Academy student ambassador perceptions of the academy model: the successes and areas for growth.

James Edward McMillin
University of Louisville

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.library.louisville.edu/etd

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons

Recommended Citation

This Doctoral Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. This title appears here courtesy of the author, who has retained all other copyrights. For more information, please contact thinkir@louisville.edu.
ACADEMY STUDENT AMBASSADOR PERCEPTIONS OF THE ACADEMY MODEL: THE SUCCESSES AND AREAS FOR GROWTH

By

James Edward McMillin
B.A., University of Kentucky, 2004
M.A., University of Kentucky, 2005
M.A., Eastern Kentucky University, 2008

A Dissertation Approved on August 4th, 2021

by the following Dissertation Committee:

____________________________________________
Dr. Kyle Ingle (Co-Chair)

____________________________________________
Dr. Deborah Powers (Co-Chair)

____________________________________________
Dr. Ron Sheffield

____________________________________________
Dr. Douglas Matthew Stevens
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife and children, Heather, Lyla, and Caraline. I will always be thankful for the sacrifices each of you made to give me the freedom and space to write. I know it was not always easy, but “Dr. Daddy” loves you and is thankful for your patience and encouragement.

I also dedicate this to the students, staff, and education leaders I have worked both with and for throughout my career as a teacher, associate principal, principal, and school chief. Each of you have impacted my life in ways that can never be measured. You have also taught me so much more than I ever taught you, and I am forever thankful that our lives crossed paths.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people, without whom I would not have been able to complete this research.

To Dr. Kyle Ingle, thank you for your honest feedback and patience as I juggled being a working practitioner and a graduate student.

To Dr. Ron Sheffield, thank you for stepping in and serving on my committee so I could cross the finish line. I am forever grateful.

To Dr. Deborah Powers, thank you for your texts, phone calls, emails, nudges, and a kick in the tail or two encouraging and supporting me. I would never have started this journey had you not been there to set me on this path. You are an amazing leader and mentor!

To Dr. Doug Stevens, thank you for exposing me to the GLA process and for making sure the course work my fellow grad school students and I completed for you was meaningful to our dissertation work. I also cannot thank you enough for taking the time to drive and visit me from Cincinnati not once, but twice, to encourage and discuss my research.

To the student ambassadors who gave me their time and insights into their academy experiences via the online video conference. I promised you all I would share the final product over some appetizers and that date is coming soon!
To the members of my cohort, especially Shawn, Kristy, and Rachel, thanks for making the drives and course work interesting and worthwhile. Team work makes the dream work!

To my high school office team, specifically, Allison and Carl. Your jokes and constant reminders that I needed to get this dissertation done both pushed and motivated me from time to time.

Finally, to my wife and children, thank you for your encouragement and subtle pushes to “finish that paper.” I know I had to miss several family events from time to time, but you always loved and supported me throughout the process. I love you all and promise promise to make some of the time up!
ABSTRACT

ACADEMY STUDENT AMBASSADOR PERCEPTIONS OF THE ACADEMY MODEL: THE SUCCESSES AND AREAS FOR GROWTH

James McMillin

July 11, 2021

When students see the relevance of their education, whether college-bound or career-bound, it can motivate them to seek out courses and experiences that will prepare them for life after high school (Plank, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2005). The experiences, accomplishments, and social influences a student has throughout their time in school creates meaning and helps inform how they identify career interests and make career choices (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). This is especially true in high school where students begin to develop an awareness of their career interests and start thinking about their life after high school (Erikson, 1963). As the U.S. and the global economy continue to move and shift to ever-changing market demands, educational institutions must transition to better align career paths to those industries in demand (Schwartz, 2016). The high school career academy, or academy model, is gaining popularity around the country to address skills gaps identified by business and education partners and prepare students for both college and career (Maxwell & Rubin 2000). I utilized a single-case design in this qualitative study to examine student ambassadors’ perceptions of
career academies and how the model impacted the high school experience for students.

A Group Level Assessment (GLA) was used as the primary data collection tool to identify recurrent themes from perception data collected from former student ambassadors that attended a career academy high school. This study discusses the purpose, successes, and recommendations for change as perceived by the former student ambassadors as well as implications for future research.

*Keywords*: Career academies, Group Level Assessment (GLA)
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

ABSTRACT vi

LIST OF TABLES x

LIST OF FIGURES xi

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION 1
  School Culture 5
  Context of the Study 6
  Conceptual Framework of the Study 8
  Research Questions 9
  Significance of the Study 10
  Scope 11
  Limitations 11
  Delimitations 12
  Assumptions 12
  Definitions of Key Terms 12
  Organization of the Study 14

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE 15
  The Stigma of Vocational Education 16
  Changing the Stigma 18
  Career Academies 19
  School Culture 24
  School Climate 26
  Student Perceptions 28
  Social Cognitive Career Theory 32
  Summary of Literature Review 33

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY 36
  Social Cognitive Career Theory 37
  Instrumental Case Study 40
  Site and Study Participants 41
### Table of Contents

- Procedures and Data Sources
- Data Analysis
- Ethical Considerations
- Subjectivity and Positionality
- Statement of Significance
- Summary

**CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

- Examining Researcher Positionality
- Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis
- Virtual GLA Process
- Group Level Assessment Findings
- GLA Themes and Coding Qualitative Data
- Chapter Summary

**CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS**

- Descriptive Findings
- Career Academy Impact on Student Ambassadors
- The Purpose of the Career Academy Model
- Student Ambassador Perceptions of the Career Academy Successes
- Student Ambassador Recommendations for Improvement
- Implications for Policy
- Implications for Practice
- Recommendations for Future Research
- Concluding Thoughts

**REFERENCES**

**APPENDIX A: GROUP LEVEL ASSESSMENT PROTOCOL**

**APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT**

**APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT CORRESPONDENCE**

**APPENDIX D: VIRTUAL GROUP LEVEL ASSESSMENT OUTLINE AND SCRIPT**

**APPENDIX E: GROUP LEVEL ASSESSMENT PROMPTS**

**CURRICULUM VITA**
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Group Level Assessment Participant Demographics........................................56
Table 2. Group Level Assessment Themes and Ambassador Rank of Importance.........58
Table 3. Group Level Assessment Descriptive Findings..............................................79
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework ..............................................................38
Figure 2. Yin’s (2018) Typology of Case Study Design.................................41
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The pedagogical approach to teaching high school students has undergone several transformative changes over the last 100 years. Early education in one-room schoolhouses focused traditionally on reading, writing, and arithmetic with the school day based around the farming and work schedules of the community (Weiss & Brown, 2013). By the 1950s, high school students were typically marked by social class and, while not openly discussed, placed on a track based on their ability to pay for college. Few families were able to afford college during this time and most high school graduates could still earn a living wage going straight from high school into manufacturing or office work. By the 1990s, however, high schools in the United States shifted to the “college for all” mantra as a way to promote education for all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status. This shift led to a prescribed academic curriculum in high schools geared towards all students attending college. Many students followed this path and moved onto college, while those who did not found it difficult even to graduate high school.

The simple idea that college is for everyone, or even that there is a one-size-fits-all model, is troublesome (Bartik & Hollenbeck, 2006). Finding an educational program that is either suitable or relevant, to every student is rare. Insisting that one educational program can meet the needs of all students is detrimental. Those students who do not seek to attend college still want and need a free and appropriate education, but that
educational path should be applicable to their individual interests, strengths, and even linked to the opportunities in their communities (Oakes & Saunders, 2008). When students see the relevance of their education, whether college-bound or not, it can motivate them to seek out courses and experiences that will prepare them for life after high school (Plank, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2005). Non-college bound students oftentimes do not see the relevance in what they are being asked to do in school and consequently question their academic course pathways (Herschbach, 2001).

United States education reforms and legislation in the mid-1990s began to focus on accountability and rigorous student preparation for career initiatives for those who were not college-bound. Grant, Strong, and Popp (2008), identified students as “at-risk” who were in danger of not graduating due to circumstances including socioeconomic factors, learning disabilities, and other household or family support issues. These initiatives sought to assist students identified as “at-risk” and channel them into vocational education programs as opposed to a college path (Fletcher & Cox, 2012). The term “vocational education” later evolved to become career and technical education. This change in terminology signaled the beginning of career academies with a focus on both careers and future education opportunities within a given field and not just a focus on preparing students for work (Fletcher & Cox, 2012). All students in various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds need a curriculum that can provide them with multiple pathways where they can learn both the academics needed for college and the career and technical skills for work (Hoachlander, 2008). These beliefs have led to interest from educational leaders and policymakers to develop career academies that integrate academics with career and technical education because these programs provide
students with numerous pathways to both career and college (Grubb and Stern, 2007; Oakes & Saunders, 2008).

By 2010, there were over 500 high schools embracing this pedagogical framework (Stern, Dayton & Raby, 2010). Stern, Dayton, and Raby (2010) suggest that the career academy model form around elements that are similar throughout the nation. First, schools organize as schools-within-a-school—also known as small learning communities. Second, the core content and career and technical education (CTE) curriculum are centered around career themes that students choose to be a part of (Schwartz, 2016). State departments of education developed much of the curriculum, but recently the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provided some guidance around career and college readiness to all states. Several states, and school districts across Kentucky, have also formed business and industry councils that work with schools and school districts to develop curriculum aligned to the technical skills they are looking for in their workforce. Finally, individual career academies partner with those industries and businesses to provide work-based learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom (Fletcher & Cox, 2012). The arrangement of students and teachers into career-themed cohorts, or academies, enables them to spend several years together in a supportive community tied to local business and post-secondary institutions.

Research on career academies has provided insight into restructuring U.S. high schools to better prepare students for college and careers. McPartland et al. (1998) produced the first results of restructuring a high school into small learning communities centered on career pathways or academies. Patterson High School in Baltimore reorganized because “it was one of the two worst high schools in the state of Maryland in

According to Raywid (1996), transforming a traditional school into a career academy school requires teachers and administrators to do more than one job as they operate from an old system while implementing the new one. The time and energy needed to carry out this change are sometimes dictated by supervisors and district leaders on timelines not set by those working at the school level. As schools transform into the career academy model to improve achievement and engage students in a real-world exploration of their chosen career field, stakeholders in that school system must also change how they interact with one another. Teachers, students, and business partners are all important stakeholders in the success or failure of a career academy. It is on the shoulders of school leaders to ensure that throughout the transformation to the career academy model that all student academic needs are met within the educational system, while also maintaining a focus on preparing those same students to make informed college and career decisions.

The literature on what school districts and leaders need to understand to transform their schools in this way is growing rapidly as career academies get more and more attention from researchers. The literature on career academies currently focuses on district staff and there is a lack of knowledge on how to assist school leaders in the redesign of their schools (Oxley & Kassissieh, 2008). If we are to assist district and school leaders on the decision to transform their school into a career academy school, then we must start by collecting information from the students themselves on how the
change affects school culture. This means there is a need to understand whether students feel adequately prepared to make college and/or career choices and are inspired in the career academy model in which they live and work each school day. Gottfried and Plasman (2018) suggest that the relationships and team building inherent within the career model help students form a deeper understanding because of the practical application of materials, collaboration among students, and collaboration between educators and business partners.

**School Culture**

The quality of the relationships students and staff establish between one another can be linked to the positive and negative feelings and perceptions that are experienced in the school setting (Bronfenbrenner 1977). The school environment is the set of internal characteristics that distinguish one school from another and that influences the behavior of both staff and students (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). Positive school culture and experiences should therefore foster student achievement and increase student engagement. Student engagement measures the level of interest a student has in areas such as academics and coursework, athletics, and extracurricular activities (clubs, intramurals, school-sponsored events, etc.); the more a student is interested in what they are doing at school, the less likely they will be to disengage, which eventually can lead to dropping out (Appleton et al., 2008). A positive school culture, therefore, is the soul and strength of the school that develops and adapts to the environment (Sarjou, Soltani, Kalbasi, & Mahmoudi, 2012). Bryan Station High School, with its effort to establish an environment of collaboration and trust through the career academy model, also must begin to move forward towards conceptualization and understanding how students
perceive the academy model and its impact on the high school experience. Research can explore the aspects of the academy model that support student engagement and collaboration.

**Context of the Study**

Bryan Station High School is located in Lexington, Kentucky. The school opened its doors for the first time in 1958 as a community school on the north side of the city. After a large outcry from the Bryan Station community, the school was completely remodeled and reopened its doors to students in 2007. Bryan Station is the only high school in the Fayette County Public Schools system that is Title I and receives additional assistance from the federal government for its high free and reduced lunch population. The school’s student capacity is just over 1800 students, but over the last two years, has had a total enrollment nearly 1600 students serving grades ninth through twelve.

Bryan Station is a unique school in its district as it was the first school to fully transition to a wall-to-wall career academy. In the 2015-2016 school year, a new leadership team, using money provided by the Perkins Grant, gave release time for twenty-four teachers to visit the Academies of Nashville in Nashville, Tennessee to study career academies and begin the work of transitioning from a traditional school model to the career academy model. That work led to the creation of the Freshman Academy for the 2016-2017 school year where all freshmen were placed in a small learning community where they could begin exploring career and college pathways. According to Kemple and Snipes (2000), career academies focus on small learning communities and connect students and their teachers to a career-themed curriculum that bridges rigorous academics with career interest. All ninth-graders take a freshman seminar course
designed to help them acquire soft skills that the college and business community feel are necessary to succeed in the 21st century. Ninth graders also attend a career expo and go on a college visit during the course of the school year to explore different career fields and learn more about college opportunities.

Along with the Freshman Academy, all students in grades ten through twelve received placements in the career academy of their choice. Those choices consisted of The Information Technology Academy, The Leadership Academy, The Engineering and Robotics Academy, and The Medical Academy. Student choice is a key foundation in the career academy approach and as Dixon, Cotner, Wilson, and Borman (2011), have written, career academies give students the opportunity to explore work-based learning experiences aligned to the career theme of the academy. These academies seek to prepare students for the college and career opportunities that lie beyond high school, whether that involves continuing post-secondary education or immediate entry into the local workforce.

Drawing on the Nashville Student Ambassador model, each career academy at Bryan Station High School has a group of four to five students that represent both their academy, and The Academies of Bryan Station as a whole, through collaboration and informing of school stakeholders. These students are called student ambassadors. Every student at Bryan Station High School can apply to be a student ambassador each year to lead their academy and once selected, receive training in leadership, communication, and professionalism. Business leaders, school leaders from other districts, advisory boards, and chambers of commerce invite these ambassadors to speak about their career academy experiences, be a voice of the students within their academies, and to promote the
academy concept. These students are the heart of the academy model at Bryan Station and the first class of ambassadors were heavily involved in the transformation of the school from a traditional school to the academy model through their insight and advocacy for change.

**Conceptual Framework of the Study**

The experiences, accomplishments, and social influences a student has throughout their time in school creates meaning and helps inform how they identify career interests and make career choices (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). This is especially true in high school where students begin to develop an awareness of their career interests and start thinking about their life after high school (Erikson, 1963). Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) posited a theory that the interaction between learning experiences, self-efficacy, and outcome expectation informs how a person identifies career interests and makes career choices. The success and failures a student experience influence their expectation of success and failure, which will ultimately help drive career choices.

This constructivist approach aligns with Creswell and Creswell (2018), who pointed out students create an understanding of experience through their prior experiences and their understanding of the world around them. In the career academy model, every student is a member of a small learning community with other students who have similar career aspirations. Students participating in a career academy model also have career supports and experiences from a variety of adult and community stakeholders. Those supports are key in influencing a student’s career development and career choices (Wall, Covell, & Macintyre, 1999). For the academy model, this means that the student experiences in their small learning communities play a key role in helping
to shape their career and college decisions. The advocacy of the student ambassadors in assisting to assess practice, recommend change, and publicly represent the academies is the key to this work.

**Research Questions**

The central research question in my study was “What are student ambassadors’ perceptions of career academies and the impact of the perception on the high school experience?” Students in career academy schools must apply, interview, and participate in monthly training and leadership development seminars if selected to become a student ambassador. Student ambassadors are students in grades 10-12 and provide student voice to support the growth and improvement of their respective academy.

My primary goal was to describe how these former student ambassadors perceived the impact of career academies on their high school experience at Bryan Station. The three subordinate questions guiding this research were:

1. How do academy student ambassadors perceive the purpose of career academies in their high school setting?

2. What are academy student ambassadors’ perceptions of career academy successes?

3. What are academy student ambassadors’ recommendations to improve the academy experience for all students?

As more schools look to transforming education through the career academy model, understanding the student experience will be important to school leaders as they prepare their districts, teachers, students, and parents for the experience. Data for this case study was collected using the Group Level Assessment (GLA) technique (Vaughn &
Lohmueller, 1998; Vaughn et al., 2011) with former student academy ambassadors in a career academy high school that transitioned from a traditional high school while they were attending. It further explored how students perceived the transition impacted the academic and behavioral culture of their school. Finally, this study also examined the implications of the transition and how students felt about their educational experiences in the academy model.

**Significance of the Study**

According to Cramer (2006), past studies of career academies have focused mainly on teacher and school leaders' perceptions of their impact and have left a gap in how students perceive the career academy model and its impact on school culture. Keeping students in school and helping them obtain a high-quality education that prepares them for both work and college is more valuable than any test score can measure. My study will help to address the gap in the literature on how students perceive career academies within a large urban school district.

My research is also important for the current work at Bryan Station High School and The Academies of Lexington. Three high schools in Fayette County have transitioned to wall-to-wall career academies with a fourth highly considering it in the near future. Significant time, effort, and human capital have gone into this work, and it was important that we collect and analyze data to determine if the return on the investment has been worth it. Many dedicated staff and community partners have worked diligently to make this dream a reality and it was imperative that we heard the voice of the former students and get their thoughts and feelings on the impact career academies had on their school experience. The results of this study can inform
educational leaders within the district, and other districts considering the career academy model and will function as a starting point for student voice on the career academy model and its impact on them socially and emotionally within their school environment.

**Scope**

My study focused on the experiences of students that have graduated from The Academies of Bryan Station. All research participants were former student ambassadors that volunteered to participate in the study. Due to COVID-19, and the impact the pandemic has had worldwide, all research participants engaged in a Group Level Assessment (GLA) through video communications platform known as Zoom. The GLA was used in an effort to understand their perspective on the academy model and what aspects of academies were successful or in need of change.

**Limitations**

Case study research does have limitations as scholars have acknowledged the research may lack scientific rigor and provide little basis for generalization of results to the wider population (Yin, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Other limitations in this study may include gaining access to former student ambassadors that have graduated from The Academies of Bryan Station. Many of the former ambassadors had moved out of the city/state and contact information was not up to date from their time as a student. The COVID-19 pandemic the world is currently facing also presents itself as a limitation that was addressed by completing the GLA virtually to gather all of the participants for the study.
**Delimitations**

My study is limited to just one high school, The Academies of Bryan Station, which was the first to wall-to-wall career academy in Fayette County Public Schools. All student ambassadors that graduated from Bryan Station had the opportunity to participate in the study in the hopes of having a high participation rate. The GLA participants were limited to student ambassadors that had graduated before the 2020-2021 school year for this study.

**Assumptions**

Throughout the Group Level Assessment process, I assumed all participant responses were accurate and honest. There was a one-year to a three-year gap between participants graduating from The Academies of Bryan Station. I also assumed all participants received similar training in their ambassador training program through the Academies of Lexington master plan. Lastly, I assumed that all literature gathered through the review of the literature was unbiased and truthful.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

The following terms were used in the study:

*Career Academies* are schools within schools designed to prepare students for both college and careers. The structure and purpose of career academies in the high school setting are as follows: 1) divide students into small learning communities with similar career interests and enable them to spend several years together in a supportive community; 2) integrate academics with career and technical education programs to provide students with numerous pathways to both career and college; 3) partner with...
post-secondary institutions and business and industry to provide work-based learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom (Fletcher & Cox, 2012).

Small Learning Communities (SLCs) refer to building a cohort of students and teachers for multiple years allowing deeper relationships to emerge and grow as both parties learn and work together. These supportive environments allow individualized attention for students, and groups of students, to meet their academic and career goals more effectively (Fletcher & Cox, 2012).

Career ready refers to students having the knowledge and skills needed for success in business and industries constantly changing (Stone, 2017). According to the Commonwealth of Kentucky, a career ready student is one who is preparatory in a defined CTE pathway and has earned an industry certification or equivalent (Kentucky Center for Education and Workforce Statistics, 2017).

Career and technical education (CTE) is the contemporary term for what was previously referred to as “vocational education”. Students enrolled in career and technical education programs learn both the academics needed for college and the career and technical skills needed for the workforce (Stern, Dayton, & Raby, 2010).

College ready refers to having the knowledge and skills needed for success in a postsecondary learning environment (Camara, 2013). As defined by the Commonwealth of Kentucky, a college ready student is one who has met benchmark scores in reading, math, and English on a college entrance exam or equivalent measure, as outlined by the Council on Postsecondary Education (Kentucky Center for Education and Workforce Statistics, 2017).
The Academies of Lexington began in the 2015-2016 school year within the Fayette County Public School System. The academies include three participating high schools from around the district as well as the three career and technical centers. The purpose of the Academies of Lexington is to transform education in the public high schools, enhance collegiate and workforce performance, and benefit Lexington and the surrounding communities in their workforce pipelines.

**Organization of the Study**

My research study consists of five chapters, including an introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and conclusions. The introductory chapter provides context on the study and includes the purpose, research questions, scope, assumptions, and definition of terms. The second chapter contains a review of the literature and is a comprehensive look into previous research and implications on career academies. Chapter Three explains the methodological choices including the design of the study, setting, and participants. Chapter Four reports the results of the qualitative study. Chapter Five discusses the conclusions and recommendations for future studies and work.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this qualitative study, I examined student ambassadors’ perceptions of career academies and the impact on the high school experience for all students. Specifically, I interviewed former student ambassadors from a single high school who have experienced the academy model. After a review of existing literature, and the identification of gaps within the literature, I formulated the following research questions:

1. What are student ambassadors’ perceptions of the impact of career academies on their high school experience?
2. How do academy student ambassadors perceive the purpose of career academies in their high school setting?
3. What are academy student ambassadors’ perceptions of career academy successes?
4. What are academy student ambassadors’ recommendations to improve the academy experience for all students?

I organized my review of the literature into eight sections. The first and second provides a brief look at the stigma of vocational education and how over time that stigma has lessened. The third section discusses career academies and the components that are embedded in the career academy model. The next five sections discuss research on school culture, school climate, student perception, student voice, and social cognitive career theory. I conclude the chapter with a summary of the findings from my literature
review. All of these topics provide foundational support for the research questions and methods of this research study.

**The Stigma of Vocational Education**

The pedagogical approach to teaching high school students has changed since the middle of the twentieth century. A common practice in the early 1950s was to track high school students into separate academic and vocational programs (Oakes & Saunders, 2008). The academic track was typically only considered for those who were marked by their social class and thought to have the ability to pay for college. Students in non-college tracks, trained for entry-level jobs and skilled labor, took a less rigorous curriculum such as “general math and science” instead of the more rigorous academic courses offered to their peers on the academic track were often stigmatized (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The belief that vocational education courses lack the rigor of other academic courses has prevailed for a long time and has stamped vocational education in a negative light into the twenty-first century.

Meer (2007) believes the stigmas associated with vocational education emerged because many believed, past and presently, that the curriculum and training only prepare students for low-skill jobs that no longer exist in the United States. For years, being deemed a vocational student was the object of lower expectations (Feinberg & Horowitz, 1990). Gainey (1993), found that non-college bound students were placed in general courses where they are taught basic life skills and were expected to produce minimal effort and achievement. The tragedy in this is that teaching to the top achieving students impacts low income and minority students who begin to believe they cannot learn at high levels and achieve (Gainey, 1993). Oftentimes, this leads to disenfranchisement through
exposure to unqualified teachers, less time on task with instruction, less challenging content, and a negative learning environment (Ogbu, 1978). Many teachers and counselors have underscored this perception with their negative attitudes towards vocational education, believing that trades were not worth the bother and students should rather explore academic jobs (Misko et al., 2007). This stigmatization increased when West (1996) found technical training inferior to other academic programs and that Ries (1997) found that many parents regarded vocational education as a path with limited opportunities in comparison to the college preparatory curriculum. U.S. society has developed an image of vocational education that is less than favorable and not aligned with current workforce needs (Misko et al., 2007).

Parents want their students to go to college and get a four-year degree because they believe the degree will lead to a better-paying job (Vo, 1997). Overcoming the enduring belief that vocational education does not lead to a well-paying job and is only for those not planning to go to college or those students considering dropping out of school (Wonacott, 2000). Many schools lack informed or knowledgeable counseling for students and parents about vocational education and apprenticeships which leads to those school stakeholders not understanding all the options that are available to them (Misko et al., 2007). The good news is that the image of vocational education is under revision through new programming such as career and technical education, school-to-career, tech-prep, work-based learning, workforce development, and lifework development (Kerka, 2000).

Career education has become a priority in many schools and school districts in the United States, yet many still believe that the measure of a good school is its ability to
prepare students to be successful at colleges and universities (Cuevas, 2001). For these individuals, the number of students who enter institutions of higher education measures educational excellence—even though only 20% of future jobs will require a four-year degree (Cuevas, 2001). Changing the beliefs held by parents and guardians of students can be very difficult. Kerka (2000) believes one starts by changing the minds of the parents; which oftentimes is hard because many have their hearts set on their children going to college.

**Changing the Stigma**

New programming with more contemporary terminology, coupled with reforms by both the federal government and individual states, are changing the stigma attached to vocational education that have existed for decades. Many educators have started to look at the academic and vocational curriculum and are combining them in a way that seeks to provide students with an opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills in their academic courses to real-world problems of the working world (Oakes & Saunders, 2008). A plethora of research is providing signs that vocational education and its curricular reforms are yielding positive outcomes for students and the workforce (Crain et al., 1999; Kaufmann, Bradley, & Teitelbaum, 2000; Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Stern, 2000). One researcher, Meer (2007), set out to create a counter-argument to income for students who chose the career and technical track over the academic track. The results of his study showed that vocationally tracked students were not likely to learn more had they chosen the academic, or college prep, track. Meer also believes that vocational students should not be stigmatized as learning less, or that their learning is inferior, to the academic track.
students as each track requires its own set of skills and interests (Meer, 2007). He goes on to state that all students can benefit from at least some technical education.

Furthermore, researchers have also found that integrating both the academic and vocational curriculum led to positive effects on student achievement, motivation, and overall student engagement. (Bragg et al., 2002; Kaufman et al., 2000; Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Stern, 2000). When comparing vocational education students taking applied math and reading courses in high school with college-prep students taking similar courses, the research team found that both groups were reaching similar proficiency levels (Levesque, Lauren, Teitelbaum, Alt, & Librera, 2000). Two studies found vocational education students go on to enroll in postsecondary education at just about the same rates as all high school graduates (Kober & Rentner, 2000; Stone, 1993).

**Career Academies**

The career academy model is a high school reform that has changed over the years from its original purpose of providing vocational education to students at-risk of dropping out of high school to one that prepares all students for both careers and college. According to Kemple and Snipes (2000), career academies emerged in the 1970s and 1980s to target high school students who appeared headed towards dropping out. The programs put in place to help these students focused on preparing them with vocational skills, keeping students engaged in school, and establishing pathways between graduation and work. The last two decades have seen legislative bills and policies, at both the state and national levels, geared towards assisting high school students make future postsecondary education and employment decisions (Maddy-Bernstein, 2000). In addition to the legislative interest, national leaders, practitioners, business leaders, and
career development experts have also begun to focus on this movement and the skills gap created by the “college for all” mantra the country has found itself facing (Lankard, 1991).

Educators in the career academy model place students in small learning communities where the focus is on creating educational pathways that are personalized and supportive to their educational and career goals and needs. Career academies center specifically on a career-related theme that provides students with a rich curriculum encompassing both academic and career/technical education courses. Some of the academy themes include medicine, information technology, and engineering, manufacturing, and robotics among many others. The underlying goals of the career academy model are to increase student attendance and achievement, improve student engagement, and create a pipeline of students prepared for the workforce (Kemple & Snipes, 2000).

The high school career academy, or academy model, is gaining popularity around the country to address skills gaps identified by business and education partners and prepare students for both college and career (Maxwell & Rubin 2000). The career academy constitutes a “school-within-a-school” concept and aligns curriculum and projects around a single occupation, profession or industry (Maxwell & Rubin, 2000). In a longitudinal study conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), the findings suggested that academies especially benefited students considered at-risk for dropping out (American Youth Policy Forum [AYPF], 2000). The data are clear that the number of students at risk of dropping out, the needs of the workforce, and the moral imperative to prepare students to be successful and productive citizens are all
issues that need to be addressed in the current reforms from legislators. (Hodge & Dougherty, 2020). Stern et al. (2000) found that after more than three decades of development and two decades of evaluation, career academies are effective in improving the performance of all students in high school.

Career Academies have grown nationwide as a high school reform model and perceived as a well-established, multifaceted approach focused on student learning and experiences (Stern, 2000). Academies focus on strategies for student career and college preparation, expand learning experiences within the classroom and workplace, and prepare all students for college and/or career opportunities (Maxwell & Rubin, 2000). The career academy model builds around elements that are similar throughout the nation. First, career academies consist of schools-within-a-school, also referred to as small learning communities (SLCs). SLCs cohort students and teachers for multiple years allowing deeper relationships to emerge and grow as both parties learn and work together. These supportive environments allow for individualized attention to be given to students, and groups of students, to better meet their academic and career goals (Fletcher & Cox, 2012). The small learning community model can build what Raywid (1996), describes as a “highly effective work environment for all stakeholders through a shared purpose, collaborative work environment, and a more focused knowledge on students’ skills and needs”.

Second, the core academic content and CTE curriculum in career academies are centered on career themes that students make the choice to be a part of when they choose their academy. Through hands-on learning experiences and the application of knowledge to relevant tasks, students gain a deeper understanding of the content than those
participating in a traditional education model (Fletcher & Cox, 2012). When teams of teachers work together to integrate real-world problems and experiences, research shows teachers’ work and effectiveness improve both individually and collectively (Bryke, Lee, & Holland, 1993). Newmann et al. (2001) found that schools that foster collaboration within their staff and students through common planning periods, school structures, and a reinforcing culture were more likely to gain instructional coherence.

Finally, individual career academies partner with those industries and businesses to provide work-based learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom (Fletcher & Cox, 2012). The arrangement of students and teachers into career-themed cohorts, or clusters, enables them to spend several years together in a supportive community tied to local business and post-secondary institutions. Civic groups and school stakeholders embrace a commitment to improving the learning outcomes for high school students that also benefits the community that surrounds the school (Hackmann et al., 2018). The commitment of local business and industry leaders is a critical piece to the career academy model and the partnerships that come from them form the foundation for the experiences students receive. Work-based learning experiences, internships, externships, guest speakers, and advisory boards for each career academy all are small cogs in the wheel of the academy model. Students, staff, and community members all benefit in multiple ways from these partnerships and experiences that eventually influence a career academy school’s academic and behavior climate.

Employers hold the key to the success of career academies by their contribution to the development of young people to fill the gaps economists see in the future concerning workforce needs. College and career readiness mean students must have exposure to
workplace situations and that can only happen when businesses and industries allow workplace visits, provide job shadowing opportunities, and, most importantly, internships. Career academies rely on employers for these work experiences so that students can complete career pathway requirements and acquire on the job technical skills. The relationships students develop through these partnerships with employers only enhance the school climate and culture developed through the SLC’s created in the academy.

As the U.S. and the global economy continue to move and shift to ever-changing market demands, educational institutions must transition to better align career paths to those industries in demand (Schwartz, 2016). One-way career academies are ensuring this happens is by working with the local chambers of commerce to analyze workforce data and shift academy themes when the need in a community arises. Healthcare, information technology, and manufacturing are sectors predicted to have a large growing need for highly skilled and educated workers in the future (Inanova, 2019). Knowing this, employers and community colleges can work together with career academies to develop pathways that can create pipelines of students who are interested in filling those jobs thus ensuring a thriving local economy and economically healthy community.

Career academies and vocational schools incorporate dual credit courses into their curriculum, which allow students to start earning college credit in high school while also providing them with marketable skills (Hoachlander, 2008; Mehan, 2007; Oakes & Saunders, 2008). Community colleges have played a significant role in the overall success of career academies around the U.S. and continue to play a major role in ensuring upward economic mobility for a large number of Americans. This is because they provide
a low-cost alternative for students seeking to gain technical and workforce skills. Companies utilize them to upgrade and enhance the skills of their employees so that companies can fill the gaps in hiring and recruiting.

When business and industry sectors align with community colleges and collaborating with employers, they can work together to ensure certification programs produce graduates that are ready to work and be successful in the 21st century (Schwartz, 2016). This collaboration must extend to high schools and can when school boards are at the table willing to transform their schools through the partnerships offered through business and high education partnerships for students.

**School Culture**

When discussing students’ perceptions of the school environment, it is important to recognize the difference between climate and culture to understand the effects of each on schools. For example, Schoen and Teddlie (2008) claim that while several climate researchers build research around the concept of climate, culture is the broader, all-inclusive concept; and therefore, suggests climate to be the second level of culture. Hoy et al. (1991) on the other hand suggests the notion that they are two different entities, in that climate is a behavior, and culture is the set of values and norms of the school. Furthermore, culture consists of shared assumptions and ideologies, while climate consists of shared beliefs and perceptions (Hoy et al., 1991). It is no wonder that culture and climate are frequently associated with one another and both are somewhat homologous to behavior and productivity within an organization. Hence, the climate of the school reflects personality and self-perception, which according to Bandura (1986), affects an individual’s decisions they make regarding their work, the effort invested to
make the decisions, and the standard to which they persist in the effort. Contrarily, culture represents strongly held beliefs, values, and assumptions of a group, which is reflected when the needs and desires of the group result in norms of day-to-day behavior, thus impacting daily decision-making (Kilmann & Kilmann, 1989). Fiore (2000) proposes that a school’s culture, no matter whether seen as positive or negative, has deep roots that make it hard to move and change. Fiore puts this into even clearer terms for further understanding the relationship between culture and climate when he says:

To understand the subtle differences between culture and climate, one must visualize a giant iceberg floating in the Northern Atlantic. The mass of ice that one is able to see in the frigid water represents school climate, in that it is readily observable. Just as one can easily perceive the qualities and characteristics of the iceberg, the same qualities and characteristics are easily observable within the climate in a school. However, it is common knowledge that there is much more to the block of ice floating in the water. In fact, there is a giant mass of ice below the surface that is not visible or observable to the eye. This mass below the surface is not only larger, but more complex, and therefore provides the supporting structures necessary for the existence of the part that one is able to actually see. This large foundation that is not visible represents culture within the school; thus it is the supporting structure on which the climate rests. The shape of it undergoes a slower, but more purposeful change than does the more easily observable climate. Likewise, with the iceberg, the mass below the surface is stable and very difficult to modify; however, its counterpart above sea level is victim to many
environmental factors that cause more rapid changes such as sun, wind, and rain.

(Fiore, 2000, p. 9)

Fiore goes on to suggest that with adequate time the whole iceberg, including the culture piece under the surface can change, but only with time and a specific purpose. The time commitment needed to change culture validates the importance of vision while working daily to cultivate a healthy climate (Fiore, 2000).

In a multisite case study, Orr and Fanscali (1995) found that students wanted to attend school more regularly and apply themselves academically when they felt a sense of community from their fellow students and teachers. Students felt that when they are supported and their work is meaningful and important, they are more likely to attend school and put forth the effort needed to be successful. This evidence points to the importance a school's culture plays in shaping a student’s beliefs in their school and community and the impact it can have on their education. This impact can go even deeper when local employers and colleges embed themselves in the school community.

**School Climate**

Academy schools center around small learning communities focused on the knowledge and the skills students need, while also creating a sense of belonging and community for all school stakeholders (Raywood, 1996). The environment created for students within academies are vitally important because schools are an important setting for the development of both social and academic behaviors. One important feature of the school environment that can have a significant impact on a student’s behaviors is the feelings and perceptions regarding the social environment in which they learn and grow (Libbey, 2004). Maddox and Prinz (2003) put forward that school climate includes
students’ perceptions of interpersonal and procedural dimensions of school life and that school climate is therefore a combination of the attitudes, beliefs, values, and norms that underlie the operation of a school. School climate is driven by how faculty, staff, and students’ model and apply these attitudes, beliefs, values, and norms. In schools with a positive school climate, you will often find adults and students showing a genuine concern for each other’s needs and staff behaviors that engender a sense of belonging (LaRusso, Roma & Selma, 2008; LaRusso & Selma, 2011)

We have heard for years in education that relationships are the key when it comes to high-quality education in the classroom. Therefore, the quality of a student’s relationship with his or her teacher has the potential to provide a positive or negative experience for the students, which can affect potential outcomes (Baker, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2003). Positive relationships in the educational setting for students yield the positive support necessary to engage in learning activities and traverse a variety of competencies needed in the school environment (Pianta, 1999). These positive relationships have also been linked to students’ successful adjustment to school, academic achievement, and liking the school they attend (Birch & Ladd, 1997). The opposite is also true for negative relationships, producing such outcomes as low academic achievement and low school connectedness (Birch & Ladd, 1997).

The relationships between students and their peers within their school and social environments play a key role in a student’s socialization, norms, and aspirations for the future (Harris, Duncan, & Bojoisly, 2002). Certain aspects of school climate, and how students perceive them, structure norms and values; that is, what students see and hear as common practice by other students they could assume behaviors are socially acceptable.
For example, Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, and Gottfredson (2005) reviewed studies that investigated school climate and surmised that how leaders lead schools relates to the volume of behavioral disruptions in school. He found that when administrators and faculty lack communication and do not work collaboratively to solve problems, there was a lowering of teacher morale and higher student disorder. The opposite was true when elements like high expectations among staff, students, and parents for student achievement, active engagement of students, and positive social relationships among students positively influenced school climate (Stockard & Mayberry, 1992). Academies group students into cohorts based on student’s choice around career pathways they want to explore. Freshmen are also cohorted to ensure specific and intentional supports are in place for the transition to high school.

As mentioned previously, the school climate is the underlying construct that connects the attitudes, beliefs, values, and norms in a school. How students perceive the school climate can influence them in both positive and negative ways. Students that have a positive perception of school climate, for example, may feel teachers are responsive to their needs, that school enforce rules and procedures fairly, and that teachers respect their thoughts and opinions (Libbey, 2004). Another important factor in the construct of school climate is how students perceive their sense of belonging, or sense of membership or acceptance into the school (Ma, 2003). Student perceptions play an important role in determining the effectiveness of a learning environment and discussed next.

**Student Perceptions**

Learning environments play a significant role in terms of the effort students put into a course, how enjoyable they find the course, and the amount of learning that takes
place (e.g., Walker & Fraser, 2005). Beginning in the 1960s, researchers began to find a correlation between students’ perceptions of their learning environments and specific student outcomes (Walberg & Anderson, 1968; Walberg, 1979). Walker and Fraser (2005) stated, “Learning environments research has consistently demonstrated that, across nations, languages, cultures, subject matter, and educational levels, there are consistent and appreciable associations between classroom environment perceptions and student outcomes” (p. 294).

Prior academic research has shown that student perceptions of the learning environment are both reliable (Fauth, DeCristan, Rieser, Klieme, & Büttner, 2014) and predictive of the levels of learning in the environment (Kane & Staiger, 2012). This means that gathering student perceptions on their learning environment is likely suggestive of the overall classroom and school cultures in which they learn and grow. When students do not form positive relationships with their peers and make connections with their teachers, many of them disengage from work, school and refuse to learn anything at all (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). The relationships and interactions between a student and his or her teacher(s) are the source material for student-teacher connections and those perceptions can strongly influence student learning (Davis, 2003).

Knowing the importance of student perceptions is paramount to future planning and implementation of the academy model in other schools and districts. Embedded in the academy model are small learning communities that set the foundation for the positive student outcomes and environments that are created for all staff and students (Fletcher & Cox, 2012). Students work weekly alongside students with similar career interests as well as the business and post-secondary partners attached to their academy
and business advisory councils. The quality of these interactions and classroom processes, when measured, can be used to inform instruction, build stronger academy systems, and give vital student voice compared to resource-intensive assessments such as classroom observations (Turner & Meyer, 2000).

**Student Voice**

As schools and districts look at reforming education practices and strengthening school improvement efforts, it is important that school leaders and educators allow students to have a voice at the table. Many students frequently describe schools as a place where they have no voice and no one cares about their ideas and opinions (Cook-Sather et al., 2015; Earls, 2003). This alienation can often result in many students disengaging from school, particularly at the high school level (Cothran & Ennis, 2000). When students disengage from school they often achieve at lower levels, attend school less, and are more likely to drop out (Fullan, 2016; Lukes, 2015).

Placing students in a position to give feedback and have voice in education and educational reforms, such as the career academy model, would allow students to shift from the knowledge receivers they are typically viewed, to knowledge creators. The term student voice can range from youth simply sharing their opinions on problems, to allowing them to collaborate with adults to address problems in their schools, or even taking the lead on change initiatives (Mitra, 2007; Fielding, 2001). Research has also shown that students improve both academically and behaviorally when teachers and principals construct their learning environments in ways that place value on student voice (Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).
With career academies being a relatively new reform model at Bryan Station High School, school and district leaders have a unique opportunity to tap into the voices of the students experiencing the academy model and engage them in a way that all school stakeholders can benefit. Several research studies have shown that student voice and input can improve organizational visioning and strategic planning (Brasof & Spector, 2016; Zeldin et al., 2005; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Children often want to talk about issues and concerns adults avoid or simply do not see from their perspective. They can serve as important sources of information that may not be available regarding implementation and experiences of educational change and can help reshape reform efforts when they are slowly or shallowly implemented (Kushman, 1997; Rudduck et al., 1997). Finally, student voice can help bridge communication and explanation between school and families and help mobilize school stakeholders in support of change when it is needed (Levin, 2000).

Allowing student voice can also have an impact on improving the school culture and climate in high schools. Many studies have shown that students have a strong desire for positive relationships with their teachers as opposed to a lack of respect and appreciation that many reported they often felt (Yonezawa & Jones, 2007; Poplin & Weeres, 1992; Lynch & Lodge, 2002). For example, students at Whitman High School in Northern California had teachers accompany them on tours of their neighborhood and discussed with them their experiences around where they lived, worked, and played (Mitra, 2003). They pointed out areas’ students avoided, where gangs had control, and teachers engaged in questions and dialogue about the needs of their school community. After these tours, students felt they came to know their teachers and that their teachers
came to better understand them. Both teachers and school leaders reported that the experience was valuable and that they had developed a better understanding of student experiences and their impact on their school. Gathering student voice tends to highlight just how important teacher-student relationships are to the overall culture of a school and collecting that voice will be crucial to learning more about how the career academy model is impacting the school environment.

**Social Cognitive Career Theory**

According to Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy is achieved through one’s personal motivation and through one’s beliefs regarding his or her capability or competence in performing specific tasks (Bandura, 1997; Lent et al., 1994). Motivation and beliefs together influence one’s perceptions of his or her abilities. This means that when an individual’s self-efficacy increases regarding their abilities to perform well on a particular task, levels of persistence and motivation will also increase. High school is a time when adolescents begin to make decisions about their future career paths, identify their aspirations, and set their educational and career goals. There are several studies that suggest that greater self-efficacy in such domains as academic performance (Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1986), interests in academic subjects (Smith & Fouad, 1999), and career interests and goal-setting (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001) is related to increases in desired outcomes such as higher grades, greater interests in core academic subjects, and greater career interests and increased goal-setting activity (Lent and Brown, 2006).

Bandura’s (1986) work on social cognitive theory has given rise to social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994) which was created as a framework to
help in understanding the ways a student forms career interests, make educational and
career choices, and achieve and perseveres in terms of academic and career endeavors.
Lent et al. (1994) posited the theory that the interaction between a person’s learning
experiences, self-efficacy, and outcome expectation informs how they identify career
interests and make career choices. In the SCCT, they argue that a person’s career self-
efficacy develops from his or her accomplishments, perceptions, social influences, and
emotional state. When a student experiences failure or success, that event informs their
expectation of success or failure, which ultimately drives career decisions (Lent et al.,
2009). Within the backdrop of a career academy school, social cognitive career theory is
embedded in the entire instructional model.

**Summary of Literature Review**

In this chapter, I discussed the stigma of vocational education and how this stigma
changed over time; thus, laying the groundwork for modern-day career academies.
Career academies have become a very popular transformative educational model many
schools have undertaken over the last two decades. As schools struggled to connect
content to life experiences and engage all students in the learning process, career
academies emerged as a model for comprehensive school reform (CSR). The career-
themed small learning communities within an academy connect both students and
teachers to a career-themed curriculum. This means that each academy has pathways
organized around major industry themes such as healthcare, business, and finance, or
engineering. Each pathway in the academy also contains a challenging academic
component, a demanding technical component, a work-based learning component, and an
individualized support system for each student academically, behaviorally, and socially-emotionally (Stam, 2011).

Partnerships with local governments, businesses, and post-secondary institutions further provide opportunities for work-based learning opportunities that many traditional high schools lack (Cox, Hernandez-Gantes, and Fletcher, 2015). Students connect to these partnerships through their CTE classes and relationships form with potential employers and college recruiters. Students experience these industry partnerships through job shadowing experience and internships as they travel through their career pathway and advance their technical skills.

The focus on these small learning communities has also shown to have positive outcomes on student/teacher relationships. Students and faculty members in several studies noted a family feeling because of being in a career academy (Dixon, Cotner, Wilson, & Borman, 2011). These strong relationships develop from students spending several years together and being cohorted with the same faculty. Teachers see students for multiple years and get to know each student individually as they work to develop their strengths and identify areas of growth. Students also get to experience many successes and failures working through project-based learning activities and curriculum with their teachers. In an interview with an administrator, Dixon et al. (2011) quoted one administrator as saying:

I don’t know if it is measurable and it may not be, but right off the bat, there’s a different feeling in classes. There is a familiarity and that feeling of family that I think is the real linchpin of what academies are attempting to do. Students, from
the day they walk in, are told that they are part of something; they’re a part of an academy that’s special, and that there are people invested in this. (p. 219)

Academy cohorts allow the teacher teams to get to know the whole student and provide intervention, support, and extensions that can be tracked and refined once implemented. SLCs allow these interdisciplinary teams to review student data and provide support across all content and grade levels. While a broad research base exists on career academies around implementation, structure, and perceptions of school & district leaders, I have found very little research exists that explores student perceptions of the career academy and what changes they feel may increase career academy effectiveness.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I provide a description of the methodology used to collect and analyze data on student ambassadors’ perceptions of career academies and their impact on the high school experience for students. There are four research questions guiding this study with the first serving as an overarching question. The study expanded on existing career academy scholarship by examining the following research questions:

1. What are student ambassadors’ perceptions of the impact of career academies on their high school experience?

2. How do academy student ambassadors perceive the purpose of career academies in their high school setting?

3. What are the academy student ambassadors’ perceptions of career academy successes?

4. What are academy student ambassadors’ recommendations to improve the academy experience for all students?

As more schools across the nation look to transform education through the career academy model, understanding the student experience will be important to school stakeholders as they prepare their districts, teachers, students, and parents for the experience. I begin this chapter with an explanation of why the qualitative methodology is appropriate for the research questions being analyzed. The research plan, including
study participants, procedures, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical concerns are also sections discussed within this chapter.

**Social Cognitive Career Theory**

This study on how career academies influences student perception of school culture is grounded in the conceptual framework of social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). A significant amount of career development takes place during high school, and adolescence, as students begin to develop an awareness of their career interests, begin career and college planning, career exploration, and start to think about their futures after high school (Erikson, 1963). Based on Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory, Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) posited the theory that the interaction between learning experiences, self-efficacy, and outcome expectation informs how a person identifies career interests and makes career choices.
Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) argued that a person’s career self-efficacy develops from his/her accomplishments, observations, social influences, and physiological and/or emotional state. In addition, the successes and failures a person experiences will inform his/her expectation of success or failure, which will drive career choices made.

As Creswell and Creswell (2018) point out, individuals create meaning through their understanding of an experience or phenomena as interpreted through their prior experiences and their understanding of the world around them. This constructivist approach, according to Glesne (2016), is interpretivist and predicated on two
assumptions: (a) reality itself is socially constructed. That is, a person develops an understanding of the world through their interactions with other people; and, (b) the variables are complex and difficult to separate from each other, making measurement a challenge (p. 10).

A career academy’s purpose, therefore, has a powerful impact on the career and post-secondary choices made by students. The pedagogical approaches taken by teachers have the ability to determine a student’s ability to learn content; the support the teacher provides as students succeed or fail directly affects that student’s sense of self-efficacy, as well as their belief in future outcomes. Business and community partners working alongside students in their classrooms and work places help to guide students in their future career plans and decision-making.

Students participating in the career academy model will have career support from a variety of adult and community stakeholders. Scholars identified these supports as influential factors in a student’s career development (Kemple and Wilner, 2008; Wall, Covell, & Macintyre, 1999). Besides the role that parents play teachers (Moore, 2009; Farmer, 1985), friends (Furman & Buhrmeister, 1992) and business partners (Ford Next Generation Learning, 2017; Farmer, 1985) play integral roles in developing students’ aspirations and supporting their career planning and exploration also. Rogers, Creed, and Glendon (2008) found a direct relationship between the career supports of teachers, business partners, and friends and career exploration and planning. Through their work in interdisciplinary teams, students have access to the deep and broad knowledge of their peers, as well as opportunities for rich curricular collaboration. Within the career academy model, students deepen their relationships with peers by working together. Stoll
and Fink (1996) emphasize that this notion of the school as a ‘caring family’ (p.192) brings with it high expectations for all its members, the recognition of individual strengths and the need for mutual support, the need to compensate and support weakness, and always behaving ‘in ways based on mutual trust, respect, optimism and intentionality’ (p. 192). Moreover, through the cohorting of students and teaming in small learning communities, teachers deepen their relationships with students who they teach for multiple years. The constructivist student experience, the career academy institutional model, and the theory of social cognitive career development work together to inform the framework of this research.

**Instrumental Case Study**

This qualitative study used a case study research design to examine student ambassadors’ perceptions of career academies and how they impacted the high school experience for students. I utilized a single-case design in this qualitative study so that I could investigate a single phenomenon as experienced by multiple participants (Yin, 2014). A single-case design was also chosen as such studies typically encourage adherence to the processes and procedures of exploring and understanding the phenomenon under study rather than trying to identify and account for differences between cases (Maxwell, 2004). As my study gathered information from multiple academy ambassadors (embedded units of analysis) at one high school (case), a single case-study approach is the most appropriate. A graphic displaying the types of case-study research is included below (See Figure 2). Based on the timeline for this research, three schools were wall-to-wall academy schools in Lexington; however, I chose Bryan Station as it was the first school to make the transition.
Creswell and Poth (2018) differentiate between three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and comparative. This study engages in an instrumental analysis of the students' experiences. In an instrumental case study design, the findings of the study contribute to an improved understanding of the issue in order to draw some generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glesne, 2016). In this case, the experiences and perceptions of student ambassadors in a high school career academy can provide insight into similar transitions in school districts across the country.

**Site and Study Participants**

Three schools in Lexington, Kentucky have implemented the career academy model. Bryan Station High School, which is the subject of this case study, has been operating for the longest and started five years ago in 2016-2017. The other two schools started implementation in 2017-2018 and 2018-2019. I selected Bryan Station as the research site, along with the participants, utilizing a purposeful sampling strategy. This is because all participants were students in their respective academies and selected as a
student ambassador to represent their career academy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bryan Station was chosen as the research site because it was the first high school in the district to transition to a wall-to-wall career academy. All participants served as student ambassadors for their career-themed academies and chosen to establish representative diversity in both sex and race. These students all graduated from Bryan Station High School also.

I recruited participants through a district database called Infinite Campus. I emailed participants and followed up the email with a text message from previously known numbers used by the ambassadors in a text group they were involved with as students. I asked all participants to respond to a Google Form Survey to gauge interest in the GLA and document the level of diversity in the study. The participant sampling pool was limited to those participants that respond and answered the Google Form Survey. I composed an informed consent form (see Appendix B) and each participant was required to have one on file prior to participating in the GLA. After all of this was completed, I recruited a total of 13 former student ambassadors to participate.

**Procedures and Data Sources**

I conducted the study with the consent of all participants after I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this research project. Subsequently, I submitted a research application to Fayette County Public Schools for Bryan Station High School along with the protocols and procedures required by The University of Louisville and my committee. It is important to note that since the research was not under direct and ongoing support or supervision of Fayette County Public Schools or The University of Louisville, my committee was consulted and had a voice in the process, which
included the Structured Ethical Reflection (SER) process that helped to maintain ethics during all parts of this research (Stevens, Brydon-Miller, & Raider-Roth, 2016).

It should always be the desire of a qualitative researcher to remain nonjudgmental and to seek to understand the experiences of the participants in their research in an inductive manner. However, just having that desire was not enough as there will always be a risk of bias. I mediated that risk by reflecting, monitoring, and studying up on my subjectivity. Before I began this study, I utilized the process of Structured Ethical Reflection (SER). Using the SER process allowed me to have a formalized process from the beginning to the end of my research to help maintain awareness of my biases and the positionality, as they related to those that participated in the study.

My study utilized a single case study approach in order to understand how a group of former students perceived both the successes and growth areas in a career academy within a large, urban school district. I used a holistic approach to the data in order to analyze emerging themes within each academy ambassadors’ experience (Yin, 2014). The main data source was a group-level assessment conducted with 13 former academy student ambassadors. This type of approach was intended to identify themes in an overall collection of data with the intent of providing meaning and recommendations for other district and school leaders who may be thinking about transitioning their school to a wall-to-wall career academy. My overall aim in this study was to explore critical influences on the success or potential future changes of the academy model within high schools, from a student perspective, after implementation. The results of this study will be used to inform the composition of a guidebook for other principals, such as those in The
Academies of Lexington and Ford NGL communities, who are starting career academies within their high schools.

I chose a Group Level Assessment (GLA) as a way to collect data for this research after careful review of existing research on how powerful it was as an analysis tool (Vaughn & Lohmueller, 1998; Vaughn et al., 2011). There were two main reasons for the decision to use a GLA in this study besides the familiarity the researcher had with GLA before beginning the study. First, it was used to collect data for analysis. Second, the methodology allowed me to capture a larger, more diverse, group of participants than individuals alone in one-on-one interviews. This more personalized approach to research aligns to the ideals of participatory action research (Stevens, Brydon-Miller, & Raider-Roth, 2016). The GLA took place during the 2020-2021 school year and was conducted via Zoom in collaboration with another action researcher as a way to lessen bias and ensure that we implemented the GLA protocol with fidelity. All participants completed the consent form before the GLA activity began, and I recorded the process for future analysis.

During the GLA activity, all former student ambassadors participated in a virtual gallery walk and conducted a reflection on five questions in a Google document. Each group spent between 10-15 minutes on a question before rotating to the next prompt. Each participant had the ability to record information digitally, take notes, and number or rank information gathered throughout the GLA in Google. At the beginning of the GLA activity, I told all participants that the numbers represent a specific weight that they could assign to each one of the themes based on its importance to them. After each participants’ allotted time on the Google document had concluded, the documents were
divided up by randomly assigned student groups. Each group examined what other student ambassadors had written down and reported out a summary of findings to all groups. The entire activity lasted approximately an hour and a half. After the GLA ended, all Google documents were printed, saved, and comments transcribed for further analysis. The recording of the GLA only included the whole group discussions, and I made sure identifying information from individual comments was absent during the analysis stage.

**Data Analysis**

To achieve my goal in this study, I purposefully chose to blend several qualitative methodologies. In qualitative research, data analysis and interpretation can often be flexible, iterative, and take multiple forms due to the researcher’s positionality and ability to make meaning throughout the process (Creswell, 2014). I organized my analysis and findings by themes. I decided to present them based on the importance level of each theme identified through the Group Level Assessment (GLA).

As the facilitator of the GLA process, I made sure to act in a way that provided a safe and secure environment for all participants to interact and share ideas. I also made sure to provide enough time for all participants to collaborate with one another and reflect on their thoughts, perceptions, and findings written on the Google document that I shared with all participants. All written reflections from the group were recorded by themselves on the Google document, reflected on in smaller groups, and consolidated into a summary form during the whole group share reflection. I was fortunate enough to study GLAs as a part of the course work for my program and was able to gain further understanding of this process with collaboration from one of my dissertation committee members.
members. GLAs can be used for not only primary data collection in research, but also to validate study findings as well. This was the sole purpose this methodology was chosen for data collection and analysis along with the GLAs ability to increase participant connectedness and collaboration.

To assign meaning to the information collected during the GLA, I used coding as a way of categorizing and grouping the responses from student ambassadors in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it (Gibbs, 2018). As such, I guided the participants in using both vivo coding and descriptive coding in order to assign a single label to the data in order to establish common themes (Saldaña, 2016). Creswell and Poth (2017) describe this approach as a way for researchers to dig deeper into the data to both highlight significant statements or quotes and provide an understanding of how the participants perceived the experience. I also collected demographic data prior to beginning the GLA using a Google survey.

**Ethical Considerations**

One of the main goals of my research study was to gain an understanding of how student ambassadors perceived the career academy model and to gather clear and factual information around how to improve student experiences in a career academy school. However, it was also important for me to maintain confidentiality and ensure the perspectives from each student are heard and represented in the findings.

Ethical issues related to this study included confidentiality and the overall experiences and opinions garnered about what works and what needs to change for students within the career academy model. Because of this, I assigned participants pseudonyms, and omitted any identifying information during the recording and
transcription processes. Finally, participants did identify specific faculty and staff both positively and negatively, so I left out names intentionally to ensure confidentiality and not create tension as a result of the findings.

**Subjectivity and Positionality**

As the former head principal of Bryan Station High school, I have a unique perspective as an insider action researcher in my own organization (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). From my position, I have insight and access to information and deep knowledge of the interworking around career academies. This also meant I needed to be aware of my own subjectivity and bias as a researcher (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001). My role has allowed me to have access to graduates that attended Bryan Station High School after the transition to a wall to wall career academy. My experiences as an executive career academy principal also allowed me as an action researcher to connect with participants and establish rapport when setting up the group level assessment (GLA) and discussing the GLA protocols. GLA protocols were shared in advance with all former student ambassadors for feedback and approval along with the informed consent form.

Using Milner’s (2007) framework as a guide, I actively had to confront the beliefs that affected my positionality in order to respect the experiences of the former academy ambassadors I studied. I also had to strive to be an objective interpreter of the data as I collected, analyzed, and interpreted it. Lent et al.’s (1994) Social Cognitive Career Theory argues that a person’s beliefs, interests, and environment play a key role in helping them construct their own career identity and outcomes. Career academy schools have a fundamental goal of allowing students to explore their community and the career
opportunities without any social and economic pressure. My intention throughout the
study was to avoid pushing any social agendas on the work and research and allow the
student ambassadors to share their lived experiences free of any influences from me.

My research is centered on career academies and how the career academy model
influences student career and post-secondary experiences. Supervisors sometimes dictate
the time and energy needed to carry out this change and district leaders on timelines not
set by those working at the school level. The literature on what school districts and
leaders need to understand to transform their schools in this way is growing rapidly as
career academies get more and more attention from researchers (Cox, et al. 2015; Dixon,
et al. 2011; Hinds, 2020; Field, 2020). With that being said, it is important for me to
point out my positionality as an insider researcher in this case study and how that plays a
role in the conclusions that are produced from this work (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010).
As Bell (1998) discusses, first-person practice insiders have the ability to reflect deeply
with vulnerability, realistic expectations, tolerance, humility, self-giving, while keeping
focused on the goal of growing and developing their organization. I was hired by the
Site-based Decision-Making Council (SBDM) as the principal of Bryan Station High
School after working for one year as an interim principal in 2016. The new
superintendent of FCPS placed me at Bryan Station as an Interim. Since that time, I have
moved to the district office and now supervise all the academy school principals and
oversee the Academies of Lexington. I have always considered myself an, “out of the
box” educator and do not like doing things as they have always been done. I also like to
collaborate and seek out ideas and opinions of others throughout this research and intend
to continue to do so. It was important as an insider researcher that I consistently reflected
and examined my attitude, beliefs, processes, and procedures while keeping an open mind with the results without making assumptions. I based my findings and conclusions on the data gathered from students and their perceptions of how career academies changed their school high school experience; whether for better or worse.

Having led a Title I High School through the career academy transformation gives me a unique vantage point and competence to what needs to occur for successful implementation. I have spoken with school leaders, school staff, and students in several states about this work and have built lasting and unique relationships with those stakeholders along with those inside my own school. I am a working practitioner with firsthand knowledge and access to the resources and people needed to complete the study. My position in this work also brings with it challenges and potential biases when completing action research that I had to be aware of; both seen and unforeseen.

According to Milner (2007), “Unforeseen dangers are those that are unanticipated or unpredicted in a research project based on the decisions that researchers make in the research process (p. 388). Milner goes on to discuss how to ignore race and culture is dangerous, stating, “…dangers can emerge when and if researchers do not engage in processes that can circumvent misinterpretations, misinformation, and misrepresentations of individuals, communities, institutions, and systems”. (p. 388). As a district leader in the school community being studied, I needed to reflect on my experiences and remember that not everyone has the same backgrounds and experiences that I have had. Not all members of this community share the same race, socio-economic status, or have the exposure I have to the career academy model; however, there are experiences many of the students I researched were aware of during their high school experience. Some of
those include drug abuse, homelessness, foster care, and growing up in different countries or cultural backgrounds. All of this stayed in the forefront of my mind as I engaged in deep reflection about myself and where I stand in relation to the community as a whole (Milner, 2007).

Growing up poor in the 1980s and 1990s, experiencing the Challenger disaster, several hurricanes, including Hugo, and Operation Desert Storm has defined me in many ways. All of this was done while also watching my parents struggle to put a roof over my head and food on the table each week. When you have nothing growing up, it makes you appreciate all the little things in life including the people that guide and support you. The small learning community of teachers, coaches, mentors, youth group leaders, and friends that lift each other up and provide the guidance and supports needed to face that thing we call life. It is because of all of this I found a passion for education and a drive to help others rise above obstacles placed in front of them in their lives.

**Statement of Significance**

This study fulfilled a crucial need for both Bryan Station High School, the Academies of Lexington, and other career academy schools, as it took a deeper look into what students perceive about the career academy model and its impact on their high school experience. It also allowed for the collection of student voice concerning what is working and what to improve. The school district where this study took place currently has three academies with another school highly considering the transition. The results of this study will inform educational leaders within the district, and other districts considering the career academy model in the future. Research already exists that shows student engagement increases and students are more likely to attend school and graduate
when there is a positive school culture focused on their personal goals and future aspirations (LaRusso & Selma, 2011).

According to Cramer (2006), there are very few studies seeking student voice on career academies and even fewer that are embedded within large high schools like Bryan Station. Past studies of career academies have focused mainly on teacher and school leader perceptions of their impact and have left a gap in how students perceive the career academy model and its impact on their school experience. Keeping students in school and helping them obtain a high-quality education that prepares them for both work and college is more valuable than any test score can measure. This study has helped to address the gap in literature that exists on student perception of the career academy model.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the research method used to answer the three main research questions focused on student ambassador perceptions of their experiences in a career academy. I discussed elements of the methodology, including the participants, data collection, and procedures for data analysis, and the presentation of findings. I used social cognitive career theory to explore student ambassadors’ experiences, seeking to enhance the career academy model in Bryan Station—and (possibly) in other schools. All study participants played a part in adding to this theory by sharing their experiences as an ambassador in their career academy high school. The goal of the next chapter, chapter 4, is to provide the results of the study and link work done in the study back to the methodology described in Chapter 3.
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In this qualitative study, I examined student ambassadors’ perceptions of career academies and the impact of the perception on the high school experience for students. The following chapter will report the findings of this research. There are four research questions which guided this study with the first serving as an overarching question. The three subordinate questions provide additional examination into the ambassador perceptions of the career academy model. The study expands on existing career academy scholarship by examining the following research questions:

1. What are student ambassadors’ perceptions of the impact of career academies on their high school experience?

2. How do academy student ambassadors perceive the purpose of career academies in their high school setting?

3. What are the academy student ambassadors’ perceptions of career academy successes?

4. What are academy student ambassadors’ recommendations to improve the academy experience for all students?

This chapter begins with an examination of my positionality as a working practitioner examining student perceptions of a school in which I once was an administrator. The next section provides an overview of the study design as well as a
discussion of the qualitative data collection using a group level assessment. Finally, I explore how the findings address the research questions to conclude this chapter.

**Examining Researcher Positionality**

As I examined my positionality as a working practitioner and researcher, I utilized the components of Milner’s (2007) framework discussed in Chapter 3. To begin this examination, I first reflected upon my experiences to uncover how I came to be in the position to do this research and what experiences shaped me in the field of education where I am both working and exploring. I grew up in poor project homes and trailer parks early on in my life with parents that struggled daily to make sure there was always food on the table and clothes on my back. Moving constantly made it very hard for me to ever have a close-knit group of friends or classmates. I remember a span of years in my childhood where we moved homes three to four times with me ending up in a different school or state each time. These drastic moves as a child forced me to adapt to change but also never really let me get to know a group of people in a deep or meaningful way. These experiences shaped how I view small learning communities today, or SLC’s, and the impact they can have on young students. Whether a sports team, a Sunday school class, or a career academy, community influences future life. Seeing the impact and the influence of the relationships in those settings helped shape my decision to teach and become a school leader focused on creating positive cultures in which young people could discover and assist them in reaching their fullest potential both academically and personally. As an educational leader, I believe a high school’s main purpose is to help guide students to discovering their talents and passions while also giving them the exposure and experiences needed to make future career and college decisions.
The second component of Milner’s framework suggested that a researcher reflect on self in relation to others. This reflection required me to consider the longstanding position I held at the school and my relationships to those students involved in the study. Having worked the last six years with the public school in which this study was conducted, I am aware of the issues and changes that occurred both before and after the move to the career academy model. My first year working at the school, it operated under the traditional high school model with students divided by grade levels. There were initially only two small learning communities in the building. Career and college readiness were terms only spoken about in state accountability discussions and student voice was often discussed but rarely collected and acted upon. Having embarked on the journey to bring the academy model to the school district, I am fully aware of my potential bias within this study. I took care to ensure the design of this study captured student perception and voice in order to guide future practice and gain insight regarding what works, what did, and what improvements and growth are needed with the academy model.

In order to maintain awareness of my biases and positionality, I engaged in a structured ethical reflection process before beginning my research. The structured ethical reflection (SER) helped me to reflect deeply on the values that I hold so that I could shift my reflection away from me and to the system and processes of my research. The SER provides researchers with a process for identifying core values and examining the ways in which these principles are embodied in research and pedagogical practice (Stevens, Brydon-Miller & Raider-Roth, 2016). Study participants are critical partners in the process of qualitative research. I sought to understand a phenomenon (student
perceptions of the career academy model) and completing a structured ethical reflection (See Appendix F) enabled ongoing monitoring for any potential bias. Accurately representing student voice, and adhering to the values and perceptions they presented, increases the trustworthiness of this study and its findings.

**Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis**

I utilized a Group Level Assessment (GLA) to collect data on student ambassadors’ perception of the career academy model. A GLA is a collaborative approach to qualitative data collection employing small, representative groups of stakeholders working together to explore the specific phenomenon under investigation (Vaughn & Lohmueller, 1998; Vaughn et al., 2011; Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014). Group Level Assessments are typically assessed in person using a standard protocol (see Appendix A). The first stage of the GLA process begins with climate setting. This usually involves icebreakers and or a warm-up exercise to build trust amongst the participants. The ideation stage follows the first stage and is where participants interact with written prompts on large poster papers placed around the room. The predetermined prompts are based on the phenomenon being investigated and participants interact with the prompts as they move around the room and discuss the questions and responses with their peers. When participants agree with a response, they can highlight the information. When they need clarification, they can seek out the specifics from the participant who placed it on the prompt. Next, participants spend time reflecting silently on the data, jotting down initial thoughts or observations from all participant responses. The understanding phase of the GLA comes next with participants working with their peers to code the responses and develop themes that emerge from all of the prompts. These

55
themes are then prioritized based on those that are most representative of the phenomenon under investigation.

Using a Group Level Assessment, I investigated the perceptions of former academy ambassadors, what they believed worked, and what needed to change with the career academy model of learning. The traditional GLA was planned out in advance but unfortunately, due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, restrictions were put in place by the Centers for Disease Control, the Kentucky Department of Public Health, and the school district forbidding any group interactions. To address these restrictions, a virtual process was created using online video conferencing software paired with an online word processing software to allow for collection of qualitative data and to replace the traditional face-to-face GLA process (see Appendix D). An invitation to participate in this study was sent to 33 students that had graduated and were former academy ambassadors. These invitations were sent through email and through a text message group established when the former ambassadors were students at the school being studied. From that group of 33, thirteen students accepted the invitation to participate in the Group Level Assessment (See Table 1).

Table 1. Group Level Assessment Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Academy</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>FRL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant A</td>
<td>Engineering/Arts</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant B</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant C</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant D</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant E</td>
<td>Engineering/Arts</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant F</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant G</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant H</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant I</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant J</td>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant K</td>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant L</td>
<td>Engineering/Arts</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant M</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The presentation of data collected from the Group Level Assessment uses the language from the participants and addresses research questions three and four. Participants were asked to rank the top four themes as they related to their experiences as an academy ambassador and their career academy experience. Participants in the study used a rank-order polling model to award points to the themes most important to them. Each participant could award a total of 10 points by assigning 4 points to their top choice, then 3, 2, 1 point respectively. The final GLA data appear in the order of their rankings by the participants (See Table 2).

**Virtual GLA Process**

The SARS-CoV-2 virus, and the recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control, the Kentucky Department of Public Health, and the school district on how to prevents its spread, required changes to be made to the traditional Group Level Assessment process (Vaughn & Lohmueller, 1998). In the virtual protocol, all thirteen study participants joined an internet-based video conference. Every potential study participant was sent a link to the online video conference with their willingness to participate in the study being obtained when they joined the conference on the set date and time agreed on. The program used for the video conference displayed names of the participants when they joined, and I had the option to change names. I used this feature to change names and assign different labels to each participant (see Table 1). Several of the participants did know each other; however, such identifiers are immaterial to the GLA process because this prior knowledge did not compromise any of the discussion or
findings. It was because of this I changed the label to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants.

In a traditional GLA, study participants can move around a physical space to respond to written prompts and discuss answers. With the changes implemented to the GLA process due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, there was no physical space for the participants to collaborate. Google Documents were created with the written prompts and the former student ambassadors participating in the GLA interacted with and engaged in discussions in both the Google Documents and through the live video conference. I facilitated the conversations through probing questions and by asking for clarification when participants seemed confused or needed guidance.

Table 2. Group Level Assessment Themes and Ambassador Rank of Importance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Points Obtained</th>
<th>Rank of Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small learning communities and sense of belonging</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College and career preparation</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to gain certifications and experiences</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy for both self and community</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing universal life skills</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore opportunities</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows what I did not want to do</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for flexibility in academy choice/change</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lack of focus on scholarships, admissions, and competitiveness for entry

Note: Students were asked to rank order their top four with 4 has the highest value possible, therefore they could distribute 10 points in rank order 4, 3, 2, 1.

Step 5 in the traditional GLA process has the participants work together to group responses found on the poster papers into thematic categories and then prioritize those categories using a voting system (e.g., placing stickers, numbers, or symbols on the themes most important to them). The former student ambassadors in this virtual GLA worked together to code the responses on each of the Google Document prompts and looked for patterns among the responses. Finally, they prioritized these pattern codes based on a collective voting model. Using the Google Documents, each participant ranked the themes most important by assigning a point value based on its importance to him or her. The most important theme would be assigned a four, a three for the second most important, a two for the third most important and so on. Each participant could see others’ votes and have open and honest dialogue about the final rankings. To conclude the GLA, the student ambassadors discussed the final rankings and consensus between all participants was that the rankings of the themes mirrored their holistic perceptions.

**Group Level Assessment Findings**

There were five GLA prompts extracted from my research questions to address student perceptions of the career academy model, what worked, and what needed changed:

1. The purpose of the career academy model for students is…
2. The aspects of the career academy that were the most successful were…
3. If I could change anything about the career academy experience, it would be…

4. Because of my participation in the academy model as an ambassador, I am/am not…

5. The career academy model has influenced my future by…

These prompts were open-ended to allow former student ambassadors to share how they perceived their career academy experiences. The first GLA prompt addressed research question two. The second GLA prompt captured the former students’ ambassadors’ perceptions of career academy successes and addressed research question three. The third GLA prompt addressed research question four and the recommendations to improve the academy model. Finally, GLA prompts four and five addressed the heart of my research and were linked to the research question one.

Additionally, the prompts allowed for conversation and collaboration for more detailed data on those experiences. It was important to create an open forum where participants were comfortable discussing and expanding on each other’s answers and ideas. Throughout the GLA participants both recognized and agreed on specific ideas but also challenged and pushed back on others. The rich dialogue between participants helped to create an environment of divergent opinions which encouraged deeper conversations and a more interactive GLA experience.

**GLA Themes and Coding Qualitative Data**

The five GLA prompts gave participants a starting point for their discussions on the career academy model. The online video conferencing program, which was recorded using a feature embedded in the program, captured the work and collaboration from all
the student participants. The Google Documents also captured participant voice and perceptions live in the Google platform. The results from the rank order voting appear in rank from highest to lowest in Table 2 and the process for coding will be discussed in more detail below.

To guide the multi-stage coding process used with the student ambassadors, I applied Saldaña’s (2016) manual for coding qualitative data. First cycle coding occurred after the initial responses from each prompt were reviewed by participants. Ambassadors highlighted responses from the data that were similar and identified themes that were consistent in their responses. The second cycle codes emerged from the first cycle. The highlighted responses were grouped by participants from all prompts and second cycle patterns began to emerge from the responses. Miles et. al. (2014) write that coding is a method for discovery and codes are the result both the careful reading and reflection of data. I used In Vivo coding to both capture and encourage participant language usage. The themes discovered in the language and words of the participants’ data Young (2011) writes is an important approach to comprehending systematic and historic inequities.

*The purpose of the career academy model.* The Academies of Lexington was born from a community's collective commitment to change how they prepare students for the future workforce. Over the last year, the worldwide pandemic has only confirmed glaring gaps in the educational process that schools and school districts must address. But do students understand that purpose from their time learning and growing in a career academy school? During the first round of the GLA prompts, the participants were asked what they felt the purpose of the career academy model was for students. The most popular responses centered on preparing students for college and careers through
different exposures and experiences in high school. One student wrote, “To ensure that all students graduate with specific goals to direct them towards a clear career or college path and the skills necessary to achieve those goals.” Another stated, “To give students different experiences so they can explore career fields and find out what they are passionate about.” Many of the participants highlighted Participant M’s response when discussing this prompt. He wrote:

Academies increase college or career readiness by providing a focused track down a specific field. Preparedness is gauged by metrics set by “real world” consequences (test scores, skill certification, etc.) and is built in collaboration with local community leaders and stakeholders. College and career readiness is defined as to provide students a vision and plan for completing high school and beyond, and finding a place in the modern economy. A key component of the career academy model is individual discovery, promoting community, and satisfying the needs of each individual student. This contrasts with the typical education model where students are forced to adapt to a narrow track of options.

The study participants appreciated Participants M’s response because it highlighted skill certifications and the collaboration with community partners and leaders. Everyone felt that academies should help students discover what they are passionate about and set them on a path to explore that passion further in collaboration with others who may have similar passions. These things were not happening when Participant A attended a traditional high school. He stated, “In my old school we got some choice in courses but mostly we were placed in random classes we sometimes didn’t even sign up for.” He went on to discuss how the career academy model made
sure courses were aligned and followed a path that prepared him for a future in the engineering field.

The most successful aspects of the career academy model. For twelve out of the thirteen participants in the Group Level Assessment, the small learning communities and the relationships created in the career academy stood out as what benefited and influenced them the most. Participant E – a graduate from the Engineering, Manufacturing and Robotics Academy – wrote:

By breaking up our large high school into “small schools,” teachers and students were able to build stronger relationships. The academies give students a sense of community and pride. There is also increased accountability within the smaller communities and less opportunity for students to “slip through the cracks.” My program director, counselor, and all of the teachers within my community knew me by name, how my classes were going, and the goals that I had for after high school.

For this student, the sense of community created in the academy model helped him to find his place in a large high school and gave him the confidence and trust in his teachers and classmates to be successful at school. He later stated, “Before academies and becoming an ambassador I was mortified to speak to a group of people. I rarely spoke at all in elementary and middle school.” The strong relationships and similar classes with peers over the course of several years helped him to break out of his shell and open-up both in and out of the classroom.

A young lady that served as an ambassador in the Leadership Academy, Participant I, felt like the small learning community was also the most successful aspect
of career academies. She specifically talked about the relationships between teachers and students and wrote:

[Career Academies] improved student-teacher relationships as I think some teachers grew to be more engaged and excited in what they were teaching when we moved to the academy model. This in turn caused students to be more excited about what they were learning as they saw their teacher be enthusiastic about the subjects they were teaching.

Her perception was based on the idea that because relationships between faculty and students improved, became stronger, and classes and course work became more enjoyable. The school climate and culture also improved. She was a student before the switch to academies and spoke about how boring classes were and how unenergetic teachers seemed in teaching content. The small learning communities helped to create what she called, “a sense of family” between staff and students. Participant G echoed these statements and said, “The relationships between students and teachers were a lot better than previous; students really got to know them [teachers] and in turn it made for a better learning environment.” The positive school climate and culture that came from the creation of small learning communities appeared several times during the GLA and was easily the most discussed theme when it came to changing their school for the better.

College and career preparation were also highlighted as another aspect of the academy model because the model provided the ability to gain certifications and work experiences that were both engaging and real world. Participant F from the Technology Academy highlighted this feeling when he wrote, “The certificates for being ready for a field immediately after a high school is the best part, meaning being a nurse assistant
certified before high school [sic].” Many of the other participants wrote that, “learning was more enjoyable,” and that they were able to make connections with people in the work force doing the job they wanted to do after high school through the academy model. Participant M spoke the most about both his and his classmates’ experiences in the IT Academy working alongside business and industry partners and the exposure to, “the real world” the academy model gave him. He said:

For example, in the IT Academy other students and I were able to travel to local businesses and learn more about our local community and career tracks within the IT Academy. Many of us were given the chance to help solve IT issues the companies were facing and get our hands dirty in high school with the work we want to be doing after we graduate high school. Those experiences alone are why this model needs to be at every school.

Being ready at graduation prepared to enter the workforce or move on to post-secondary institutions was a theme many of the participants both mentioned and highlighted during the GLA process. As one participant said to others as we wrapped up the second prompt, “If high schools are not helping students discover what they want to do after they graduate then why even have them!”

Changes to the career academy experience. The third prompt asked students what they would change about their career academy experience. It was evident quickly that participants felt student choice/flexibility on academy pathways and a lack of focus on specific college preparations were two major areas they would like to see changed. Five student participants lamented on choice and flexibility in terms of career academy
pathways and student choice throughout the GLA. This topic led to some rich discussions among the former students. A selection of responses follows.

**Participant A:** Flexibility is so important for young people. Especially 14 year old’s who are trying to pick something they have to stay with for the next four years. 14 year old me and 18 year old me are very different people and it would have been good to have had the opportunity to explore other pathways.

**Participant B:** I felt that I didn’t really know what I wanted to do when I chose an academy so having the option to change academies would be productive. High school was the first time I had ever really even thought about a career and really linked it to my choice in where I go to college.

**Participant E:** I felt that I was forced into one of four career paths. Although the academies helped me realize what I did not want to pursue, I found my career path outside of the academy model. I understand a student must fulfill a minimum number of courses within an academy to “complete the pathway,” but I feel limiting an academy change to one puts some students at a disadvantage. I do not have a good solution to this problem, but I believe it deserves some thought going forward. I knew a few students that chose one academy and were placed in another because their chosen academy was at capacity. This severely impacted their high school/academy experience negatively because they were studying careers they had no interest in.

**Participant G:** I would agree with the flexibility just because there really were a small number of options for students to choose from with this and so some kids were just kind of stuck in an academy/pathway that didn’t necessarily fit them. I
know that it would be very difficult to add more options because of scheduling, money, class sizes, etc., but I do genuinely think that it was a common issue that some kids also just felt like they didn’t fit.

**Participant I:** From my experience I think I would change the flexibility in the options of classes students can take once they have chosen a certain pathway. For example, if someone is in a medical pathway but wants to take a robotics or engineering class, they should be able to. This may already be an option that I am unaware of but if that is the case students should be given the option rather than just pushed through a track once they have chosen an academy.

**Participant J:** I think there should be more room for students to be able to participate in multiple academies instead of just picking one. Flexibility is key. I also think the list of classes that are classified under an academy shouldn't be limited only to people in that academy.

For each of these students, having the opportunity to change academies, pathways, or even to just work with students from other academies would have given them a better experience in the academy model. Many of the student participants had friends or classmates that never really discovered their passion and felt “stuck” in the academy pathway they chose. Several students suggested allowing double majors to expand the pathways students in the academy model could explore or even starting pathway exploration as early as middle school. “Limiting students to a single academy or pathway doesn’t really align with the academy poster that says, ‘Explore your world, find your future’ hanging all over the school”, stated one of the participants. Allowing students various opportunities to explore different pathways throughout high school,
regardless of their academy, many felt was a change that would ensure every student
could figure out what they wanted to do when they grew up.

The other change highlighted by the former student ambassador participants was a
lack of focus on preparing students for college tasks like scholarships, admissions, and
opportunities on college campuses. Participant L was very passionate about this topic
and wrote:

Even though the academy structure was to prepare you for college, it felt as if the
school didn’t involve enough engagement within colleges. College visits weren’t
enough because it felt as if the purpose was to convince them to attend the college
when it should have been more like “this is what you’re capable of doing in
college.” That’s an error on both ends, the high school and the college that was
involved. Also just the fact that college is nothing like high school. [sic] So
students were left with false expectations. At points the events that were held for
the students seemed more a leisure than like “look at what you can do.” That was
not the point at all.

Participant M echoed her feelings saying, “…few resources were given to prepare
students to excel and to be competitive for college admissions or scholarships.” For
some, more training on Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, was
needed. Others felt college visits were not enough and may even happen too soon for the
many of the ninth graders that were taking them. Several of the participants in the study
were currently enrolled in a college or university and felt that deeper focus needed to be
placed on preparing students for finding and getting into colleges that were linked to the
career pathway and academy they chose. Participant K summed it up for their group when she explained her experience:

I think there was a large focus on being career ready. I understand that not every student is destined for college; however, I believe that through the small learning communities and teacher-student relationships there exists an opportunity to help students who are on the fence about college (whether it be because of family things, money, or lack of knowledge) take a step toward college. I truly don’t have many complaints about the model, I just wish students were exposed a little bit more to college opportunities, and how there are options through financial aid and scholarships.

All former student ambassador participants agreed with Participant K that increasing the focus around college preparation (admissions, scholarships, post-secondary choices) would ultimately help students in the academy model develop more solid plans for their lives after graduating high school.

**Participating as an ambassador.** The next prompt the student participants explored during the GLA focused on their individual perceptions of the academy model after being an ambassador. Several participants needed clarification on the prompt and without missing a beat, Participant B jumped in and said, “I am better at working in teams, and being able to communicate with a group of people. It trained me to be a good listener. I feel that I really matured with being an ambassador in so many ways.” This one statement got the discussions going and two major themes emerged from the participants.
The first theme that emerged centered on what the student participants called, “life skills.” These skills are often what educators and business partners refer to as soft skills. Many of the student participants spoke about working in groups, public speaking, communication, and time management. Just like Participant B felt she was better able to work in a team and communicate with her peers, several other participants felt like they had similar experiences. A selection of responses highlighting the theme are below:

**Participant D:** I am better at working in groups. I am better at understanding how my peers work. I am better at advocating for myself and others. I am better at asking for what I want. I am better at finding the people I need to speak to. I was able to interact with people with varied interests.

**Participant E:** I am more equipped with public speaking skills. Before becoming an ambassador and participating in the course, I was mortified to speak to a group of people. Actively practicing my public speaking skills and learning from professionals gave me the confidence to express my thoughts to others. I wish that more than 30 students a year could participate in that course!

**Participant H:** I am a lot more confident when being a leader to others. I have gained the confidence to approach my professors for help and even to talk to as friends. I am also better at working in teams and dividing work amongst others.

**Participant M:** I am more confident as a leader. Leadership was effectively taught through experience (giving tours, giving presentations) and by observing the operation of the school’s leadership team. I felt like I had a voice in shaping the school, and that my ideas and skills were valuable towards improving the community. The ambassador program was the best “boot-camp” for soft skills,
requiring collaboration, communication, and effective teamwork. In this regard, the skills used in the ambassador program were essential to college preparedness personally.

The confidence expressed in these responses may come from the training and opportunities every ambassador has when leading their academy. Each academy ambassador is asked to be the voice of their academy to not only their fellow academy students, but also to district staff and the business advisory boards that support each academy. These responses also indicate that the students valued their experience as an ambassador because it provided them with a sense of self-efficacy. According to Lent et al. (1994), the development of self-efficacy stems from the experiences and interactions students have while in their learning environment.

The second theme identified from this prompt was the ability to both advocate for both themselves and their community. Participant G pointed out that all student participants either wrote about or stated out loud the ability to fight for themselves or others professionally. Participant K, a young woman from the medical academy echoed this when she wrote, “I also am able to stand up for what I believe in and challenge the perceptions of others.” She felt that being a leading voice for the students in her academy forced her to hear different opinions and weigh those opinions against what she saw and felt each day. She went on to say, “Being an ambassador reinforced all the good things I knew about my school and encouraged me to challenge those who believed the negative stereotypes about my school.”

These feelings of learning to stand up and advocate for one’s beliefs extended to other former ambassadors as well. Two other students wrote similar comments, one who
said, “I am more confident in letting my superiors hear my voice and speaking in front of people who have influence over my current situation,” when referring to the current job she is working. Participant C added that, “I am no longer a person that lets adversity or change shut me down and leave me curled up in a ball. I know how to fight for what is right for myself and others appropriately.” The real life experiences and training from being an ambassador and representing their academy contributed to their individual growth and taught them how to advocate with both peers and those they saw as superiors. Every student participant underlined how they did not think they would have learned those skills had that not had the opportunity afforded to them from their career academy school.

**Career academies influences on their future.** The final prompt of the GLA sought to determine how the former student ambassadors felt the academy model had influenced their future. Regardless of what academy each student participant studied in and supported, all participants felt that the academy model helped to prepare them for their future after high school. This was the one major theme that became obvious to all participants as they reflected on their experiences since their days walking the halls of their former school. For some, this meant the academy model showed them what they didn’t want to do. Participants B, C, and H all discussed and wrote about how the academies helped them discover that their career passion wasn’t what they thought it was when they entered high school. One of the students, (Participant B) commented, “The career academy model showed me what I did not want to pursue in the future and helped me develop an idea of what I wanted to pursue.”. For Participant A, the academy model showed him that there are a ton of options out there for a career. “The career academy
model helped me understand that there is always another option. I switched majors already. I would not have felt that to be ok had I not understood how careers and majors are connected.” Echoing this comment, Participant H wrote, “…letting me know what I do not want to do. I did not feel like I fit into my academy and when I went on to college I found a better fit for my interests that I discovered while exploring careers in high school.”

There majority of the other participants had the opposite experience. Some especially insightful responses are captured below:

**Participant F:** I found in the academy model what I wanted to do after high school and the academy model allowed me to put some certifications on a resume and expanding my horizons of what is possible: to find success within yourself. You go to find your why and a little of the how. You get a little bit of when, but for the most part you find the who. But the what is up to you [sic].

**Participant G:** The career academy model has influenced my confidence in my chosen field. Because of the experience and community, I got in high school that almost carried over to experience in college and has really solidified my choice.

**Participant J:** The academy model heavily influenced the major I chose. During this process, I was able to find a career that is right for me. It has also made me more outspoken and prepared me for the professional world. It helped me move into more future-goal thinking rather than just focusing on the present. I am now creating a path for myself that is full of small goals that are towards my bigger ones.
Participant M: My personal interests were encouraged through independent studies and I was challenged to achieve greatness. The encouragement to explore my interest by Bryan Station’s faculty further cemented my career choice (Software Developer) but also drove me to want to solve problems in what I do.

Each of these students perceived that the academies only reinforced what they felt they wanted to do when they grew up. The work, experiences, and skills they gained in the model further prepared them to make decisions regarding what career or college track they planned to pursue after high school. Exploring these college and career pathways early at a younger age is one of the most important aspects of the career academy (Kemple & Snipes, 2000). One student, Participant I, had one piece of advice she felt would enhance the preparing all students for their future. She said, “I’ve been thinking while we have been discussing this that maybe you need to start earlier, like in middle school with academies”. This response was echoed by all participants to ensure students had more time to try and find what career they were passionate about.

Summary of Findings

This study centered around a Group Level Assessment of former career academy ambassadors that had graduated from a career academy high school. Thirty-three former ambassadors received an invitation to participate, of this population, only thirteen participated in the GLA held using a virtual meeting platform. The GLA process consisted of five prompts extracted from the research questions that all participants responded to both in writing and through verbal discussions. After all students had completed the five prompts, they then worked collaboratively to identify the most important themes of their collective experiences.
Career Academy Purpose. Research question two explored what the former student ambassadors perceived the purpose of career academies were in the high school setting. Study participants reflected that the academy model should help students to discover what they want to do after they graduate in terms of college and/or career. They noted that students in a career academy should be exposed to different career pathways they may be interested in so that can explore those career clusters. Additionally, the participants believed that exploring career pathways with others who had similar interests helped to create networks of students that could learn and collaborate. Participants also mentioned that collaboration with business partners and advisory boards helped students develop skill sets early that could benefit in their chosen career field after graduation.

Career Academy Successes. Research question three focused on what the former student ambassadors saw as the career academy successes. All participants agreed that the small learning communities created by the academy model was one of its most successful aspects. Small learning communities helped students in their large high school find others with similar interests and gain the confidence and trust in their teachers and classmates. Many felt like their relationships with teachers, counselors and school leaders were strengthened in the academy model and that both students and teachers were more engaged in the learning process. Small learning communities ultimately impacted the climate and culture of the school in a positive way and it made school feel both safe and fun to attend.

Seven of the thirteen participants highlighted their learning opportunities and ability to gain certifications and job skills while still in high school as a major success of the academy model. These experiences also supported the learning of students from
business partners through internships and job shadowing opportunities which connected students with the community they lived. This in turn helps students in the academy model acquire the soft skills needed to work together as a team, communicate effectively, and advocate for both themselves and others. Finally, many of the participants felt that the career academy model either helped reinforce what they felt they wanted to do after high school or put them on a path to discovering what they wanted to do when they grew up. Either way, the experiences in the academy model helped shaped the futures of the former students.

**Recommendations for Change.** Research question four investigated the recommendations the participants had for improving the experience of all students in the academy model. Without a doubt, all of the participants noted that there needed to be more flexibility when it comes to both choosing an academy and choosing a career cluster or pathway to explore. The former students asserted that making the choice midway through their freshman year wasn’t easy for them or their peers. They were grateful that students still had the opportunity to switch after their sophomore year but when you didn’t discover your passion until your junior or senior year than you were stuck. Others felt that if the academy model allowed for some students to double major, many would want to explore two pathways and that could help lesson the feeling some students experienced of being limited in their career pathway choice. Participants also agreed that of if students could start exploring careers and college pathways earlier, like in middle school, then more would be prepared to make their academy selection their freshman year.
The other recommendation for change participants argued for was a more intentional focus on college scholarships, admissions and choices linked back their career pathway. Most felt one of two college visits were not enough and most just felt like a sales pitch either form the college or from the school. Many of the participants liked that academies were career focused because ultimately college should lead to a career. They problem with the model lay with the lack of resources and training on how to apply for a specific college, fill out the FAFSA, and make the right college choice. One participant explained that for many students, not having the knowledge and resources keeps them from thinking they even can attend college and further their education after high school. An intentional focus on those things, they asserted, would support the academy model and the career readiness embedded in academies.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of my research was to analyze former student ambassadors’ perceptions of the career academy model and how they felt it influenced their high school experience. From the Group Level Assessment, it was possible to draw conclusions about the career academy model, what works, and what could be changed. The participants perceived an overall positive experience from the career academy model but did highlight several aspects that could be changed to better support all students. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the conclusions drawn from the findings, discuss the limitations of this study, and address implications and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

I sought to answer four research questions through this study with the first serving as an overarching question. These research questions focused on the perceptions of former student academy ambassador for the career academy model and the impact their perceptions had on their high school experiences. The questions were:

1. What are student ambassadors’ perceptions of the impact of career academies on their high school experience?
2. How do academy student ambassadors perceive the purpose of career academies in their high school setting?
3. What are the academy student ambassadors’ perceptions of career academy successes?
4. What are academy student ambassadors’ recommendations to improve the academy experience for all students?

In this chapter, I will first discuss the descriptive findings from my research before presenting a summary of the findings for each research question. Lastly, I will discuss the implications of my findings for policy, practice, and future research.

**Descriptive Findings**

Past research on career academies has focused primarily on how adults, such as teachers and school leaders, viewed the academy model and its impact on the school environment (Field, 2020; Fletcher & Cox, 2012; Hoachlander, 2008; Mehan, 2007; Oakes & Saunders, 2008). In this study, I sought to capture student perceptions of the
career academy model by analyzing data from the voices and lived experiences of former 
student ambassadors that graduated from a career academy high school. Adding these 
student voices to the already growing body of research on career academies is crucial to 
ensuring schools and school districts that adopt the model do so having all perspectives. 
This research fills a gap that will bring clarity and perspective from the eyes of the people 
we are trying to impact the most through the model, our students. A summary of the 
GLA themes and descriptive findings from my research can be found below in Table 3.

Table 3. Group Level Assessment Descriptive Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GLA Themes</th>
<th>Descriptive Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small learning communities and sense of belonging</td>
<td>Students in this study perceived that career academies helped them to develop a sense of belonging and allowed them to build stronger relationships with their teachers and peers. The small learning community relationships they formed led to increased engagement and a more positive climate and culture within their school. This research study illuminated student voice and revealed small learning communities as the most important aspect of the career academy model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College and career preparation</td>
<td>By exploring career pathways, working alongside business and industry partners, and engaging in hands-on experiences, students in the academy model felt better prepared to make college and career decisions. New perception data from students indicates that career academies helped them feel better prepared for college and career has been captured.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to gain certifications and experiences</td>
<td>Through engaging and real-world experiences, students in this study emphasized how the training and certifications they received in the career academy model allowed them to be ready for the career field they were interested in after graduating. This research called attention to new student voice data and revealed that students were more prepared for their career field because they could earn certifications in the academy model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy for both self and community</td>
<td>Students in this researched study developed what Lent et al. (1994), refers to as self-efficacy. Through their interactions and experiences in the academy model, the student participants felt they learned how to advocate for both themselves and their community. New perception data from students has been collected showing that students in the academy model learned to advocate for themselves and others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Providing universal life skills

Often referred to as soft skills by educators, business, and industry partners, students in this study felt they learned the skills needed to be successful in life and work through the academy model. Due to this ground-breaking research, student voice data has been collected for the first time, indicating students learned universal skills through the academy model. Some of the skills included better communication, public speaking, time management, and learning how to work and collaborate in groups.

Explore opportunities

Exploring the many career and college opportunities students have after high school was not something students in this research study felt they were able to do in the traditional high school model. New student perception data from my research shows that exploration of career pathways through the academy model helped lead to greater self-efficacy and belief in what could be accomplished after graduating high school.

Shows what I did not want to do

New student voice data from this research shows students in this study perceived career academies helped many students discover what they did not want to do. When students are allowed the opportunity to make these discoveries in high school, it could potentially help them avoid switching majors, adding additional college debt, or starting a career they do not find fulfilling.

Need for flexibility in academy choice/change

Many students in this study perceived that the career academy model should be changed to allow more flexibility and choice when choosing a career pathway. Being forced to choose too early led some students to feeling stuck thus negatively impacting their high school experience. New student voice data from this research suggests that earlier career exploration in middle school could help prepare students for choosing their academy in a career academy high school.

Lack of focus on scholarships, admissions, and competitiveness for entry

We now have new perception data from students indicating that a more intentional focus on preparing students for college admissions, scholarships, and the competitiveness for entry is needed in the academy model. Increasing the focus on these topics could help students, both financially and personally, to continue their post-secondary education but did not see it as an option.

This research produced several unique findings from the former students and its impact on their school and school environment. The first is that small learning communities were viewed as the most important aspect of the career academy model. The relationships formed between staff and peers created a sense of belonging that increased student engagement and made for a more positive climate and culture. Another
unique finding indicated students in the academy model felt better prepared to make both college and career decisions because they had the opportunity to explore career pathways in high school, gain certifications and career experiences, obtain soft skills, and learn to advocate for both themselves and others. The perception data from students also revealed new information that could help enhance the academy model experience if changes were made by school leaders. They included having a more intentional focus on college admissions and scholarships and allowing for more student flexibility when students choose an academy or pathway. Students in this study suggested that career exploration needed to begin before high school and that school leaders should look at the middle grades to better prepare students for making academy and pathway decisions.

Several of my research findings are in align with previous researchers who gathered data from teachers and school leaders on the impacts of the career academy model. Fletcher & Cox (2012) write about the small learning communities created in the academy model and their impact on the school environment while McPartland et al. (1998) was able to gather data from teacher ratings of showing an improvement with school climate after a school in Baltimore reorganized into academies. Dixon et al. (2011) captured in their research that academies allow students the opportunity to explore work-based learning opportunities and gain experience and skills that prepare students for college and career. My research on student perspectives of the career academy model support these findings and show that student voice is crucial if we are ever going to gain a well-rounded understanding of the impacts it can have on schools and the communities they serve.
Career Academy Impact on Student Ambassadors

The first research question served as an overarching question to the three subordinate questions that will be discussed later in this chapter. The main goal and driving force behind my research were as to capture how student ambassadors perceived the influence of career academies on their high school experience and ultimately the future choices they made for college and career. The final two GLA prompts of the GLA sought to determine that influence from the participant perspectives. It did not matter what academy each student participant chose or studied, all former student ambassadors felt that the academy model helped to prepare them for their future after high school. For some, that influence was allowing them to explore their career and interest on a deeper level that they had not experienced in the traditional school setting. Others reflected that it helped them figure out what they did not want to do and set them on a new path they had become passionate about through the career exploration they received through the academy model.

The GLA theme (See Table 2) of exploring career opportunities dominated the discussion around the overall impact of the career academy model and how it influenced each former student. The experiences they gained in the model provided them the opportunity to explore various career fields and narrow their focus before graduating high school. The work, experiences, and skills they gained in their academy pathway, and as a student ambassador, equipped them with knowledge and training to advocate for themselves and for their community. All felt they had developed universal life skills, the GLA theme rank fifth in importance, that made them better communicators, team members, and were better able to handle conflict and challenges because of the
opportunities afforded to them in their academy school. One participant highlighted that the influence she received from the academy model needed to start at an earlier age. She suggested the goal setting, reflection, and exploring of one’s career interests needed to start in middle school and be expounded on more in high school. This final thought was echoed by all former student ambassadors as a solution to many of the changes they perceived needed to be made to the academy model.

**The Purpose of the Career Academy Model**

The second research question I sought to explore unveiled academy ambassadors’ perceptions of the purpose of career academies on their overall experience as a student. It was clear from the participant responses that graduating students’ to be college and career ready was the foundational purpose of the career academy model. The definition of college and career ready varied among student participants with some stating that being academically prepared was most important, while others discussed the importance of acquiring skills and dispositions needed to be successful in the workforce. All former ambassadors highlighted that the career academies should prepare students to succeed in whatever post-secondary path they choose to take. As noted in Chapter Four, one student summarized the purpose of career academies this way, “A key component of the career academy model is individual discovery, promoting community, and satisfying the needs of each individual student.”

The Academies of Lexington promises to provide students with exposure and experiences that will help students discover their passion and prepare them be successful in a global society. The students alluded to the fact that everyone did not need to go to college and earn a bachelor’s degree to be successful and that the academy experience
should continue to ensure balance between academics and workforce skill development. This is in alignment with current attitudes from business and industry partners that worry the country’s educational system is not meeting the ever-changing needs of the workforce (Murphy, 2016). There must be an individualized approach for each student to explore career pathways, engage with business and industry partners, and interact with student and adults who share similar interests. This aligned with the second and third GLA important themes (see Table 1), college and career preparation and ability to gain certifications and experiences, identified by the former student ambassadors as the most important aspects of the career academy model.

**Student Ambassador Perceptions of the Career Academy Successes**

One interesting outcome from the analysis of the GLA responses directly related to research question three and former student ambassadors’ perceptions on the successes of the career academy model was their united belief that relationships and small learning communities were what benefited and influenced them the most. Career academy advocates argue that this educational model ensures future student success in postsecondary pursuits because of the relationships developed in the small learning environment (Dixon et al., 2011, Kemple & Snipes, 2000). Participants offered that by breaking up a large school into smaller schools, there was less chance for students to go unnoticed or as they said it, “slip through the cracks”. This was because the student ambassadors felt each career academy within the school was able to create a sense of community around the interests and similarities of the students and staff that made up the academy. More specifically, the former students felt the staff knew their career and
college goals and how best to help them reach those goals both academically and professionally.

Students also highlighted improved student and teacher relationships as an outcome of the small learning communities created through the academy model. Participants noted that teachers seemed to be more excited and engaged in teaching and learning after their school transitioned to the academy model and that the excitement carried over to students. Class discussions, class work, and even certain skill assessments became more enjoyable because class culture and climate improved. There was a sense of family and that everyone was in it together to learn, grow, and get prepared for their future. After the former student ambassadors coded the responses, small learning communities and sense of belonging was the highest rated theme from the Group Level Assessment.

While small learning communities was highlighted by most of the participants as the theme most successful aspect of the career academy model, others felt the college and career preparation they received was most important (See Table 1). The academy model provides every student the training and work experiences needed to gain industry certifications and learn about the career field in which they are most interested. This study revealed that students perceived a benefit from the career academy model because of the access they had to business and industry partners whether through guest speakers, field trips, job-shadowing, or internships. Fletcher and Cox (2012) argue that those experiences help students to find value in what they are learning and make connections to the learning in the classroom. The confidence gained from working alongside industry professionals on real world problems was highlighted by a former IT Academy student
ambassador as a career academy success that all students should have the opportunity to experience.

**Student Ambassador Recommendations for Improvement**

One of the major challenges that the former student ambassadors perceived from the academy model was the lack of student choice and flexibility both before and after choosing their career academy pathway. Participants felt the academy model limited their choices and forced them into a single course of study with a very short time frame to make change. While they recognized their school allowed them to change academies after their sophomore year if they did not have a passion for the pathways it contained, many felt it still locked students into deciding with very little flexibility for change. For example, one student spoke about never even thinking about a career pathway until getting to high school and being interested in two career pathways that were in different academies. He felt forced to make a decision he was not prepared to make even though in the end the choice helped him realize what he did not want to do.

The GLA participants felt that having the opportunity to change academies, pathways, or even to just work with students from other academies would have given them a better experience in the academy model. Several former ambassadors had peers they worked with in their academy disengage from courses because of the lack of flexibility or belief that the academy they had chosen was not directly linked to their preferred career field. One example a participant shared was about their friend who wanted to be a lawyer, but the school did not have a law pathway. The friend was counselled to take a business pathway in the Leadership Academy because the counselor felt that learning about both creating and running his own business would benefit him
after graduating law school. He ended up bored and feeling stuck in the academy pathway after his junior year while also feeling pushed to get a certification that he was not interested in obtaining. For these former students, having the opportunity to change academies, pathways, double major, or even just work with peers in other academies would have given them a better experience in the academy model.

Another change the graduates felt needed to be considered was the lack of focus on preparing students for college tasks like scholarships, admissions, and opportunities on college campuses. Many of participants had spent a year or more on a university or college campus before participating in this research study and did not feel there was enough focus on specific resources or trainings navigate college life. They indicated that the college visits the Freshman Academy participated in during their ninth-grade year happened too soon and were more of a sales pitch by the institution they visited and less about how to apply, find resources, and adapt to being away from home. In general, participants perceived that high school college visits left students with false expectations of postsecondary life and that career academy schools needed to do more to teach and expose students the resources and aid needed to be successful in that environment after high school.

**Implications for Policy**

The implications for this research on educational policy at federal, state, and local district levels serves to acknowledge how important the career academy model is to reforming the education landscape and enhancing career and technical educational opportunities provided to students. Society at large will benefit from this model by preparing high school graduates for a constantly changing, globally interconnected,
workforce. This is outlined in Kentucky’s new Academic Standards for Career Studies (Kentucky Department of Education, 2019) in which students’ individualized learning plans should come to life in classrooms. Schools must be creative in finding ways to educate and teach students more than the traditional academic content by reimagining teaching and learning through integrating essential skills such as communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. These soft skills transfer across pathways, professions, and technical knowledge that leads to industry certification. Furthermore, all students deserve these opportunities no matter their race, sex, free-reduced lunch status, or zip code.

When all learners feel safe, valued, and that the education they are receiving is relevant to their goals and dreams, the workforce will grow in ability, and communities will prosper. The career academy model is an inclusive school reform model in which every student is a member of a small learning community of their choice. States considering the adoption of new policies around the career academy model need to look no further than the state of Florida whose legislature coordinated statewide planning between business and education to help attract industries with high employment capacity to the state through the Career and Professional Education Act of 2007. This act led to every school district in Florida adopting the academy model in at least one of their high schools. My analysis revealed that former students felt the partnerships they had with business and community influenced their education positively and helped to prepare them to make college and career decisions. Such a broad policy would serve the economic needs of business, industry and public education in every state including ours here in Kentucky.
Implications for Practice

A finding implication from this research includes the significant importance of providing small learning communities for all students. Small learning communities have defined many of the magnet and gifted programs I have been associated with in my career as an educator and the academy model only highlights the inclusivity of allowing every student within a school to have the sense of community and the student/teacher relationships the former student ambassadors described. Diversifying and engaging students in their career interests and goals will require school and district leaders to have a clear vision for their career and technical education programs. This vision work must include student, teacher, and business and industry voices. School districts must identify and nurture strong business partner relationships and increase community participation so that all students can have access to career exploration opportunities be it a guest speaker, fieldtrip, job shadow, internship, or combination thereof.

I recommend that school districts explore having specific school employees such as academy coaches, college and career coaches, or work-based learning coordinators that can take on the task of developing strong business and community partnerships for schools. This task, if it is going to be successful, cannot be added to classroom teachers or administrators already overflowing plates. These positions can focus on ensuring students get to explore their college and career field interests and help business and community partners tap into the future workforce.

School districts in Kentucky also need to take a deeper look at the Individualized Education Plan (ILP) all students are required by law to complete each year from sixth grade through their senior year (704 KAR 3:305). Career exploration is a key component
of the career academy model and key to giving students a chance at discovering their passion and future career interests. One implication for practiced discussed by the study participants was to allow career exploration to begin in the middle grades. The ILP has specific components already geared towards engaging middle school students in career interests and exploration so they can begin to develop career self-efficacy long before they reach high school and be more prepared to make their academy choice.

My recommendation is that schools and school districts really take a hard look at the ILP and embed opportunities for middle school students to being exploring what they want to be when they grow up. Some of these opportunities could even begin as soon as fourth or fifth grade. Middle school is also a great place to embed the pre-academy model that has been developed by Ford Next Generation Learning. This model, much like the academy model, allows middle schoolers to explore career pathways and helps to link what they are learning academically to the real-world careers they will one day be pursuing.

While career academy schools cannot provide students access to every career field, it is vitally important to ensure every student can engage in the ones available to them. Several of the former academy ambassadors highlighted that many of their peers disengaged from courses, or their academy, because they either lost interest in that field of study or did not have access to a career pathway they were passionate about. From a scheduling standpoint, my recommendation would be for school leaders, counselors, and academy teachers to create interdisciplinary courses of study that allow students to “double major” and explore multiple career pathways that are related. For some students this may even require a more individualized approach where specific pathways are
designed to capture their interest and engage them in their learning. This flexibility in programming would address one of the major changes the former student ambassadors highlighted in their reflections.

Secondary and postsecondary institutions are challenged with improving the collaboration knowledge gap that exists between the high school and college experience; especially for those students whose career pathway will require a college degree or certification. As noted by the participants in my study, college visits are not enough to prepare students to navigate that world. I would recommend educational leaders to partner and invest in summer dual credit programs, student shadowing opportunities, or even create innovative school programs in which all students take specific academy courses their junior or senior year on a university or college campus. There they can have a college-like experience while exploring admissions, scholarships, and opportunities within their chose major or career field.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Schools, districts, and educational leaders should continually analyze data and programming for its effectiveness and return on investment. This is particularly important when considering an education reform model such as the career academies as the work requires an abundance of time, energy, and both human and monetary capital. As this study looked solely at former student ambassador perceptions, further research is needed on the perceptions of the business and industry’s perspective of the academy model. This research may help school leaders gather data on to better ways to foster
these relationships and expand business and community engagement in the academy model.

Examining parent and guardian perception of career academies could also be a benefit to school organizations that support the academy model by giving a more well-rounded look at how parent engagement in the model affects their student’s success. Many parents and guardians have students in multiple schools or programs within a district so collecting comparison data on how parents perceived their student was prepared for college and careers after graduating from a traditional school versus a career academy school would be interesting to examine.

Lastly, I would recommend a longitudinal study on academy students, that were not necessarily academy ambassadors, several years after they graduated high school and finished college or entered a career. This type of study could give a broader look at the impact of the career academy model on students’ postsecondary career and college aspirations and whether the model helped to shape and prepare students for the future workforce.

I included only one school implementing the career academy model and future researchers could stretch their data collection and analysis to include other schools and districts who have shifted to this school reform model. Comparing student perceptions across more schools and districts could provide greater insight into the successes, challenges, impacts, and recommendations for change. These data could lead to better experiences for all students in the career academy model.
Concluding Thoughts

Schools and school districts across the United States are constantly under pressure to improve student outcomes, close achievement gaps, and graduate students ready to excel in a global society that is constantly in flux. In order to face such external pressures, education and business leaders must work collaboratively to address the needs of their communities to ensure all students, no matter their sex, race, or social economic status have a pathway to achieve their dreams. This collaboration can only occur when all players are informed concerning the issues their community is facing and are all are willing to put some skin in the game to address those issues.

During this research, the focus highlighted the student voice over all others. I have found that adults discuss student voice but rarely is it ever gathered formally and considered intentionally (Mitra, 2006). Our students are the future education and business leaders and by allowing them to engage in the issues now, maybe, just maybe, they can help us identify the gaps we fail to see in our educational policies and practices. These former students found that their success in high school was largely impacted by them being part of a small community of learners and engaged in a curriculum tied to what is relevant to their career interests. If education is about improving the lives of students and bettering the communities in which they live and learn, this study has given us a good starting point to forget the outside political pressures of public education and create school environments where students feel it will help them grow, develop, and succeed.
REFERENCES

Washington, DC: Author.


Bartik, T., & Hollenbeck, K. (2006). *Graduation requirements, skills, postsecondary*


Chhuon, V., & Wallace, T. L. (2014). Creating connectedness through being known:
Fulfilling the need to belong in U.S. high schools. *Youth & Society, 46*(3), 379–401.


Cothran, D.J. and Ennis, C.D. (2000). Building bridges to student engagement:


positive student outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (jespar)*, 7(1), 71-90.


100
Reshaping High Schools, 65(S).

Ivanova, I. (2019, February 4). *These are the industries with the biggest labor shortages.* Retrieved from http://cbsnews.com


Murphy, J. (2016). The evolution of the high school in America. Teachers College Record, 118, 1-16
Instructional program coherence: What it is and why it should guide school  
 improvement policy. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 23*(4), 297-  
321.

Regional Educational Laboratory.

Oakes, J., & Saunders, M. (2008). *Beyond tracking: Multiple pathways to college, career,  


Oldfather, P. (1995). Songs ‘come back most to them’: students’ experiences as  
researchers. *Theory into Practice, 34*(2), 131-137.


Oxley, D. & Kassissieh, J. (2008). From comprehensive high schools to small learning  

relationships between children and teachers* (p. 85–104). American Psychological  
Association.

school and the place of career and technical education: A survival analysis of  
surviving high school.* St. Paul, MN: National Research Center for Career and  
Technical Education.


explore the health needs of an ethnically diverse, low-resource school: An innovative large group assessment approach. *Family & Community Health*, 34, 72–84.


Wonacott, M. (2000). *Benefits of vocational education: Myths and realities*. Columbus,
OH: Center on Education and Training for Employment.


APPENDIX A: GROUP LEVEL ASSESSMENT PROTOCOL

**Preparation**: Write prompts on large chart paper and place on walls. Cover until Step 2 to avoid distraction (easiest to just fold paper upward from bottom and tape until ready to expose). Good to have as many as 1.5 as many flip charts as participants.

Prompts should generally be a balance of:
- Open-ended and structured
- Strengths and weaknesses
- Positive and negative
- Specific and broad
- Silly and serious

Sample prompts are included below.

**Step 1: Climate Setting**
Trust building. Overview of GLA process and what will occur. Ice-breaker or warm-up exercise useful when participants do not know each other.

**Step 2: Generating**
Participants are given markers (can be one color to maintain the most anonymity) and go around the room responding to the prompts. If they agree with another’s statement, place a check or star next to it.

**Step 3: Appreciating**
Participants spend a short time walking around looking at all the responses to get an overview, encouraged to interact and discuss. They might also like to add stars/checks to some more of other people's responses.

**Step 4: Reflecting**
Participants spend a short time thinking on their own about the data as a whole, might jot down initial thoughts or observations.

**Step 5: Understanding**

Participants are divided into smaller groups of 5-8 and assigned 5-6 charts. They discuss and look for *themes across* the set of charts, analyzing the data from their perspectives. Good to give examples to avoid participants looking for main ideas on each chart. Can have facilitators for each group. After, groups come together and report verbally their most commonly occurring themes, facilitator records for everyone to see.

**Step 6: Selecting**

Participants clarify the most important ideas, distilling the themes from Step 5. This can be done as a large group with the primary facilitator, or in self-facilitated small groups. This step might also include some type of prioritization process, with participants individually placing dots or rankings next to their own priority themes, for example. Themes not selected might not be completely discarded, but “parked” on a separate list for consideration at a later date.

**Step 7: Action**

Large group considers possible next steps based on priorities, informing relevant future programs, interventions, developments, or other changes. Can choose to then break into smaller groups for specific action planning. This step can also be scheduled at a separate time for those interested in being involved in the action, if this makes more sense.

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

Investigator(s) name & address:

Advisor and Principal Investigator:

W. Kyle Ingle, Ph.D.
Educational Leadership, Evaluation, & Organizational Development
The University of Louisville
1905 South 1st Street
Louisville, Kentucky 40292
(502) 852-6097

James McMillin
University of Louisville
4201 Starrush Place
Lexington, KY 40509; james.mcmillin2@fayette.kyschools.us

Site(s) where study is to be conducted: Bryan Station High School, Fayette County Public Schools.
Phone number for subjects to call for questions: James McMillin at (859) 396-1300

Introduction and Background Information

You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is being conducted by James McMillin (doctoral student). The study is sponsored by the University of Louisville, Department of Educational Leadership, Evaluation and Organizational Development (ELEOD). The study will take place at Bryan Station High School in Fayette County Public Schools. Approximately fifteen subjects will be invited to participate.

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to collect and analyze data on student ambassadors’ perceptions of career academies and their impact on the high school experience for students.

**Procedures**

In this study, you will be asked to provide demographic information and information about your past and present experiences in education. You will also be asked to participate in a Group Level Assessment to identify themes pertaining to your experiences as an academy ambassador as it relates to the academy model and your experience as a student (60 minutes). Your participation will include a pre-GLA survey to collect demographic information (5 minutes). You will have the opportunity to review my final research findings. The GLA will take place via Zoom and Google Docs and will be recorded. The GLA phase of this project will conclude by March 1, 2020.

**Potential Risks**

There are no foreseeable risks other than possible discomfort in answering personal questions.

**Benefits**

The possible benefits of this study include the opportunity for FCPS and other school districts to include my finding as part of their decision making process as it relates to student perceptions of the academy model. The possible benefits to society include informing, and potentially changing, how school districts approach moving to the academy model and what structures students may find as both beneficial and not beneficial. The information collected may not benefit you directly. The information learned in this study may be helpful to others.

**Compensation**

You will not be compensated for your time, inconvenience, or expenses while you are in this study.

**Security**
Total privacy cannot be guaranteed. Your privacy will be protected to the extent permitted by law. If the results from this study are published, your name will not be made public; pseudonyms will be used, and participants will be identified by letter. While unlikely, the following may look at the study records:

- The University of Louisville Institutional Review Board, and the Human Subjects Protection Program Office.
- People who are responsible for research and HIPAA oversight at the institutions where the study is conducted.
- Government agencies, such as: Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP)

**Conflict of Interest**

This study involves no foreseeable conflict of interest.

**Security**

All data will be stored on a password-protected computer. Hard copy documents will be stored in a locked file at the investigator’s home. Everything will be destroyed within six months of the study's completion.

**Voluntary Participation**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to be in this study you may stop taking part at any time. If you decide not to be in this study or if you stop taking part at any time, you will not lose any benefits for which you may qualify. You will be told about any changes that may affect your decision to continue in the study.

**Contact Persons, Research Subject’s Rights, Questions, Concerns, and Complaints**

If you have any concerns or complaints about the study or the study staff, you have three options.
You may contact the principal investigator at (859) 396-1300 or through email at james.mcmillin2@fayette.kyschools.us

If you have any questions about your rights as a study subject, questions, concerns or complaints, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Program Office (HSPPO) (502) 852-5188. You may discuss any questions about your rights as a subject, in secret, with a member of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or the HSPPO staff. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, staff of the institutions, as well as lay members of the community not connected with these institutions. The IRB has reviewed this study.

If you want to speak to a person outside the University, you may call 1-877-852-1167. You will be given the chance to talk about any questions, concerns or complaints in secret. This is a 24 hour hotline answered by people who do not work at the University of Louisville.

Acknowledgment and Signatures

This informed consent document is not a contract. This document tells you what will happen during the study if you choose to take part. Your signature indicates that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in the study. You are not giving up any legal rights to which you are entitled by signing this informed consent document. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

____________________________________  ___________________________________
Subject Name (Please Print)          Signature of Subject       Date Signed

__________________________________  ___________________________________
Printed Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)   Signature of Legal Representative  Date Signed

___________________________________  ___________________________________
Relationship of Legal Representative to Subject

117
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Printed Name of Person Explaining Consent Form</th>
<th>Signature of Person Explaining Consent Form (if other than the Investigator)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Printed Name of Investigator</td>
<td>Signature of Investigator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Investigators:</td>
<td>Phone Number:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James McMillin</td>
<td>(859) 396-1300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hello __________,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is James McMillin and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership, Evaluation and Organizational Development (ELEOD) at the University of Louisville. I am writing as I am conducting a case study to collect and analyze data on student ambassadors’ perceptions of career academies and their impact on the high school experience for students.

The primary goal of my study is to investigate student perception of the academy model and what aspects of the model they feel were beneficial and what aspects would they feel need to be changed. Thus, I am seeking to include in my research former academy student ambassadors at Bryan Station High School who have experienced the academy structure. Your voice is of considerable importance to the study. My hope is that you will participate in a Group Level Assessment about your perception of the academy model as your input could help guide future changes to the model.

I am asking that you participate in a 60-minute GLA. I plan to conduct a virtual GLA prior to March 1st, 2021. If you have additional questions, please contact me via email at james.mcmillin2@fayette.kyschools.us or call (859)396-1300.

Thank you in advance and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

James McMillin

Doctoral Candidate, Department of Educational Leadership, Evaluation and Organizational Development (ELEOD)

University of Louisville
APPENDIX D: VIRTUAL GROUP LEVEL ASSESSMENT OUTLINE AND SCRIPT

Virtual GLA

Part 1 - Stage Setting
● Introduction (Host)
● Tell them about recording, moderator will change names to Participant A, Participant B, etc.
  ○ One moderator will be assigned to this task

Part 2 - Breakout rooms Round 1 - (embed Google Docs)
● Breakout Group A: Prompt Set 1 -
● Breakout Group B: Prompt Set 2 -
● Breakout Group C: Prompt Set 3 –

Part 3 - Breakout rooms Round 2 - (embed doc link in chat for next doc)
● Breakout Group A: Prompt Set 2 -
● Breakout Group B: Prompt Set 3 -
● Breakout Group C: Prompt Set 1 -

Part 4 - Breakout rooms Round 3 - (embed doc link in chat for next doc)
● Breakout Group A: Prompt Set 3 -
● Breakout Group B: Prompt Set 1 -
● Breakout Group C: Prompt Set 2 -

Part 5 - Breakout rooms Round 4
● All back to the main room
  ○ Introduce the next concept - which is theme generation
  ○ Moderator will type the themes at the bottom of the document
  ○ Have no more than 3 choices
● Re-enter breakout rooms
  ○ Go back to original document and find frequently occurring words/phrases
  ○ Moderator leads discussion about which of the themes are the most important
  ○ After identifying the themes, discuss which themes are the most important
    ■ You could have an informal poll in the chat box
Part 6 - Voting

● Main room
  ○ Explain what will happen next
● Moderators will populate Google Form with top three themes from each Breakout Group Prompt Set
  ○ Breakout Group A - rows 1-3
  ○ Breakout Group B - rows 4-6
  ○ Breakout Group C - rows 7-9
● Google Form for Rank Order Voting -
● Link to edit Google Form:

Part 7 - Wrap-up

● Thank you, etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Script</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GLA Host</strong></td>
<td><strong>Host say:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3 minutes)</td>
<td>Thank you, everyone for joining us today. I know that your time is important, so we will try to be as efficient as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I expect this Group Level Assessment to take approximately 60 minutes. I will record this so that we can have a record of all of the responses and a transcript of all of the chats. Please be aware that the private chat room transcripts will also appear when I download the meeting. I will begin the recording now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;&lt;START RECORDING&gt;&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As you might be noticing, I am changing (or have changed) your names to correspond with a letter of the alphabet as I go over this information. All of the names are being changed to help protect your confidentiality and allow you to feel comfortable responding honestly and with candor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Let me explain what is going to happen today. A Group Level Assessment, or GLA, is a data collection tool that I am using to collect data for my dissertation. Typically, this process is done with everyone together in a room responding to prompts on poster paper, walking around and talking with each other to get ideas. With everything that is going on, I had to adapt that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
process to this electronic medium. It is not a perfect match.

After I finish going through these instructions, you will be asked to open up a Google Document with 10 prompts. Today’s prompts are focused on areas related to career academy schools and your experiences:

There are multiple pages to the Google Document. I will walk you through the process of responding to each prompt. You will have 4 minutes to respond to the prompt. At the end of 4 minutes, we will move on to the next prompt. We will repeat this cycle until we’ve been through all of the prompts.

Are there any questions before we begin?

In a moment, a link will appear in the chat box. Click it to open it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(40 minutes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Moderator, as the participants are typing answers, ask probing questions to encourage discussion. You can encourage them to emphasize the other comments on the page by highlighting. Below are some questions to help promote thinking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Probing questions</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What else did you need to know?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the curriculum sufficient?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were there enough experiences?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about internships or job shadowing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about field trips or guest speakers?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was there exploration? Was it too broad? limited?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you satisfied with your choices?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you wish you would have studied?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were there too many? Too few?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How was the rigor?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was their real-world content? Real projects?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will they help your future?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did they give you a realistic view of the world?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What could’ve been better?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you wish you learned?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think about your interpersonal and professional skills.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think about your interactions with students and teachers.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What could you have done differently or take advantage of that you didn’t?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think about recruitment.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think about activities that you did or didn’t do.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are they limited?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are they restrictive?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are they helpful?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
peers. Were they representative of the school? students were a stereotype of that field?

Part 3

GLA Host
(1 minute)

Host say:

During the next part of this GLA, you are going to return to the Google documents. I will lead you through a review of the comments that appear in the document. Remember that the highlighted words/phrases have been emphasized by someone else today.

As you are reviewing the comments, you should group them together in like categories at the bottom of the page.

After you have grouped and categorized, I will lead you in an informal voting process. Your goals are to identify three themes that are most important to the experience identified in the prompt.

Are there any questions?

We will have about 10 minutes.

GLA Host

<<Go to the Google Form:

Type your three themes in the appropriately labeled rows. >>

Part 6

GLA Host
(2 minutes)

Host say:

We will now begin the final part of our Group Level Assessment. We grouped and categorized all of the answers into themes that reflect the experience identified in the prompt. You then worked collaboratively to determine which three of those themes are the most relevant to the experience identified by the prompt.

Your next step is to individually look at the ten themes identified by the groups and determine the five that are most representative of your overall experience. These could be the five that weigh heaviest on your mind. They could be the five that you still have questions about. They could be five things that are important to you but totally disconnected from each other.
These are your responses. All of the answers will be aggregated together and ranked based on the groups votes.

In a moment, there will be a link to a Google Form. This form will list all 9 themes. You are asked to rank them in the order of the 5 most important; yes, there will be ones you can’t vote for because you only have 5 votes. Please note that you are rank order voting, so 5 is the most important and 1 is the least important.

<<Host put the Google Form link in the chat box: >>

Are there any questions?

I’ll give you a minute to complete the Google Form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Host say:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once you have finished voting, we are done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you have not already done so, please respond to the email from the other day with the address that you would like your thank you gift card sent to.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E: GROUP LEVEL ASSESSMENT PROMPTS

Based on your experiences as an academy student ambassador, what do you feel is the purpose of a career academy school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on your experiences, describe what you feel were the successes of the academy model. Please give supporting details/reasons when possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on your experiences, what would you recommend to improve the academy model? Please consider positives, negatives, structures, what worked, and what was lacking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CURRICULUM VITA

James E. McMillin
4201 Starrush place- Lexington, KY 40509· (859) 396-1300·
james.mcmillin2@fayette.kyschools.us

Leadership Purpose: To inspire, develop, and support Fayette County School Principals and continue the work of bringing to life the Portrait of a Graduate for all students, parents, staff and alumni within their schools.

Education:
Bachelors of Arts in Education-Biology/Science Education
University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY

Masters of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction
University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY

Masters of Arts in School Leadership
Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, KY

Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership and Organizational Management (Superintendent Program)
University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky (Expected Graduation Date: August 2021)

Relevant Work Experience:
July 2019-Present
Fayette County Public Schools Chief of High Schools
- Managing office budget of over 1,500,000
- Oversee FCPS athletics for the entire district in all middle and high schools
- Supervised and supported six A1 high school and 12 program principals.
- Collaborated and supported all CCR coaches and associate principals.
- Review school and program data weekly to drive district and school improvement initiatives.
- Work weekly with district support specialists to assist individual schools and staff members
- Chaired SBDM committees to fill principal vacancies

August, 2015-June, 2019
Principal, Bryan Station High School
Managing school budgets of just over $750,000.
Responsible for hiring and/or overseeing the evaluation of 145 staff members (TPGES/Frontline/KTIP)
Tasked with improving the academic, behavior, and overall school climate and culture.
Collaborating with multiple stakeholders including KDE, district, students, parents, and community members.
Continuing growth as a leader in the National Institute for School Leaders (NISL) program.
Graduated from the BB&T Leadership Institute while building bridges between school and business.
Transformed a traditional high school into a wall to wall career academy with community and staff support.
Principal Advisory Council to the Commissioner of Education Representative
Established academy school to business partnerships and assisted two other high schools in implementing wall to wall career academies.

**Associate Principal, Tates Creek Middle School (IB)**
- Responsible for developing a school-wide behavior system and plan for improving overall student behavior. (PASS trained-2013).
- Responsible for hiring and/or overseeing the evaluation of 90 staff members.
- Managed all extra-curricular activities as Athletic Director and oversaw all buildings and grounds issues.
- Started several community partnerships including one with Wal-Mart that helped feed over 100 families each school year during winter and summer break.
- SBDM Co-Chair

October, 2009-July, 2012
**Associate Principal, Woodford County Middle School**
- Provided behavior and instructional resources and support for classroom teachers.
- Admissions and Release Committee (ARC-chair trained-2010). Facilitated ARC’s and helped oversee the special education department.
- Assisted in bi-weekly walkthroughs of elementary, middle and high schools for overall district compliance with district Classroom Assessment for Student Learning (CASL) initiative.
- Assisted Woodford County court system in truancy and discipline cases.
- SBDM Co-Chair

August, 2004-October, 2009
**Biology Teacher, Henry Clay High School**
- Responsible for teaching biology to 9-12 grade students.
- Coached freshman basketball, Special Olympics basketball team and tennis.
- Helped teach and run a summer school program for at-risk 8th graders coming to Henry Clay.
• Served as Henry Clay High School’s teacher representative on the superintendent teacher committee.