of appropriate workplace behavior, is also recommended.

**Recommendations for Future Study**

Assessing soft skills gain is still an area of research that is not well developed, partially due to the fact that soft skills are qualitative in nature. Future recommendations for studies include developing a survey instrument that can be utilized to pretest and posttest students enrolled in soft skills courses. Also, a study that examines the
perceptions of the educators, graduates of the programs, as well as employers who have hired from the centers would include the voices of additional stakeholders, expanding the perspectives considered. Incorporating a better balance of male versus female participants would also widen the perspective.

This qualitative comparative case study found that effective communication was a major theme as a soft skill considered essential for employment. It also found that practical learning through internships and clinicals provide opportunities for adults to learn and demonstrate effective soft skills. The current coronavirus pandemic has caused many programs to transition to distance learning. In addition, job interviews are being conducted more often through mediated communication, both audio and video. In-person internships and clinical experiences are on pause as programs consider the design of work-based learning which may include more simulated and virtual experiences.

All of these changes provide possibilities for further research, including investigating how the novel coronavirus has affected the delivery of soft skills training in career and technical education. Further recommended areas of study include the impact of mediated communication: e-mails, voicemail, audio, and video communication on in-person communication. Transitioning to e-internship (virtual internships) as a form of work-based learning, is another potential topic to investigate as well.

**Conclusion**

Research on soft skills has focused on high school and college graduates. Although employers, educators, and policy makers want to have a well-trained skilled workforce (Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Robles, 2012), there is little information on adult students enrolled in workforce training programs. Therefore, to address this gap, this
study investigated how training centers approach designing, teaching, and assessing soft skill development in adult learners.

Students enrolled in adult education tend to be low income, unemployed, or underemployed. They need training or certification so that they can improve their prospects for employment and economic advancement. Research indicates that having soft skills in addition to hard or technical skills enhances their employability (Coffelt et al., 2016; USDOE, 2012). Also, adults who gain skills beyond a high school diploma are likely to have an increased lifetime earning potential (Kim & Tamborini, 2019).

The context of the study was a network of training centers in urban communities throughout New York State. The centers offer adult academic education and workforce development training funded by the state government. The population was comprised of instructors, advisors, and program administrators at the centers. The instruments of data collection were a survey, website content, syllabi, and semi-structured interviews. The interviews had open-ended questions and were conducted by video. Eight participants from six centers completed the surveys and 10 participants were interviewed from the five centers selected for the case study.

The results of the study showed that the interview participants were able to define what they thought were the soft skills essential for employment. The skills were aligned with the literature regarding communication, professional behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and critical thinking as essential soft skills (Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Ricker, 2014; Robles, 2012). The participants provided examples of internal collaboration with other departments and external collaboration with employers, work-based learning sites, and advisory boards to determine what skills were important to
teach. The skills they identified were taught in ways supported by the research: through coursework, simulation, and experiential learning (Ellis et al., 2014; Germaine et al., 2016, Murthi, 2014). The participants also exhibited an awareness of the challenges faced by adult learners in terms of their background, experiences, and current situations, although some participants did not think that all of their colleagues were prepared or properly supported to handle those challenges.

A set of best practices was identified and recommendations made on how to implement them. The recommended best practices include using industry input to develop student learning outcomes around soft skills acquisition; streamlining and standardizing curriculum content and delivery, including allowing time for practice and reflection; supporting staff training and development; and ensuring the collaboration and commitment of center leadership to establish and enact institution-wide expectations.

The results also identified areas for further study. These areas include conducting research to measure the skill acquisition of students enrolled in dedicated soft skills courses. Additionally, a study that expands the population by adding the perceptions of graduates and the employers who hire the center graduates and having a better balance of male versus female voices would amplify the voices of more stakeholders. A third area of potential study is to investigate the use of mediated communication; that is, the use of technology supported communication, compared to in-person communication. Lastly, a study of transitioning to e-internship or virtual internship experience could be explored. The last two recommended areas to study relate to the effect of the shift to distance learning created by the novel coronavirus and its impact on teaching soft skills in career and technical education.
It is hoped that the findings from this study will add to the body of knowledge on the essential soft skills needed by adult learners preparing for employment and on approaches to teaching them. The recommendations for best practice can be used by administrators and faculty at adult workforce development centers to enhance their programming of soft skills. To do so successfully, the staff must keep in mind that they cannot teach every soft skill that employers may think of as being important (Clokie & Fourie, 2016); however, they could determine what is of most importance for their center, or for individual programs by engaging employers in various industry sectors in their local or regional areas.

Understanding who their students are, how they learn, and the types of activities that will help them to learn, will assist in the overall planning of soft skills programming. Including the students in the assessment of their own skills would help to increase the students’ level of self-efficacy and assist in their development and preparation for the workplace. Employing interactive techniques using simulations and virtual tools, can also extend the opportunities for students to practice and reflect on their learning.

All the research questions in this study were answered. The participants agreed that soft skills are important for their adult students to learn. They expressed that their students preparing for employment will be more successful if they can communicate effectively, relate well to others, exercise self-control, and exhibit professional conduct in the workplace. They reported that their centers are teaching soft skills at varying levels of success and showed that some of them were using industry requirements, learning frameworks, and employer engagement to determine what to teach. Finally, the
participants who reported solid internal and external collaboration on soft skills teaching appeared to rate their center performance more highly than those who did not.
References


Belzer, A., & Kim, J. (2018). We are what we do: Adult basic education should be more than employability. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 61*(6), 603-608.


Greene, J. O. (2009). Communication skills theories. In S. Littlejohn, K. Foss (Eds.), *The encyclopedia of communication theory* (pp. 136-139). doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959384.n54


Dear Jacinth:

Thank you for submitting your research proposal to the Institutional Review Board. I am pleased to inform you that the Board has approved your Expedited Review project, “Employability – A Comparative Case Study Examining Teaching Soft Skills in Employment Focused Certificate Programs for Adult Learners”.

Following federal guidelines, research related records should be maintained in a secure area for three years following the completion of the project at which time they may be destroyed.

Should you have any questions about this process or your responsibilities, please contact me at irb@sjfc.edu.

Sincerely,

Eileen Lynd-Balta, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

ELB: jdr
Appendix B

Survey

About your institution
1. What is the name of your center?
2. How many career (vocational) students does your center enroll annually (July to June)?
   a. 1-249
   b. 250-499
   c. 500-999
   d. 1000 and more
3. What are the career clusters at your center? Check all that apply
   a. Allied Health
   b. Building Trades and Construction
   c. Business and Office Technology
   d. Computer technology
   e. Culinary or Hospitality
   f. Industrial
   g. Security
   h. Other________________
4. How many career programs do you have that are 100 hours or longer?
   a. 0
   b. 1-5
   c. 6-10
   d. More than 10

About you
5. What is your name?
6. Please write your email address
7. What is your position at the center?
   a. Instructor
   b. Advisor
   c. Administrator
8. Please list your work telephone number

Soft skills are defined as the communication skills, interpersonal relations, critical thinking skills, and personal and professional attributes that employers say are needed by employees to be successful in the workplace.
9. Does your center teach soft skills? Yes or no
10. How is soft skills taught in your center? Check all that apply
   a. Specific course (professional development, work readiness skills, etc)
   b. Workshops or seminar series
   c. Embedded in career program courses
   d. Integrated into general curriculum courses
   e. Course-based experiential or simulation activities
   f. Work-based experiential (internship, practicum, clinical)
   g. Other ________________________

11. Who developed the curriculum? Check all that apply
   a. Course instructor
   b. Administrator
   c. Career services professional
   d. Commercial product
   e. Accessed from educational or industry site
   f. Other ______________________

12. How was course content developed? Check all that apply
   a. Employer input
   b. Advisory board input
   c. Industry requirements
   d. Educational framework
   e. Work readiness content
   f. Pre-packaged published material
   g. Other ______________________

13. Who teaches soft skills curriculum at your center?
   a. Instructors
   b. Advisors
   c. Career services professionals
   d. All the above
   e. Other ______________________

14. What materials are used to teach soft skills at your center? Check all that apply
   a. Textbook
   b. Supplemental materials created by the Center
   c. Online program
   d. Other ______________________

15. Are all career students required to participate in soft skills training? Yes or No

16. If some career students are required to take soft skills training, which programs are they in? ______________________

17. How is soft skill training competency measured at your center? Check all that apply
   a. Course completion
   b. Certification
   c. Pre/posttest
   d. Program completion
c. Employment
f. Other _________________

18. Do the staff at your center talk about the importance of soft skills? Yes or No

19. When do you talk about soft skills? Check all that apply
   a. We don’t talk about it
   b. During program development
   c. Faculty meetings
   d. Advisory board meetings
   c. With employers
   f. Other _________________

20. Based on your knowledge of your center’s offerings, please indicate if the following soft skills are being taught or addressed in career programs at your center.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soft Skills</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict resolution/negotiation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer service/client focus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork/collaboration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability and flexibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing emotions and self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility and reliability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to learn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active listening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical observation/nonverbal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding written communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and organizing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please include any comments you have on soft skill teaching, delivery, or preparation at your center.

If soft skills programming is taught at your center, please email the researcher any course outline, syllabi or link to online materials or any other presentation materials that you think might relate to the study. Of interest are the topics, assignments, assessments, and course hours. Please email Jacinth Hanson at jh07899@sjfc.edu.

Thank you.

Will you be sending materials to the researcher?
   a. Yes or b. No
Appendix C
General Employability Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employability skills</th>
<th>ESF</th>
<th>CES</th>
<th>WRP</th>
<th>Soft skills included in survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal/people skills</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict resolution/negotiation</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer service/client focus</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for others</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork/collaboration</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal/professional attributes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability and flexibility</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing emotions and self</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility and reliability</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to learn</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active listening</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical observation</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding written communication</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal communication</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Critical thinking</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and organizing</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Applied knowledge/applied skills</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Using systems and resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing time and resources</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding and using information</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding and using systems</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding and using technology</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix D

Recruitment Email to Training Center Directors

Dear Director:

I am pleased to inform you that I will be conducting a study on soft skills development in adult students enrolled in workforce development. My dissertation topic is “Employability – A Comparative Case Study Examining Teaching Soft Skills in Employment Focused Certificate Programs for Adult Learners.” For the purpose of the study, soft skills are defined as the communication skills, interpersonal relations, critical thinking skills, and personal/professional attributes that employees need to gain and keep employment.

The design of the study is to gather qualitative data on what is taught as soft skills programming, how it is taught, and how student learning is assessed in adult training centers. Data will be collected in several stages: through a survey to each center, follow up interviews with staff from some centers, and through a review of syllabi and any other program content that is made available.

Please note that the neither the centers nor the individuals who participate will be identified publicly. All individuals who agree to participate will be asked to indicate their consent and will be able to withdraw from the study at any time.

I need your help to gather data from your center. Please identify individuals who are knowledgeable about students enrolled in career programs and soft skills curriculum design and teaching in career programs at your center. It could be you, a program administrator, department head, a lead instructor or career services administrator. Please send me the names, titles, and contact information of two to three people, including email and phone number so that I can invite them to complete the online survey.

Please see attached letter of support for the study from ______________________________________.

Thank you for your assistance. Please contact me if you have any questions. You may also contact my chairperson, Dr. Anthony Chiarlitti, Visiting Assistant Professor at ________ or email a chiarlitti@sjfc.edu.

Regards,

Jacinth Hanson
St. John Fisher College Doctoral Candidate
Jh07899@sjfc.edu

Attachment
Appendix E

Letter of introduction to participants

Dear _____________

My name is Jacinth Hanson. I am a doctoral candidate at St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY.

I am conducting a dissertation study to determine how soft skills programming is designed and taught at centers that enroll adults in workforce training programs. For the purpose of this study, soft skills are defined as the communication skills, interpersonal relations, critical thinking skills, and personal and professional attributes that employers say are needed by employees to be successful in the workplace.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you were identified as someone who is knowledgeable about the design, teaching or delivery of soft skills programming or content at your center.

Please note that the neither the centers nor the individuals who participate will be identified publicly. All individuals who agree to participate will be asked to indicate their consent and will be able to withdraw from the study at any time. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College and has the support of the ____________________________________________________________________________

Data will be collected in several stages: through a survey to each center, follow up interviews with staff from some centers, and through a review of syllabi and any other program content that is made available. The online survey will be no longer than 30 minutes and interviews will last approximately 60 minutes.

I am checking with you to see if you are interested in participating. If you indicate that you are interested, I will send you the link to the survey, which includes a section that allows you to give your consent to participate. If you are invited to participate in the follow up interviews, you will receive a separate consent form before the interview.

The final results of the study will be shared with all individuals and the centers that participate. We hope that your participation in the study will add knowledge about adult learning in certificate programs and provide some best practices regarding teaching soft skills to students who may face academic and career challenges.

Thank you.
Appendix F
Informed Consent Form - Survey

St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board

Statement of Informed Consent for Adult Participants - Survey

Employability - A Comparative Case Study Examining Teaching Soft Skills in Employment Focused Certificate Programs for Adult Learners

SUMMARY OF KEY INFORMATION:
- You are being asked to be in a research study about soft skills acquisition by adult students. As with all research studies, participation is voluntary.
- The purpose of this study is to examine the soft skills adult workforce development programs teach in their career training programs and how those skills align with employability frameworks that establish the skills employees need to get and keep a job.
- Approximately 10-30 people will take part in this study. The results will be used for a dissertation study to complete the requirements for a doctoral program.
- We believe this study has no more than minimal risk. Participants will be asked to complete an online survey and/or be interviewed about teaching soft skills.
- If you participate, you will be required to complete an online survey about soft skill curriculum and preparation at your center. You may also be invited to participate in an interview to cover in more detail your perceptions of how adults learn soft skills and what challenges may exist at your center in teaching soft skills.
- The survey will last approximately one half hour. You may be contacted for follow up questions for clarification after the initial contact. The study should be completed within six months of the initial contact.
- You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study will add knowledge about adult learning in certificate programs and provide some best practices regarding teaching soft skills to students who may face academic and career challenges.

DETAILED STUDY INFORMATION (some information may be repeated from the summary above):

You are being asked to be in a research study of soft skills development in adult learners enrolled in noncredit certificate training programs. This study is being conducted online, at the participant work
site (multiple) or by video. This study is being conducted by Principal Investigator Jacinth Hanson. Dissertation chair is Dr. Anthony Chiarlitti in the Ed.D. Program at St. John Fisher College.

You were selected as a possible participant because you were identified as someone who is knowledgeable about the design, teaching or delivery of soft skills programming or content at your center.

Please read this consent form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

PROCEDURES:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

You will be asked to complete an online survey of approximately one half hour to describe how soft skills or professional development are taught at your site, including how content is determined, and how students are assessed. You may be contacted with follow up questions to clarify your responses.

COMPENSATION/INCENTIVES:

You will not receive any compensation or incentive to participate.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

The records of this study will be kept private and your confidentiality will be protected. In any sort of report the researcher might publish, no identifying information will be included.

Identifiable research records will be stored securely and only the researcher(s) will have access to the records. All data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s office or on a password-protected laptop by the investigator. All study records with identifiable information, including approved IRB documents, tapes, transcripts, and consent forms, will be destroyed by shredding and/or deleting after 3 years.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Participation in this study is voluntary and requires your informed consent. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. John Fisher College or with your Center. If you decide to participate, you are free to skip any question that is asked. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

CONTACTS, REFERRALS AND QUESTIONS:

The researcher conducting this study: Jacinth Hanson. If you have questions, you are encouraged to contact the researcher at __________ or jh07899@sjfc.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s chairperson, Dr. Anthony Chiarlitti, Assistant Professor, ___________, achiarlitti@sjfc.edu.

The Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study/or if you feel that your rights as a participant (or the rights of another participant) have been violated or caused you undue distress (physical or emotional distress), please contact the SJFC IRB administrator by phone during normal business hours at _____________ or irb@sjfc.edu.
“Electronic Consent for online survey”

Clicking on the “Agree” button below indicates that:

- I have read the above information.
- I voluntarily agree to participate.
- I am at least 18 years of age.

If you do not wish to participate in the study, please decline participation by clicking on the “Disagree” button below.”

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree
Appendix G

Informed Consent Form - Interviews

St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board

Statement of Informed Consent for Adult Participants - Interviews

Employability - A Comparative Case Study Examining Teaching Soft Skills in Employment Focused Certificate Programs for Adult Learners

SUMMARY OF KEY INFORMATION:

- You are being asked to be in a research study about soft skills acquisition by adult students. As with all research studies, participation is voluntary.
- The purpose of this study is to examine the soft skills adult workforce development programs teach in their career training programs and how those skills align with employability frameworks that establish the skills employees need to get and keep a job.
- Approximately 10-30 people will take part in this study. The results will be used for a dissertation study to complete the requirements for a doctoral program.
- We believe this study has no more than minimal risk. Participants will be asked to complete an online survey and/or be interviewed about teaching soft skills.
- If you agree to take part in this study, you will participate in an interview for approximately one hour to find out your perceptions of how adults learn soft skills and what challenges may exist at your center in teaching soft skills. You may be contacted for follow up questions for clarification after the initial interview. The study should be completed within six months of the initial contact.
- You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study will add knowledge about adult learning in certificate programs and provide some best practices regarding teaching soft skills to students who may face academic and career challenges.
DETAILED STUDY INFORMATION (some information may be repeated from the summary above):
You are being asked to be in a research study of soft skills development in adult learners enrolled in noncredit certificate training programs. This study is being conducted online, at the participant work site (multiple) or by video. This study is being conducted by Principal Investigator Jacinth Hanson. Dissertation chair is Dr. Anthony Chiarlitti in the Ed.D. Program at St. John Fisher College.

You were selected as a possible participant because you were identified as someone who is knowledgeable about the design, teaching or delivery of soft skills programming or content at your center.

Please read this consent form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

PROCEDURES:
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

You will be asked to participate in an interview of approximately one hour. During interview sessions, participants will be asked to provide in depth responses to understand their perceptions on the importance of soft skill development for students. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Participants may be contacted to clarify their answers after the transcription or during analysis of data.

COMPENSATION/INCENTIVES:
You will not receive any compensation or incentive to participate.

CONFIDENTIALITY:
The records of this study will be kept private and your confidentiality will be protected. In any sort of report the researcher might publish, no identifying information will be included.
Identifiable research records will be stored securely and only the researcher(s) will have access to the records. All data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s office or on a password-protected laptop by the investigator. All study records with identifiable information, including approved IRB documents, tapes, transcripts, and consent forms, will be destroyed by shredding and/or deleting after 3 years.
Only the researcher will have access to identifying information for any recordings. Recordings will be erased after 3 years.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:
Participation in this study is voluntary and requires your informed consent. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. John
Fisher College or with your Center. If you decide to participate, you are free to skip any question that is asked. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

CONTACTS, REFERRALS AND QUESTIONS:

The researcher conducting this study: Jacinth Hanson. If you have questions, you are encouraged to contact the researcher at _________ or jh07899@sjfc.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s chairperson, Dr. Anthony Chiarlitti, Assistant Professor, __________, achiarlitti@sjfc.edu.

The Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study/or if you feel that your rights as a participant (or the rights of another participant) have been violated or caused you undue distress (physical or emotional distress), please contact the SJFC IRB administrator by phone during normal business hours at _________ or irb@sjfc.edu.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT:

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understood the above information. I consent to voluntarily participate in the study.

Signature:________________________________________ Date: _________________

Signature of Investigator:____________________________  Date: __________________

I agree to be audiorecorded/transcribed    ____ Yes    ____No  If no, I understand that the researcher will take detailed notes of my answers and may follow up for clarification.

Signature:________________________________________ Date: _________________

Signature of Investigator:___________________________  Date: __________________

Please keep a copy of this informed consent for your records.
Appendix H

Interview questions

Thank you for meeting with me. This interview is being recorded and will be kept confidential.

The purpose of the interview is to hear the perceptions of instructors and administrators about the teaching of soft skills to adults enrolled in career programs. Soft skills are the skills, traits, attitudes, and behaviors that help employees navigate the workplace successfully. For the purpose of this study, soft skills are defined as the communication skills, interpersonal relations, critical thinking skills, and personal and professional attributes that employers say are needed by employees in the workplace.

Do you have any questions?

Background information

1. What is your role at the center?
2. How long have you been in that role?
3. Tell me a little about your experience in adult education and in workforce development

Interview questions

1. From your perspective, what are the soft skills that students preparing for employment should be able to demonstrate to show that they are ready to work?
2. Why do you think that the skills that you mentioned are important?
3. In your experience, are any of them more important than others? Why? Why not?
4. Can you give me some examples of how career students are taught soft skills at your center?
5. What input do employers or advisory boards have on the curriculum?
6. How do instructors, career advisors, and administrators collaborate in designing or teaching professional development or work readiness curriculum at your center?
7. Do your career programs have internships, practical training, or any other kind of experiential learning, and if so, how do they help students gain soft skills?
8. Students come to your center with varying degrees of skills; how do you utilize your students’ prior knowledge and their own sense of self in preparing them for employment?
9. Tell me about any challenges that your center has in teaching and preparing students to develop soft skills that will help them to succeed in the workplace
10. How well do you think your center is doing in preparing students to work well with others in the workplace in terms of working on teams, managing emotions, and negotiating conflict?
11. Should your center be doing more or less of anything in terms of soft skills training? What are those elements?
12. Do you think that your career graduates are prepared to get and keep jobs? Why do you think that?

Thank you.

Is there anything else that you would like to add before we conclude?

I may have to follow up with you at a later time to clarify some of your answers. Is that okay?

When the study is completed, the results will be shared with each center that participated. The centers and the participants will not be identified.