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COLLABORATION AND RETENTION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF  
THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FACULTY IN CAREER AND TECHNICAL  
EDUCATION

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By  
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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of Creighton University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in  
Interdisciplinary Leadership

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Omaha, NE  
April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2026

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## Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine how collaboration between student support and instructional services in higher education impacts retention in career and technical education programs. The literature review highlights foundational theories in student development, student engagement, and student involvement that inform retention-focused student service departments' work. Theories on career and technical education, student success, and faculty involvement are also highlighted as contributing factors influencing retention rates and driving the work of instructional service departments. While research confirms the significant role of both departments in retention, the importance of their collaboration remains largely unaddressed. This study used a phenomenological qualitative research methodology and included interviews with career and technical education faculty who shared their lived experiences of collaboration with student support services. Findings from the study highlighted the main themes of the siloed experience, skill-based definitions of success, and external barriers. Proposed solutions included identifying a shared understanding of the problem, articulating goals and responsibilities, redefining success metrics, and integrating CTE success teams.

*Keywords:* collaboration, career and technical education, retention, student success, adaptive leadership

## Dedication

To my parents, whose belief in me and encouragement have shaped my journey. Your example and the values you instilled-especially the transformative power of education- have guided me every step of the way. I also dedicate this work to the students pursuing career and technical education. Your resilience in overcoming barriers, your remarkable work ethic, and your inquisitive spirit are a constant source of inspiration. May your determination and curiosity continue to open doors and create brighter futures.

## Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to the many individuals and organizations who have supported me throughout this dissertation journey. I want to express my sincere appreciation to my dissertation chair, Dr. Donnette Noble, for her guidance, encouragement, and expertise throughout this process. I am thankful for the camaraderie and support of Cohort 57. Sharing this journey with such a dedicated and inspiring group has been a privilege. To all my colleagues who supported this research and work tirelessly to support students, their passion and dedication are truly admirable. A special thank you to Haley Hegeman for her kindness, encouragement, and support. I am also grateful for the Technical and Professional Studies Division for their support of this research and for inspiring me through their commitment to student success. Their honesty, humor, and dedication to improving lives have made a lasting impact on my journey.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There is a significant disconnect between instructional and student support services in higher education that negatively impacts students' experiences (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Alternatively, meaningful and intentional collaboration between these two departments enhances student learning and engagement (Kuh et al., 2005). A mid-sized western public state college faces several barriers, as its career and technical education (CTE) programs are even more siloed than its transferable academic programs. Because CTE programs have specific skill-based requirements, most CTE students are advised primarily by faculty, as student service professionals often lack adequate training or resources to provide accurate information about CTE programs and courses. Academic advisors offer guidance on general education coursework, and faculty advisors assist with program-specific course sequencing, which can confuse students early on when information does not align. Student service professionals require comprehensive training on CTE programs and career options to ensure correct information is provided to students. CTE faculty also need training in integrating appropriate referrals to student support services into their recruiting, advising, and onboarding of new students. Strategic collaboration between these two departments is critical to enhancing student retention. Instructors and faculty provide content and industry expertise in the classroom, while student support services provide holistic student support and development that impact students outside the classroom.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Siloed departments in higher education increase the likelihood of errors and duplicate work among faculty and staff. While definitions of student success vary across CTE programs in higher education, low retention rates are problematic for both programs

and students. Tinto's (1975) seminal work establishes that academic and social factors influence a student's decision to persist. Student support services offer structured programs that complement academic learning and foster a sense of belonging on campus. Effective programming enhances student engagement, which directly impacts student retention (Hirschy, 2017). CTE programs are often advised by CTE faculty, who have specific industry and content knowledge. Therefore, student services and CTE faculty must intentionally collaborate to effectively support both institution- and program-specific needs. Kezar and Lester (2009) identify the benefits of collaboration and the need to explore innovative programming amid declining enrollment, changes in the higher education landscape, decreased funding, and heightened pressure to increase the number of students who complete degrees and certificates.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to examine how collaboration in higher education impacts student retention rates in career and technical education programs.

### **Research Question**

The following research question guided this qualitative study: How does collaboration between student support and instructional services in higher education impact retention rates in career and technical education programs?

### **Aim of the Study**

This study aimed to design student support initiatives and provide collaborative solutions to address the challenges faced by students and faculty within CTE programming. It also aimed to confirm whether collaboration between student services and instructional services leads to greater student support, specifically higher retention

rates. Ultimately, this project should determine if there is value in collaboration in supporting student success.

To effectively support students pursuing CTE programs and increase retention, it was critical to analyze the challenges faculty currently face in providing comprehensive support. Student support service programming provides students with tools to transition successfully into college and offers guided support for their educational and career goals; however, if students are not appropriately referred to this programming, the results are limited (Karp et al., 2010). Exploring ways to bridge gaps among these services could pave the way for more strategic and practical training for CTE faculty. Collaboration between these two departments provides guided support, including institution-specific resources from student support services and industry, as well as content-specific resources from CTE faculty. This dissertation utilized interviews with CTE faculty members to examine their experiences and explored the role of leadership in effective collaborative initiatives.

### **Definition of Relevant Terms**

*Retention rates:* The measurement of student success in this dissertation.

Institutional data were used to define retention as the percentage of new students who continued taking classes into their second semester.

*Student success:* As defined by retention, it is critical because it demonstrates that the student finds value in education and that the institution provides adequate resources to support the student's decision to continue taking courses the following semester. Student success in this paper was used interchangeably with student retention, which refers to a student's decision to enroll in the following term (Hirschy, 2017).

*Career and technical education (CTE):* Prepares students for the workforce through occupational training and is critical in supporting local economies and preventing poverty (Hirschy et al., 2011; Rabren et al., 2014). CTE programs include associate of applied science degrees and certificates that prepare students to enter the workforce directly.

*Associate of applied science degrees:* Degrees designed to prepare students to directly enter the workforce and include both general education and program-specific coursework.

*Certificates:* Designed to equip students with specific skills to enter a job or enhance career opportunities.

*Collaboration:* “Individuals and groups working together toward a common purpose, with equal voice and responsibility” (Kezar, 2003, p. 138).

*Student support services:* Include any department that provides direct assistance to students outside the academic or instructional realm. Examples of student support services include enrollment services, recruitment, advising, tutoring, financial aid, and military and veteran programming.

*Instructional services:* Include full-time faculty members and part-time instructors who provide instruction to achieve course learning outcomes. CTE faculty and instructors must hold an active CTE teaching credential that demonstrates their educational and industry experience.

### **Methodology Overview**

Students pursuing career and technical education programs in higher education face unique challenges compared to traditional academic paths. This dissertation-in-practice explored the experiences of CTE faculty using a phenomenological qualitative

research methodology. Interviews for this research were conducted with full-time faculty members who were expected to advise students and provide appropriate referrals to support services.

### **Delimitations, Limitations, and Personal Biases**

#### *Delimitations*

Delimitations for this study included time, location, participants, and focus. The interviews took place during the 2025 fall academic term. This timeframe may have affected faculty insight and responses due to the political and presidential policy shifts in higher education. Shifts in higher education funding have altered the college's culture, where faculty were expected to contribute more with less funding for student support services. This study included interviews with faculty experiences at one specific college and may not represent the experiences of all CTE faculty at other institutions. The faculty included in this study had worked at the college for at least three years, which categorized them as non-provisional, and had worked long enough to have experienced and implemented training to support student success and retention. This study focused on the experiences of CTE faculty, which may differ from those of faculty who teach general education courses.

#### *Limitations*

Phenomenological qualitative research explored the unique experiences of CTE faculty in supporting students. Interviews highlighted individual experiences at the college but may not fully reflect prior training, experiences, and personal biases of the faculty included in the study. Participants in this study came from various academic divisions, each with different leadership, onboarding, training, and instructional expectations.

*Personal biases*

As the researcher, I brought a variety of biases to this study. My education and work experience spanned both student and instructional services, so I valued the contributions of both areas to student success. I have also experienced success with collaboration between these two departments and was particularly interested in how to expand and support collaborative opportunities to benefit students. At the time this research was conducted, I supervised CTE faculty in an academic division with CTE programs, so I cared deeply about the success of these programs. Because my professional role could have implemented training or processes across these departments, it may have influenced the direction and focus of the interview protocol. To help mitigate personal bias, I included CTE faculty from other academic divisions as participants in the study, and to provide a more comprehensive perspective on CTE faculty experience. I was a reflective researcher, engaged in thoughtful journaling throughout the interview process, and considered how my perspective, role, or experience may have affected data interpretation.

**Reflections of the Scholar-Practitioner**

In my experience working in higher education, I have supported students, faculty, and staff in both instructional and non-instructional capacities. Students face numerous barriers to academic success. I witnessed significant, well-intentioned efforts across the college that were not well planned or well-resourced for long-term implementation. Departments were understaffed, leading to burnout and high turnover rates. There seemed to be missed opportunities to maximize resources through collaboration, communication, and intentional programming. I was particularly interested in the experiences of new students, having seen many students leave within the first semester due to unclear or

confusing processes. These students left college with a negative view, often blaming themselves for their lack of success, and do not return to higher education. While not everyone wants or needs a college education, I believe everyone deserves the opportunity to achieve their goals and succeed. My biggest concern was my ability to implement an effective, improved, and sustainable collaborative process that does not require my ongoing involvement.

### **Summary**

The project examined the experiences of CTE faculty in supporting students and preparing them to enter the workforce. Researchers and student affairs professionals have recognized and encouraged comprehensive programming in higher education since Tinto's (1975) seminal work, which examined how factors beyond the classroom influence student retention. However, effective collaborative programming between academic and student services remains disconnected and inconsistent (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Students benefit from the institutional knowledge of student support services and the industry experience of CTE faculty. An institution that intentionally designs programs for new students to provide comprehensive support can prioritize student learning and improve retention.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Student success in CTE programs is uniquely defined based on individual student goals. Traditional institutions of higher education often measure student success by degree completion. However, students pursuing CTE programs may have alternative personal and professional goals that differ from the traditional baccalaureate path to degree completion. Examples include registering for a single course to acquire a specific skill set, completing a few courses to enhance one's career, or pursuing courses for personal enjoyment or as a hobby. Several variables influence a student's decision to persist, and extensive research on social, cultural, academic, and institutional factors contributes to overall student success and retention (Hirschy et al., 2011; Tinto, 1975).

Research on retention rates in CTE programs is often flawed because the theoretical models used are more applicable to four-year institutions than to technical and community college populations (Hirschy et al., 2011). Therefore, different metrics must be used to measure student goals, and student success must be clearly defined to evaluate student outcomes and program effectiveness. Students in CTE programs are more likely to be adult learners who often juggle work and family responsibilities, making it more difficult for them to access academic resources that directly influence student retention (Xing et al., 2019). Student support services, including tutoring, academic advising, military and veteran programming, and student life programming, are intentionally designed to help students build a sense of belonging on campus, clarify processes, and successfully navigate the college experience (Means & Pyne, 2017). Institutions recognize that holistic support for students is vital for successful transitions to higher education and that ongoing assistance is necessary to ensure retention, goal achievement, and completion.

Stakeholders in higher education define and evaluate student success in various ways, including educational goal attainment, degree completion, student learning, development, retention, and engagement (Hirschy, 2017). Retention as a measure of student success is important because increased education has a direct impact on both the individual and the community (Barton, 2008; Hirschy, 2017). Students interested in CTE programs sometimes take a few specific courses to sharpen a skill set, with no intention of completing a certificate or degree. In contrast, others begin college with the intention of earning a degree or certificate. A degree or certificate-seeking student's decision to enroll in the subsequent semester demonstrates that they value continuing their education and that the institution provides the appropriate learning opportunities and support services that align with their educational and career goals. Retention is the foundation for student success in higher education and can be explored through the multiple factors that influence student attrition inside and outside the classroom.

Student support services play a vital role in fostering a sense of belonging, enhancing engagement, and supporting students' development, which in turn influences their decision to remain in college (Tinto, 1982). Social, psychological, cultural, and financial factors influence student retention and can be directly affected by meaningful, structured academic advising. Clear communication and effective collaboration between student support services and instructional services can provide a seamless learning environment that offers comprehensive support for students (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004).

### **Need for Comprehensive Support**

Various factors influence retention rates for CTE programs and should be examined differently from traditional metrics analyzed in baccalaureate programs (Hirschy et al., 2011). While definitions of student success vary across CTE programs,

low retention rates are problematic for both programs and students. Scholars often use Tinto's theories to examine causes and propose institutional processes to improve student persistence and retention. Tinto's theories and frameworks clarify how variables beyond the classroom significantly affect student learning and success. Tinto's (1975) seminal work establishes that academic and social factors influence a student's decision to persist. Student support services offer structured programs that complement academic learning and foster a sense of belonging on campus. Effective programming enhances student engagement and directly impacts student retention (Hirschy, 2017). Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement further explores how student learning, development, and the overall academic experience directly apply to retention rates. A student's overall academic experience includes the responsibility of student services to provide support and co-curricular opportunities, and of instructional services to provide a meaningful classroom experience. Together, these departments can create strategic opportunities and learning experiences that help students establish a sense of belonging and connection to the institution.

### **Student Support Services**

Student support services encompass strategic programming at an institution that enhances a student's cognitive and social development in college (Schuh et al., 2017). Student service professionals design support structures that help students navigate the transition to higher education and persist in their academic journey. A comprehensive approach to student support improves retention through intentional efforts and structured programming in financial aid, recruitment and admissions, academic services, curriculum and instruction, and student services (Swail, 2004). Additional components within this framework include cognitive, social, and institutional factors (Swail, 2004). These

variables affect a student's decision to persist, while an institution's challenge is to implement comprehensive programs that support each student's unique needs. Student support services encompass several competencies foundational to programming, including assessment and research, teaching and training, ethics and professional standards, theory and translation, administration and management, multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills, as well as helping and advising (Pope et al., 2004).

While all student support services provide an important resource to students, the role of academic advising and its impact on student retention will be further explored.

### **Academic Advising Services**

Academic advising is a vital service that bridges the gap between student needs and resources, enhances the student experience, and increases retention. Academic advisors advocate for students and encourage students to develop meaningful connections with the institution (Vianden, 2016). The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education defines the mission of Academic Advising Programs (AAP) to “assist students as they define, plan, and achieve their educational goals... and must advocate for student success and persistence” (Wells, 2015, p. 39). Academic advisors assist students with course selection, degree planning, and aligning majors with academic and career goals. Academic advisors use student development theories to guide students' educational planning and employ various advising styles tailored to each student's needs. Academic advisors help students identify their strengths and interests and implement long-term plans that align with their goals. Students are empowered to advocate for themselves through referrals from advisors to appropriate campus and community resources, such as academic tutoring or basic needs support (Wells, 2015). The structure of academic advising varies by institution type and is primarily shaped by the institution's

mission and the vision of administrative leadership (Clark et al., 2010). CTE programs are often advised primarily by CTE faculty due to their specific industry and content knowledge. Therefore, academic advisors and CTE faculty must intentionally collaborate to effectively support both institution- and program-specific needs.

### **Effective Collaboration**

Collaboration between departments requires a shared goal, a commitment to communication and organization, and accountability. Effective collaboration between academic services and student support services creates a seamless learning environment in which students learn both in and outside the classroom (Kezar, 2003). Intentional collaboration and partnerships in higher education increase engagement and directly impact student success and retention (Whitt, 2017). Practical collaborative efforts prioritize programming that empowers students, shares responsibility, and aligns action with the institutional mission (Kinzie & Kuh, 2005).

Collaboration between faculty and academic advisors capitalizes on each professional's strengths. CTE faculty possess highly specialized knowledge in their fields and industries, while academic advisors are experts in supporting students as they navigate the educational process. CTE programming often requires a specific, structured course sequence, and the order of coursework may vary based on the student's experience, goals, and interests (Bettencourt, 2021).

Given the faculty's specialized knowledge, academic advisors need to refer students appropriately to ensure accurate course recommendations. Effective communication between academic advisors and faculty demonstrates mutual respect between the departments and a shared goal of providing comprehensive support to students. Academic and student support partnerships effectively increase student learning

when shared responsibility aligns with the institutional mission (Kuh, 2001). The transition to college can be challenging, particularly for first-generation students, who comprise a large share of students in CTE programs (Hirschy et al., 2011). First-year experience programming, implemented by student service professionals, provides structured support to guide students through their first year of college. Students who meet with an academic advisor for educational planning, successfully register for their first-semester courses, and are appropriately referred to faculty for industry- and career-related questions receive comprehensive support that fosters a seamless learning environment (Kuh, 1996).

### **Collaboration and Student Success**

Departments in higher education are often siloed, increasing the likelihood of errors and duplication of effort. Meaningful collaboration creates more efficient processes, provides better student service, and enhances employee motivation (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Partnerships between academic and student affairs departments create opportunities to increase learning outcomes and engagement “by calling on those who work most closely with students-in class and out of class and in curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular activities- to collaborate in designing, implementing, and improving student learning” (Whitt, 2017, p. 361). Successful partnerships require shared goals, intentional communication, and assessment strategies to ensure long-term effectiveness (Whitt, 2017).

### **Faculty Support**

Significant time is spent in the classroom, so student-faculty interaction is unquestionably important (McArthur, 2005). Faculty influence is significant in any learning environment, but particularly on commuter campuses, where students typically

come to campus only to attend classes and often lack the time to engage in on-campus events, activities, and support services. If students are taking only evening courses, their only consistent interaction with the institution's professional staff is with the instructor. Faculty members fulfill several roles in supporting students academically and professionally, directly influencing student learning, experience, and retention. Cain (1997) states, “the teaching faculty is the key to the community college’s work. Other factors in the system, such as the support staff, administrators, politicians, and students, might help draw up the route for the trip, but it is the faculty members who drive the bus” (p. 47). A new student may miss out on engaging with faculty if academic advisors do not appropriately refer them to this resource before classes start. Academic advisors provide faculty contact information, confirm that students are in the correct major, and enroll them in the recommended courses to ensure meaningful connections with faculty.

### **Academic Advising Support**

Academic advisors in the community college setting provide vital guidance to help students decide how many credits to enroll in to succeed. Discussions of the timeline for degree or certificate completion while balancing outside commitments are an important priority for academic advisors and their role in student retention (McKinney et al., 2022). Academic advisors empower students to make important academic, personal, and professional decisions by using various advising approaches to best support students’ needs and development.

Intrusive advising involves student participation in the advising process and decision-making, keeping the student engaged and understanding the ramifications of their educational choices. (Donaldson et al., 2016). This approach is proactive and responsive to the myriad institutional and non-institutional barriers that students navigate

throughout academic planning and in achieving educational goals. This approach contrasts with prescriptive advising, in which the advisor tells the student what to do rather than having the student actively make decisions that affect their short- and long-term goals (Donaldson et al., 2016). Effective advising, regardless of approach, involves active participation from both the advisor and the student, which positively impacts retention and degree completion (Donaldson et al., 2016). Quality academic advising in a community college is vital because the student population often includes adult learners who are less academically prepared, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, or have minimal social and familial support systems (McArthur, 2005). Underprepared students are less likely to disclose their need for support, leading to lower utilization of support services and making intrusive advising practices crucial for these populations (Donaldson et al., 2016).

Tinto's (1975) extensive research on attrition examines the factors influencing students' decisions to leave higher education, beyond those related to academic success. Factors include engagement, social interactions, a sense of belonging, tutoring and support services, financial aid, and additional resources that support development and accountability (Chiteng, 2014; Donaldson et al., 2016; Tinto, 1975). Intentionally designed and structured advising processes directly impact student success, including reduced attrition and higher GPAs (Chiteng, 2014). In addition to degree planning, "Scholars and practitioners agree on the importance of academic advising in helping students navigate and integrate within the academic and social environment of college" (Chiteng, 2014, p. 529). Comprehensive support is vital to address the full range of student needs, ensuring students in CTE programs succeed academically, personally, and professionally.

### **Comprehensive Support**

Kolenovic & Karp (2013) highlight how multiple sources of support impact retention by “encouraging academic momentum via structured and comprehensive support” (p. 273). Examples of comprehensive support include individualized academic advising, career service guidance, academic tutoring, and opportunities to network and engage in campus activities (Kolenovic & Karp, 2013). Comprehensive support encourages academic momentum, a sense of belonging, and access to resources (Kolenovic et al., & Karp, 2013, p. 274). In addition to support services, the organizational structure within community colleges can inform practice and enhance student success (Van Noy et al., 2016). Structured support includes “program prescription, program alignment, access to information, and active program advising and support,” which are vital in preventing barriers and increasing retention (p. 266).

Other factors that influence academic performance include socioeconomic status, family support, access to academic resources, and socialization (Iannarelli, 2014). These factors can all be explored individually; however, they often overlap, significantly enhancing impact. For example, a student raised in a lower socioeconomic environment is more likely to have a job that prevents them from accessing academic resources during the day and less likely to have a social support system that encourages them to use those resources.

### **Career and Technical Education**

Students pursuing CTE programming have different needs than those on the traditional transfer path. Colorado CTE, for example, has developed a strategic plan aligned with Perkins funding requirements and a system to ensure high-quality CTE programming that supports the state's workforce needs. The strategic plan encompasses

four primary objectives: career advisement and development, instructor recruitment and retention, partnerships, and quality programs (Colorado Community College System, 2019). The strategic plan includes specific strategies for each goal, recommending that “Advisors, student services, and CTE instructors align efforts in order to have meaningful career conversations with students” (Colorado Community College System, 2019). As of 2023, 94,681 students were enrolled in secondary CTE programs and 84,160 in postsecondary CTE programs, representing 37.5% of all degrees and certificates awarded in Colorado (Colorado Community College System, 2023). Exploring and implementing ways to provide comprehensive support to CTE students is crucial in achieving the Colorado statewide postsecondary attainment goal of 66% for individuals aged 25-34 by 2025 (Colorado Community College System, 2023). Meaningful career-connected conversations with students are a collaborative opportunity with shared responsibilities from both the student and instructional service departments.

### **Gap in the Literature**

Kezar and Lester (2009) highlight the benefits of collaboration and emphasize the need to explore innovative programming in response to declining enrollment, changes in the higher education landscape, decreased funding, and pressure to increase student completion rates for degrees and certificates. Faculty in academic divisions and staff in student support services participate in professional development opportunities to enhance their skills and programs within their specialized areas. However, research, training, and professional development to effectively coordinate programming across these departments are lacking. Partnerships are not always beneficial to all stakeholders and can be misleading and unproductive when conflicting perspectives and goals related to student learning arise (Whitt, 2017). Historically, a significant disconnect has existed

between departments, and this mindset persists, hindering faculty and staff from engaging in innovative, collaborative programming (Magolda, 2005; Whitt, 2017). A common mistake is assigning unnecessary extra work across departments instead of creating a balanced workload that promotes mutually beneficial programming (Kezar & Lester, 2009). While logistical issues and historical perspectives influence collaboration research, it is crucial to further explore how to effectively incorporate collaborative partnerships in higher education to boost retention.

### **CTE in a Mid-Sized Western Public State College**

CTE programming within a mid-sized western public state college provides a precise lens into the barriers and opportunities facing partnerships between instructional and student support services. Additional responsibilities for CTE teachers make it challenging to take on more. For example, “Obligations, such as advising student organizations, traveling with students, data reporting for federal funding, organizing and managing lab settings, and creating work-based learning opportunities for students, are all unique aspects of the CTE classroom and the CTE teacher’s duties” (Malette et al, 2020, p. 30). CTE faculty face barriers that are consistent with nationwide concerns including, “the lack of professional learning opportunities, instructional leadership, and time for collaboration and planning” (Malette et al., 2020, p. 30). These obstacles must be addressed to effectively establish meaningful, productive partnerships.

To make progress, it is important to recognize that collaboration is not always suitable or advisable; as Kezar & Lester (2009) highlight, “There is nothing worse than forcing collaboration on a situation that simply does not require it” (p. 8). The American individualistic mindset and reward system in higher education also hinder prioritizing collaboration (Kezar & Lester, 2009). It is crucial to consider factors such as

specialization, professionalization, disciplines and departments, paradigmatic differences, faculty training and socialization, loose coupling, reward systems, bureaucratic and hierarchical administrative structures, conflicts between academic and administrative cultures, staff subcultures, distinctions between academic and student affairs, and responsibility-centered budgeting—all of which have historical roots supporting individualistic behaviors (Kezar & Lester, 2009, p. 23). Effective programming and partnerships must be purposefully designed, acknowledging that barriers and differing perspectives can influence planning and implementation.

### **My Contribution**

To effectively support students pursuing CTE programming and increase student retention, it is critical to prioritize comprehensive support for new students. If student support services and instructional services continue to operate in silos, institutions will miss a key component for supporting academic and social development, which will directly impact student attrition (Karp et al., 2010). First-year programming provides new students with tools to transition successfully into college and offers guided support for their educational and career goals, resulting in increased retention. Guided support includes institution-specific resources from academic advisors and industry, as well as content-specific resources from CTE faculty.

### **Summary**

Researchers and student service professionals have recognized and encouraged collaborative programming in higher education since Tinto's (1975) seminal work, which examines how factors beyond the classroom influence student retention. However, effective collaborative programming between academic and student support services remains inadequate in many higher education institutions (Kezar & Lester, 2009).

Students benefit from the institutional knowledge of student service professionals and the industry experience of CTE faculty. An institution that intentionally designs programs to provide comprehensive support to students can prioritize student learning and improve retention.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Students who establish a sense of belonging at an institution typically have higher levels of engagement and are more likely to demonstrate successful outcomes (Kuh, 1996). Institutions that intentionally design programs to support students provide opportunities for students to feel a sense of belonging and establish trust during a pivotal transition in their lives. According to Kuh (1996), seamless learning is a holistic approach in which students and instructional services provide meaningful and comprehensive support for students' academic and career goals. My Dissertation in Practice utilized a phenomenological qualitative research methodology. In-depth interviews were conducted to gain insight into the challenges faculty face in supporting students beyond instruction and to learn about their experiences. In-depth interviews and observations revealed how social interactions influence decision-making.

#### **Research Question**

How does collaboration among student support services and instructional services in higher education impact retention rates in career and technical education programs?

#### **Method**

A phenomenological approach, incorporating interviews, offered a meaningful exploration of faculty experiences in CTE programs as they navigate student concerns. Interviews invite exploration of faculty members' past experiences interacting with students and collaborating with student services. Interviews provided an opportunity for participants to share their stories, perspectives, and experiences, allowing me to examine trends and highlight ways to provide more significant and relevant training and support for faculty. Phenomenology revealed the meaning attached to lived experiences and how supporting student concerns led to effective or ineffective collaboration between student

support and instructional services. Interviews offered a meaningful exploration of faculty members' experiences collaborating with student services to support student success.

### **Research Design Overview**

The method for this study was a phenomenological qualitative approach. The problem statement focused on students who lack adequate institutional support, who experience greater frustration, face more obstacles, and are less likely to return the following semester. Low retention and completion rates in CTE programs have a direct negative impact on the local workforce and economy. Faculty plays a pivotal role in supporting students beyond instructional content and delivery. CTE faculty often have extensive industry and technical expertise, while college student development training is often not provided due to several institutional factors. Retention rates were analyzed as a measure of student success because they demonstrate that students are benefiting enough from their educational experience to pursue completion of a degree or certificate.

### **Participants**

Participants included faculty in CTE programs who have taught at the college level for at least three years. Faculty who have taught at the institution for at least three years are no longer considered provisional and have completed institutional training to support students both inside and outside the classroom. This study excluded faculty who teach general education courses. Potential participants were emailed a description of the research purpose, the protective measures in place, and the option to participate. Faculty were informed that they would be invited to participate in an interview to share their experiences supporting students in navigating barriers beyond course content and instructional capacity.

Participation in this study took approximately one hour per interview. This study posed minimal risk; however, participants may have experienced discomfort in disclosing information about their decision-making and the factors that led them to provide support beyond their professional and technical expertise. Participants may have experienced frustration due to insufficient training and a heavy workload. All transcribed interview materials were stored in a password-protected network drive; names and identifying information were not stored or used, and any personal identifying information was immediately discarded.

### **Data Collection**

The data collected from interviews with participants included demographic information, such as self-identified gender, race/ethnicity, years of teaching experience, and CTE credentialing information. Experiential data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with participants.

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

Eligible participants were contacted via their work-assigned email and, if they were interested, responded by email. A follow-up email was sent, including available interview times in a survey format. Faculty who selected an available interview time received an email from me confirming the scheduled interview time and location. The interview protocol included factual questions, feeling questions, perspective or opinion questions, and questions that elicit examples (Saldaña & Omasta, 2022). The goal of the interview was for participants to share their experiences working with students who are navigating barriers that may prevent them from continuing their education. Follow-up questions were prepared to help the participant disclose relevant information about their experience and to clarify the question as needed. The questions purposefully explored the

phenomenon through a structured interview process (protocol). This structure allowed participants to explain how their decision-making process and experience influenced their decision to collaborate with student services or take other actions in response to the student's concern.

### ***Data Collection Tools***

After an initial interest email was sent to potential participants, a follow-up survey was sent to ask for their availability for an interview. Several available times were provided throughout the two weeks, including morning, afternoon, and evening options to accommodate as many schedules as possible. An interview protocol (Appendix B) included questions encouraging reflection and interpretation of past experiences. Follow-up questions were prepared to encourage the flow of information sharing.

### **Data Analysis**

This research methodology outlined a systematic qualitative data analysis process that used in vivo coding techniques for analyzing interview transcripts. The approach emphasized preserving participants' authentic voices while developing meaning through multiple analytical cycles. The process began with first-cycle elemental coding using the in vivo method, which captured participants' exact language to honor their perspectives and explore personal meanings within the data. Hard copies of transcripts were printed following Saldaña's (2021) initial coding process. Throughout this coding phase, analytic memos were recorded in the margins.

The second cycle used cumulative pattern coding to develop major themes. This phase categorized the initial codes into clusters based on similar descriptions, feelings, or experiences. The grouped codes revealed broader patterns and thematic connections across the data. Observations and researcher reflections continued throughout the second

cycle. Data was imported into the Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), and grounded theory principles were used for further analysis. CAQDAS was used to group words, phrases, and themes, allowing further exploration of links and associations between codes that might not be immediately apparent through manual analysis. Within each group, major category themes were identified and highlighted in bold, following Saldaña's (2021) concept of "focused codes" (p. 105). The analysis was narrowed to major in vivo category labels. Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used to support data analysis while adhering to the Creighton University EdD Program's guidelines for AI use. This methodology provided a qualitative approach that draws on participants' voices to yield authentic, meaningful data for analysis.

### ***Methodological Integrity***

My perspective as a researcher was considered during both the data collection and analysis. The interview protocol remained consistent while encouraging participant comfort and safety. The context of the interviews was relevant because all participants were current faculty members, and the interviews were held on the main campus, where CTE programs are housed.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations included the impact of participation in the study on faculty, who may have been concerned about sharing negative or critical information about a current staff member or colleague. I obtained informed consent from participants and minimized the risk of harm by maintaining confidentiality and anonymity and securing data. No deceptive practices were utilized in the interviews, and participants could withdraw from the research without consequence. All identifying information was immediately removed from the transcript, and the study results were shared

anonymously. The study protected the rights of the participants and maintained research integrity by adhering to Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines established by Creighton University.

### **Summary**

CTE faculty provide industry-specific knowledge vital to students' academic and career-related decisions, while student service departments support students as they navigate the requirements of higher education. Effective collaboration between these departments enables comprehensive support. Faculty experiences supporting students can highlight areas for improvement in training, communication, and interdepartmental processes. This study examined the experiences of CTE faculty through qualitative interviews with an emphasis on collaboration and supporting the needs of students in CTE programs. In vivo coding methods were used to ensure validity and capture authenticity in participant experience. Ethical data interpretation was guided by the Jesuit principle of *cura personalis*, adhering to credible and reliable research practices while honoring participants' voices and experiences.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This study examined the role of collaboration between instructional services and student support services in higher education and its impact on retention in career and technical education programs. Faculty who have been teaching in CTE programs for at least three years were interviewed, and in vivo coding was used to preserve participants' voices and reflect their honest experiences with collaboration. The research question that framed the interview process was: How does collaboration between student support and instructional services in higher education impact retention in career and technical education programs? The first coding cycle used in vivo, an elemental coding method that explores the personal meanings and experiences in the data. Ethnographic questions welcome participants' direct language and honor their unique perspectives (Saldana, 2021). Researcher reflection and analytic memo were used throughout the coding process. The second cycle used cumulative coding, which categorized faculty experiences by similar descriptions, feelings, and actions. Data was further analyzed through focused coding, which identified associations among groups and emerging themes.

### **Results**

Nine faculty members were interviewed, including seven men and two women, aged 45-70. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 5 to 30 years in CTE programming, and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. The faculty members also had significant industry experience, including at least 10 years outside academia. The initial elemental coding method used in vivo, which relied on participants' exact language and word choice to describe their experiences. Initial coding was completed manually on the printed transcripts, with salient words and phrases recorded. Transcripts

were imported into NVivo 15, and keywords and phrases were highlighted and coded in the CAQDAS software. Researcher reflection through memo writing remained consistent throughout manual and coding completed in NVivo 15, and was further utilized to review key phrases highlighted in both paper and digital formats. Nodes were used to separate and organize the data into categories that directly capture participants' meanings before identifying themes.

**Table 1**

*Participants' Demographic Data*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Experience Range</b>
Allan	M	50-55	16-20 years
Terrence	M	35-40	5-10 years
Robert	M	45-50	11-15 years
Cheri	F	55-60	11-15 years
Ben	M	45-50	11-15 years
Alex	M	65-70	11-15 years
Catherine	F	55-60	26-30 years
Martin	M	50-55	11-15 years
Edward	M	55-60	5-10 years

*Note: All data above uses ranges for anonymity.*

**Collaboration Barriers**

The primary nodes utilized were collaboration barriers, student success factors, and faculty experience. Collaboration barriers were further delineated into structural silos, communication gaps, and role ambiguity. Structural silos within the organization created a sense of separation among departments, leading to confusion about available

services. Phrases such as “passing the buck,” “different world,” and “never met them” highlighted frustration established by this disconnect. Significant communication gaps highlighted the lack of clear, meaningful information shared among departments and a misunderstanding of job roles and duties. Phrases such as “advising doesn’t know,” “honestly don’t know what that office does,” and “difficult to get responses” highlight the consistent participant perspective regarding these concerns. The role ambiguity persisted throughout the interviews, including phrases such as “who do I call?” “I don’t know what they do,” and “we’re all a bit clueless.” Collaboration barriers arose internally, while student success depended on both institutional and external influences.

### **Student Success Factors**

Student success factors included academic and career goals, financial stability, and a sense of belonging at the institution. Participants shared their experiences with retention metrics, which are often driven by misalignment between students’ goals and institutional goals for student retention and completion. For example, participants believed that a student who completed one or more courses in a single semester to learn specific skills should be counted as a success, regardless of whether they return the following semester, under traditional definitions of success and retention. Participants mentioned financial concerns in every interview as a major factor influencing a student’s decision to continue taking classes. Even students who valued the education and experience gained in their courses often drop or withdraw if they are forced to choose between supporting themselves and their family and continuing to take classes. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of students’ sense of belonging, indicating that connecting with students and communicating their belief in student success were priorities.

### **Faculty Experience**

The participants' experiences with collaboration included responses indicating frustration, burnout, and a desire for connection. The persistent sense of frustration was expressed in phrases indicating that nothing seems to change, inadequate or nonexistent training opportunities, and a lack of accountability among staff members. This frustration fostered a "do it myself" mentality, which, in turn, led to feelings of burnout. Phrases such as "it's exhausting," "just do it all," and "people not doing their job" captured the faculty experience of burnout due to inadequate collaboration among departments. While frustration and burnout were salient experiences, responses also included a desire for greater interdepartmental connection at the college. Participants largely believed that holistic support is necessary and that additional support outside the classroom is vital to retention. Even though feelings of frustration and ambiguity persisted, participants believed it was the college's responsibility to provide services that support students' ability to overcome barriers and to continue their education. The final coding step condensed the patterns into three major themes regarding the connection between collaboration and retention: siloed experience, skill-based definitions of success, and external barriers.

## **Findings**

### **Theme One: Siloed Experiences**

CTE faculty shared similar experiences of isolation between their classrooms and their students, as well as with the rest of the college. The theme of silo experience emerged from coding patterns, including a lack of communication, interaction, and awareness of shared duties among faculty regarding student service departments.

Robert's response to his experience with collaboration, "never, literally in 14 years,"

captured the depth of isolation he experienced regarding any of the student services departments. He explained that there was a lack of effective communication from other departments, both written and verbal, to learn more about his specific program, explore ways to support his students, or help grow his program. Cheri's response, indicating "you need sonar," highlighted the systemic communication problem of not knowing how or whom to connect with to address a student's concern. Cheri explained her frustration in trying to help a student with a registration issue and became increasingly frustrated with the number of people involved who were unable to answer her question. She eventually gave up on helping the student in that situation. Edward's comment, "it just doesn't exist," captured the reality that collaboration at this institution is not broken; it was not effectively developed.

The interviews highlighted the gap between the need for holistic student support and the reality of the departmental structural separation at the institution. The student service departments at this institution are physically located on opposite sides of campus from the CTE classroom and shop areas and do not share the same hours of operation. Some classes ran only in the evening, while student services operated only during the day. Physical and operational separation resulted in a lack of intentional communication and information sharing, creating confusion and uncertainty about job duties and roles.

**Table 2***Supporting Evidence for Silo Experience Theme*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Supporting Quote</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>
<b>Silo Experience</b>	"There's no communication. There's no, let's plan this. There's no let's work together on this. It just doesn't exist."	Edward
<b>Silo Experience</b>	"Non-existent other than the tiny bit with advising...years ago. I don't even think I've stepped foot in any of those offices, let alone spoken with, met with, communicated with, other than a random email here and there... never, never, literally, never in 14 years."	Robert
<b>Silo Experience</b>	"The thing that constantly befuddles me is, who the heck do I talk to about this thing? So yeah, that's siloing. And it's not just silos. It's like you need sonar... I was trying to help a student last week figure out who to contact about a particular enrollment question... I found that there were, I think it was nine different people who signed this form"	Cheri

**Theme Two: Skill-based Definition of Success**

CTE faculty defined student success through a lens of workforce readiness rather than traditional academic metrics such as grades and completion rates. Skill mastery repeatedly emerged as a key pattern, with faculty prioritizing preparing students for the job market over GPA and retention rates. CTE faculty focused on employment as a goal, which did not directly relate to retention or graduation rates. Edward defined student success with “what can you do?”, highlighting that the application of what was learned in the classroom was effectively measured by the preparation and application of the skill set in the workforce, rather than a more traditional definition of learning, such as the acquisition of knowledge. Cheri had a similar question: “Do you have marketable skills?” This is a fundamentally different success metric than demonstrating knowledge and

critical thinking through GPA and completion metrics. Terrence stated, “I’ve had students like, hey, got a job, I’m out,” which provides a clear distinction between how CTE faculty labeled success and what would typically be labeled as a failure in traditional academic metrics of student success.

**Table 3**

*Supporting Evidence for Skill-based Definition of Success Theme*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Supporting Quote</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>
<b>Skill-based Definition of Success</b>	"Student success, to me, is defined by my student grasping the material that I'm teaching and being prepared to go out into the workforce. Grades do not necessarily come into that. For me, for student success, what do you know? What can you do? You understand this stuff?"	Edward
<b>Skill-based Definition of Success</b>	"Soft skills, confidence, problem solving, ability to face adversity, create resilience and perseverance, and I think that is what they need to be able to go into all the different directions in the industry."	Terrence
<b>Skill-based Definition of Success</b>	"Do you have marketable skills? Not just useful skills, not just wonderful, good-to-have skills, but marketable current skills?"	Cheri

If a student secured employment or earned a promotion before completing a degree or certificate, CTE faculty considered that a success, in contrast to traditional academic definitions of success that focused on degree or certificate completion as a requirement to enter the workforce. Participants also prioritized supporting students' path to finding their passion, which also contrasted with the more traditional focus on grades and completion. It was more important for faculty to help students establish a path for their future than to achieve high grades in a course that was not meaningful to their career and professional goals.

**Theme Three: External Barriers**

Participants all addressed life circumstances beyond the instructor's and institution's control that affect a student's ability to persist. Barriers addressed by faculty were separate from instruction or academic experience and were often not apparent to faculty until it was too late. Cheri explained students' needs: "basic survival support, food, housing, safe spaces... I've had students who were homeless," illustrating the complexity of challenges students are facing. Ben's response that "Maslow's hierarchy of needs... you got to make sure all those are met" further identified the range of factors necessary for student success that can fall outside of the scope of institutional support if left unrecognized. Key issues included finances, housing, mental health, and family influences, and faculty often lacked full awareness of available resources or of the recommended protocol for supporting students. Financial instability was the most frequently mentioned external barrier, as Edward clearly articulated: "If they can't keep paying the electric bill...they're going to drop." Bureaucratic barriers were also indirectly mentioned as issues that students navigate, for which faculty felt unable to support them due to a lack of information, understanding, or training.

Participants consistently expressed the challenge of addressing complex issues such as poverty and homelessness. While their responses indicated they would help within their means, they largely felt it was beyond their scope. There was an overall sense of helplessness, evident in their emotional responses, as they articulated the burden of witnessing students struggle without adequate resources or processes to support them.

**Table 4***Supporting Evidence for External Barriers Theme*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Supporting Quote</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>
<b>External Barriers</b>	"Basic survival support, food, housing, safe spaces, if necessary, mental health support. I've had students who were homeless. I've had students who were in domestic violence situations. I've had students who were survivors of school shootings."	Cheri
<b>External Barriers</b>	"Probably the number one thing is to encourage them that they can do it. I think that for a lot of people, they are told you cannot do this... the hard part is equipping them to get there."	Catherine
<b>External Barriers</b>	"Financially, you can't... what do you tell them if they have to feed their family? You can't tell them, oh no, stick it out. Stay in school. If they have a family to support, then they're kind of out of luck. Sometimes that's just way it goes."	Martin

**Discussion**

Departmental silos within institutions of higher education are barriers to student success (Kezar & Lester, 2009). The findings from this study demonstrate that CTE faculty experienced significant isolation, largely due to structural and operational processes that limited communication and information sharing. While these findings align with Kezar & Lester's (2009) research on collaboration barriers in higher education, the empirical findings from these interviews suggest that the lack of collaboration is likely more pronounced in CTE programs than in traditional academic programs. These results confirm Kuh's (1996) research on the benefits of a seamless learning environment and the integration of efforts across multiple departments. The data from these interviews provide evidence of the severity of siloing through the lived experiences of faculty who largely shared the "non-existent" collaboration they experienced while working at the

college. One participant discussed collaboration through the lens of the significant work she has contributed to supporting other departments, but the shared effort that defines true collaboration was missing from her experience.

CTE faculty consistently described student success as skills-based, which prepares students for the workforce. The empirical example shared by Robert, defining student success as the ability to “get a job and be able to support themselves,” aligns with Hirschy et al. (2011), who critique the flawed research on retention rates in CTE programs. Qualitative evidence demonstrated that institutions must be able to measure student success and retention rates using a framework that includes students' goals in CTE programs that prioritize career advancement over grades and degree completion. Establishing a shared definition of success would build the foundation for meaningful communication and collaboration among student support and instructional service departments.

All participants provided examples of external barriers that affect students' ability to complete a class or continue their education. Basic needs such as food and housing, as well as financial constraints, influence a student's decision to remain in college. These findings align with Tinto's (1975) research, confirming that factors outside the classroom affect retention rates. Participants reported significant hardship in balancing work, family, and academic demands, a finding confirmed by Xing et al. (2019) and McArthur (2005), who note that CTE students face additional challenges as adult learners.

Current literature on collaboration in higher education, including Kezar & Lester (2009), addresses the challenges of siloes in higher education but does not specifically address the systemic structural separation between student services and CTE programs. While research demonstrates the benefits of collaboration (Whitt, 2017; Kinze & Kuh,

2005; Kezar, 2003), the participants' experiences included minimal to no meaningful or effective collaboration. There is a critical gap between research confirming that collaboration and engagement improve retention rates and CTE faculty's lack of empirical evidence that collaboration affects retention in their programs. The absence of collaboration, along with faculty recognition of an institutional need to support students outside the classroom, creates contradictions and confusion for faculty without intentional, meaningful communication between these departments.

### **Summary**

Results from this study confirm existing literature on the value of providing comprehensive support to college students (Kolenovic & Karp, 2013). The themes that emerged from these qualitative findings of silo experience, skills-based definition of success, and external barriers demonstrate the absence of collaboration, while research confirms the need and benefits of collaboration (Kezar & Lester, 2009; Whitt, 2017). The unique needs of CTE students highlighted by Hirschy et al. (2011) and Xing et al. (2019) are critical to consider when assessing the benefits of collaboration and the concerning disparity in how student success is defined across departments in higher education.

Adaptive leadership theory differentiates between technical problems and challenges (Heifetz et al, 2009). Technical problems can typically be addressed with a specific directive, tool, or policy implementation, whereas adaptive challenges are complex, involving relationships, communication, and cultural dynamics within the institution (Heifetz et al, 2009). The experiences of CTE faculty suggest that the absence of collaboration is an adaptive challenge that requires intentional institutional changes. Proposed solutions to collaboration and retention will be addressed in the next chapter using the adaptive leadership framework.

## CHAPTER FIVE: PROPOSED SOLUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

Departmental silos in higher education not only reduce organizational efficiency and effectiveness but also directly undermine student success. Lack of communication leads to misinformation, confusion, and delays in providing students with necessary support. CTE programs often operate on a different schedule from traditional academic classes and are physically separated from the main campus because of the large equipment and lab space requirements. Intentional collaboration between student support and instructional services in higher education is critical to providing comprehensive support to students navigating barriers as they complete coursework in CTE programs.

### **Aim Statement**

This study aims to design student support initiatives and provide collaborative solutions to address the challenges faced by students and faculty within CTE programming. It also aims to confirm whether collaboration between student support and instructional services leads to greater student support, specifically higher retention rates. Ultimately, this project will determine if there is value in collaboration in supporting student success.

### **Proposed Solutions**

The absence of collaboration between student support services and CTE faculty is an adaptive challenge, according to Heifetz et al. (2009). Adaptive leadership is an important framework for exploring collaboration because it distinguishes between technical problems that can be fixed directly through policy change and adaptive challenges that often require ongoing effort and shared responsibility. Several technical tools can be implemented quickly, with minimal effort and collaboration, and improve communication and information sharing among departments. For example, accurate

course sequencing documents used by all departments, flyers with updated contact information and job duties for clarity on referrals, updated and easily accessible information published on the website, increased cross-departmental training requirements, improved onboarding for new student service and instructional staff, improved technology platforms to streamline marketing and registration efforts, as well as several other solutions to support the staff and student experience. However, despite improved systems and technology, the value of human connection and collaboration will remain a priority in addressing the complex needs of students in higher education.

Adaptive challenges often require building trust to address complex issues. The silo experience of faculty, the lack of control over external barriers, and the conflicting definitions of student success are adaptive challenges that would require institutional and behavioral changes to address the absence of collaboration between student support and instructional services. Edward's response in Table 2: "There's no communication. There's no, let's plan this. There's no let's work together on this. It just doesn't exist" reveals this issue is not a procedural gap; it is a systemic gap requiring new ways of thinking and working. According to Heifetz and Linsky (2009), the core principles of adaptive leadership require leaders to: get on the balcony, identify the adaptive challenge, regulate distress, maintain disciplined attention, give the work back to the people, and protect voices of leadership from below.

### **Proposed Solutions**

Instructional services and student services must share a clear understanding of the problem before exploring solutions. According to Heifetz and Linsky (2009), the first step in solving a problem is to create a balcony moment. A balcony moment offers the chance to “purposefully step outside of a situation to obtain a greater perspective of what

is really happening and more accurately diagnose the problem” (Dugan, 2017, p. 270). This might involve guided conversations with faculty and staff, as well as tours of student service departments where staff meet with students directly, and instructional areas like the various lab and shop spaces where learning occurs. For multiple departments to work together effectively, there need to be facilitated sessions with mixed groups to discuss topics from several perspectives. For example, a retention focus group could meet regularly to review which retention strategies are working in their areas and analyze where barriers exist. The information shared in these focus groups can also help identify departments and individuals with opportunities for successful collaboration.

Adaptive work at the leadership level requires redefining success metrics. A task force including faculty, instructors, staff, and administrators can meet to develop metrics that align both institutional and CTE success. These metrics should capture both traditional retention and workforce outcomes, which will ultimately provide the framework for structuring and implementing effective institutional support. The adaptive work of the leaders requires complex discussion involving competing values, because collaboration cannot exist with conflicting definitions of success.

Establishing a CTE student success team is another strategy that involves creating a cross-functional group for each CTE program. Depending on the type of institution, this can be implemented in various ways, such as reorganizing structurally to integrate student services and instructional departments. These departments are usually siloed, reporting to different supervisors and using different success metrics. Integrating departments aligned with workforce outcomes highlight the importance of ongoing collaboration rather than short-term focus groups. Bringing staff and faculty from different departments together offers opportunities to meet regularly and discuss

enrollment trends, at-risk students, program improvements, and success stories. This approach provides a framework for collaboration while allowing each program to develop solutions tailored to its unique needs.

### **Evidence that Supports the Solution**

An intentionally designed committee that meets for a specific set of time to strategize retention is vital to discuss strategies that maximize resources and student success outcomes. Building trust across departments is an adaptive component within Heifetz's adaptive leadership framework. This effort requires both learning and a cultural shift, which can be established through structured discussions among staff and faculty. An effective collaborative discussion on retention provides an opportunity to redefine professional roles and boundaries by sharing ideas and goals. Data collected from this research demonstrated historical resentment and territorial behavior among staff and faculty from various departments. Creating a platform of dialogue is crucial in prioritizing problem-solving as a collaborative activity rather than the responsibility of each department.

The adaptive work of leadership requires the reconciling of competing values within the institution. Collaborative work cannot be accomplished while underlying definitions of success conflict and will require aligning institutional accountability with CTE values. Interview data revealed that faculty felt helpless when facing students in crisis. Faculty need to be adequately trained on institutional resources, including who to contact, how to make referrals, what resources are available, and example scripts for difficult conversations. This training can be further developed and paired with professional training on trauma-informed teaching, empowering faculty to use strategies that create a safe learning environment. Results from the interviews identified significant

gaps in training for CTE faculty not only in institutional resources, but also in basic classroom management and teaching effectiveness. A CTE success team is a strategic group of trained professionals who work together to support specific student populations. Adaptive work requires ongoing relationships. A CTE success team requires clearly defined job duties, a structured approach to sharing information, and a warm handoff protocol. A feedback loop between student support services and faculty could further improve communication and consistent improvement toward student success outcomes.

### **Evidence that Challenges the Solution**

There are several potential obstacles to the proposed solutions to address departmental siloing that specifically affect students, staff, and faculty in career and technical education. This was a single-institution study that demonstrated very specific challenges that may not align with challenges other institutions are facing. Transforming the culture and organizational structure of this institution presents significant challenges, as it requires that staff, faculty, and leadership rethink and reimagine their usual approaches to planning and decision-making. Student support and instructional service departments are proud of the work they do to support student success, and these solutions require an openness for change and a shift in how communication is shared.

Establishing a shared definition of success will be challenging as stakeholders offer different perspectives, motivations, and goals. Institutions provide access and equitable opportunities regardless of academic or career goals, so targeting CTE skill-based student success metrics that align with larger institutional goals is a complex issue. Structural and organizational changes are also difficult to implement and would require institutional leadership to align with this vision of strategic collaboration among departments.

### **Implementation of the Proposed Solutions**

Adaptive change requires structured commitment and ongoing participation, and the proposed solutions would take between three and five years to fully implement. The pace of change is an important consideration and will require starting small with pilot groups working on retention, learning from each other, and adjusting current retention strategies. Strategies within adaptive leadership will be an important framework to maintain, as people involved in this work should expect resistance and setbacks. There will be leadership requirements necessary to drive this vision both structurally and behaviorally. Commitment from executive leadership ensures that department goals and faculty and staff evaluations align with institutional collaboration goals.

Resource allocation is another important factor largely driven by leadership. Time for meetings and collaboration needs to be built into the workload, expectations, and schedule. Professional development funding options would be available and encouraged to further engage in collaborative programming in higher education that focuses on student success outcomes. College-wide recognition and reward systems would shift the culture toward valuing collaboration and bridge the gaps in department-specific success metrics. To monitor progress, baseline metrics should be established, including meeting frequency and communication, referral rates, warm handoffs, and joint programming.

### **Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of the Solution**

A shared commitment from leadership is necessary for the proposed solutions to be implemented effectively. Collaboration and retention are both broad concepts that require intentional programming driven by a clear vision, guidance, and support from leadership. Commitment from both the Dean and VP levels of leadership is important to communicate the structural changes and expectations for departmental goals.

Supervisors, including associate deans, department chairs, and directors, serve in critical roles leading the collaborative efforts and developing the framework for ongoing development.

### ***Timeline for Implementation of the Solution***

Implementing committee work, CTE success teams, and structural changes will take at least three to five years and should occur in phases. Committee work to begin collaborative conversations around retention strategies will take about six months to strategically recruit and engage committee members. It is critical that positive, results-oriented individuals from both student and instructional service departments are actively contributing to the meetings. Developing CTE success teams will likely take between six and twelve months, depending on institutional resources and leadership support. CTE success teams should have assigned student caseloads and should include program-specific faculty members from instructional services and staff members from advising, enrollment, recruitment, and career services. The most important components of the CTE success teams will be the program-specific training and the commitment to meeting regularly to discuss success strategies. Staff from student services need to be trained on the nuances of the CTE program, learning, and workforce outcomes to assist with students' questions and expectations. Faculty need to be trained on the resources provided by student services and to have clear guidance on how to make referrals to students. This training should be provided by departmental leadership and be ongoing to ensure consistency and accountability.

Changes within the organizational reporting structure will take the longest to implement and will require thorough planning, communication, and stakeholder participation. As institutions face declining funding and enrollment instability, it is

increasingly important to evaluate staffing and reporting structures to maximize resources and explore innovative solutions to provide comprehensive support to students. Aligning departmental structures with student success goals ensures students have access to meaningful college resources. CTE programs should be working directly with workforce and career service departments. Students should have a clear path to information on available career options and support in navigating the path to employment. CTE faculty have the industry expertise to collaborate with staff in these departments to develop programs and resources that align with the goal of career readiness.

### **Evaluating the Outcome of Implementing the Solution**

Leadership will need to consider the most important metrics for evaluating retention numbers to ensure collaboration is effective. While retention numbers do not always accurately reflect a CTE student's success, they are a vital measure of whether appropriate support was in place for the student to continue pursuing academic and career goals at the institution. Student surveys requesting feedback on support and student goals will be an important tool for ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of student support. Clear processes among staff and faculty need to be documented to ensure consistency among departments and expectations that align with department and institutional goals.

### **Implications**

#### **Practical Implications**

The data revealed consistent feelings of isolation among CTE faculty. Efforts to bridge communication among faculty and staff provide structure without mandating a specific action plan. Discussions across both departments enable each program to develop ideas and solutions that align with the academic program's needs and goals. CTE faculty offer specialized expertise that is enhanced through meaningful collaboration.

Faculty are often the first to recognize when students are struggling, making their perspectives and experiences crucial in developing realistic, effective support systems.

Staff in student service departments who are properly trained in the unique needs of students pursuing CTE programs can address common barriers to academic success. Staff members oftentimes do not see faculty as partners in the work to support student success, even though a partnership is the most effective way to provide comprehensive support to students while maximizing college resources. Strategic, proactive outreach can prevent issues students commonly face, such as financial and academic obstacles.

Institutional leaders who recognize the adaptive work required to develop a collaborative culture can transform the student experience, increase students' goal attainment, and redefine retention metrics. Institutional retention and success metrics need to align with the values and goals of CTE programs for collaboration to exist. Leaders must model and support efforts to encourage relationship-building as a critical factor in developing trust, improving communication, and improving the overall experience for students, faculty, and staff. The data from this study capture an important opportunity for institutions to shift away from competition among departments and toward a collaborative environment focused on student success.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study captured faculty experiences of collaboration within an institution without formal collaborative programming. Results can be further clarified through a longitudinal study that would track the implementation of adaptive strategies addressing collaboration over a five-year period. This study also only explores the experiences of faculty at one institution; further research could use a comparative study examining institutions where collaboration is working. Data were gathered through a qualitative

methodology that captured the faculty perspective. Further research can incorporate quantitative analysis of collaboration metrics in relation to retention and employment outcomes.

### **Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice**

The findings from this study highlight the substantial and continuing efforts required to enhance support for students. Despite the difficulties, tackling complex issues yields meaningful outcomes and requires ongoing leadership engagement to sustain progress. Adaptive leadership clarifies the importance of creating a balcony view to step back and recognize the issues that need to be addressed; however, once leaders are aware of the issues, strategic and consistent effort is needed for the long-term commitment necessary for adaptive challenges (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). The landscape of higher education is changing, with students having the opportunity to learn skills independently online or pursue short-term credentials that prepare them for the workforce without a traditional four-year bachelor's degree. Adaptive leadership is a framework for addressing the complex issues that are facing higher education and provides an opportunity to engage people in the work required to “tackle tough challenges and thrive” (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009, p. 14). To shift a work culture in which faculty and staff across departments align their values and work toward a shared goal requires leadership commitment to both the technical problems and adaptive challenges involved in collaboration and retention.

### **Summary of the Dissertation in Practice**

This study examined the collaboration between student support and instructional service departments in higher education and the impact on retention in career and technical education programs. Qualitative data revealed the siloed faculty experience,

conflicting definitions of success, and external barriers that affected collaborative opportunities and retention rates. Proposed solutions include a retention focus group including both faculty and staff, a task force to redefine success metrics, and realigning institutional support and organizational structure to include a CTE success team. Student and instructional service departments demonstrate a profound commitment to student success, and the data from this study revealed a lack of collaboration to strategically support students. Students are investing their time and money in their academic goals, and institutions of higher education should be committed to equipping them with the skills and resources to succeed. Collaboration among departments is a vital step in ensuring students have the support and resources needed to achieve their academic and career goals.

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*Appendix A*

## Bill of Rights for Research Participants

As a participant in a research study, students have the right:

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without any pressure from the people who are conducting the research.
2. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after students begin the study.
3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to students, and what students will be asked to do if students are in the study.
4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.
5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.
6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether students will be compensated for participating in the study.
7. To be told who will have access to information collected about students and how their confidentiality will be protected.
8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about their rights as a research subject.
9. If the study involves treatment or therapy:
  - a. To be told about the other non-research treatment choices students have.
  - b. To be told where treatment is available should students have a research-related injury, and who will pay for research-related treatment.

*Appendix B***Interview Protocol**

The following research question guided this qualitative study: How does collaboration among student support services and instructional services in higher education impact retention rates in career and technical education programs?

Hello. My name is Kaeley Neopl. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Before we begin, do you have any questions about the information sheet that was provided?

I will supplement my notes by audio-recording our interview to ensure an accurate record of today's conversation. Is this okay?

*If the participant is unwilling to continue, thank them for their time and conclude the interview. If the participant agrees to the interview being audio-recorded, thank them and continue.*

I will ask you a few general questions. If there is anything you do not feel comfortable answering or do not know the answer to, please let me know, and I can rephrase the question, or we can skip it.

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Participant:

Questions:

Researcher will define collaboration, student services, and instructional services.

1. How do you define student success?
2. In your experience, what support do students need to be successful?
3. In your experience, how do issues students navigate outside of the classroom impact a student's decision to continue taking classes?  
Follow up: Could you share any examples? What do you feel your role was in providing support to that student?

4. What has been your experience collaborating with student services, such as advising, enrollment services, military and veterans programming, etc?

6. Before we conclude this interview, is there something about your experience that you think influences your decision to collaborate with student support services that we have not yet discussed?

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. If you have any questions in the future, please feel free to contact me using the information provided.

*Appendix C*

# Creighton UNIVERSITY

## Institutional Review Board

### EXEMPT NOTICE

DATE: 27-Aug-2025  
 TO: Kaeley Neppl  
 FROM: Social and Behavioral IRB  
 PROTOCOL TITLE: Collaboration and Retention: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Faculty in Career and Technical Education  
 PROTOCOL NUMBER: 2044524  
 SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Application  
 REVIEW METHOD: Exempt Review  
 DETERMINATION DATE: 27-Aug-2025  
 DETERMINATION: EXEMPT

Thank you for your submission. This memorandum is notification that the protocol referenced above has been reviewed as indicated in the Federal regulatory statutes at 45CFR46.104(d) and deemed exempt from ongoing IRB review. You are therefore authorized to begin your research.

As an exempt study, there is no requirement for continuing review. Your protocol will remain on file with the IRB as a matter of record. Although your study is exempt from ongoing review, you and your research team are not exempt from ethical research practices and should therefore employ all protections for your participants and their data which are appropriate to your research.

The following conditions apply to all IRB submissions:

1. No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB exempt determination date.
2. Only the Consent/Information Sheet/Assent/Parental Permission forms and recruitment materials submitted with this review (as applicable) may be used to enroll subjects.
3. All protocol modifications must be IRB reviewed and approved prior to implementation. This includes any change of investigator or site address.
4. All recruitment materials and methods must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to being used.

Should any changes need to be made to the study, please submit a Request for Modification within InfoEd. Any changes to the application may cause this protocol to require a different level of IRB review.

While not required, when the above-referenced protocol has been completed, please submit a Request for Study Closure.

**Please be advised you will be asked to update the status of your research yearly by responding to an email from the IRB office. If you do not respond, your project will be considered completed and closed.**

If you have questions about this approval or filing an appeal, please contact the IRB at [irb@creighton.edu](mailto:irb@creighton.edu) or 402-280-2126.

Sincerely,

Amy Badura Brack, PhD Chair, Social Behavioral IRB

**A copy of this letter will be retained in Creighton University's IRB records as per the requirements established at 45 CFR 46.115. Please be aware that under Nebraska State Law investigators are required to retain copies of all exempt study documents for a period of three years.**