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# "A Degree Is A Part Of The Puzzle, But Only A Piece." Understanding How Employers Determine The Value Of Academic Credentials

Brenda Kaspari

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*“A degree is a part of the puzzle, but only a piece.”*

UNDERSTANDING HOW EMPLOYERS DETERMINE THE  
VALUE OF ACADEMIC CREDENTIALS

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1977  
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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

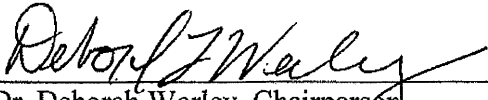
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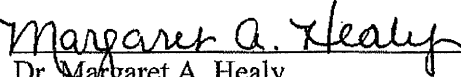
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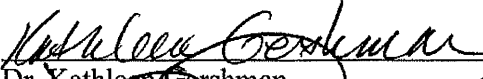
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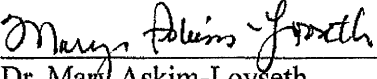
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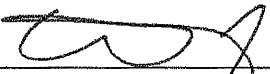
  
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Anderson, who encouraged us to never set limits on what we could do. I hope you realize what an inspiration you have been to me.

## ABSTRACT

With the skyrocketing costs of higher education and the increased scrutiny of how educational institutions prepare graduates for the workplace, this dissertation explored how the “outsiders,” or employers, view and determine the value of academic credentials. Using the premise of credentialism, this grounded theory, qualitative study addressed two major questions; first, how do employees evaluate academic credentials, and second, what factors are important to employers?

Through the interviews it was discovered that there were gray areas when determining the value of a college credential. There were three critical findings. First, college degrees are a valuable credential, yet there are issues that may deter its acceptance. Second, employers are seeking the softer skill set in new employees. Finally, the overriding attribute of a “culture fit” is critical. Five themes emerged from the research: the background of the human resource professionals who participated in the study, the positions hired for and processes of hiring, the evaluation of applicants, the evaluation of credentials, and finally, the enhancement of college experiences for employment.

The research found five clear implications. First, it suggests the importance of a liberal arts education in developing soft skills. Second, there is a need to address the academy and real-world disconnect. Third, there is a need to enhance experiential learning in a multitude of capacities. Fourth there are strong implications for instructor, administrators, professors and the

greater campus community. Finally and perhaps most importantly there are strong implications for students.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Making the decision to attend college and having the commitment to follow through to completion of a college degree is a major decision for any individual. Prospective students must weigh the costs and benefits of attendance in their current life circumstances and in thinking about the future. While choice of schools and opportunities may vary, one constant is that students want to ensure that the degrees they earn will be accepted and respected upon graduation (Belcher, Tucker, & Neely, 2012). Students are concerned about the quality, “brand,” and reputation of the institution they attend. This is especially true for those students who select a nontraditional option to earn their credentials. Now more than ever, students pursue higher education with the primary goal of using their college credentials to obtain gainful employment (Eaton, 2009; Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs, & Hayes, 2011; Lorenzo, 2008; Saunders & Zuzel, 2012; Stone, Van Horn, & Zudin, 2012). Simultaneously, employers look to the college educated workforce to guide their companies forward in the global economy. With the emphasis on preparing students for gainful employment and accountability for institutions of higher education, it is critical to examine whether higher education institutions are, in fact, preparing students with the skills and knowledge that employers need.

When this study was first proposed, higher education and the benefits offered to its students was under intense scrutiny. During the three years between the proposed study and the findings, much has changed in the educational arena, but the intense scrutiny and the question of

value with respect to investment has remained. It is critical that this issue is studied. In this vein, this study sought to understand how employers determine the value of academic credentials when making hiring decisions. The study investigated what qualities and factors employers consider value added when determining if potential employees would be an asset to their organizations.

### **College Attendance and Benefits**

Americans are attending college at record rates. In 2008, 37.9% of Americans between the ages of 25 and 64 held a two- or four-year degree (Lumina Foundation, 2011). In the fall of 2016, 20.5 million students were enrolled in institutions of higher education (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2016), and it is estimated that by 2020, 34 million Americans will have a bachelor's degree and another 18 million will have an associate's degree (Clinefelter, 2014). Although enrollment in higher education may be higher than it has ever been, the United States must increase both levels of undergraduate and graduate participation in higher education, as well as persistence to degree attainment if the nation is to compete favorably in a global environment. Authors of a recent report from the Society for College and University Planning indicated that, "The moves to a knowledge economy has increased every nation's understanding that it must increase its number of college graduates and then retain those graduates" (2010, p. 5). According to the U.S. Census American Community Survey (ACS), if the rate of increase over the past eight years of higher education degree attainment continues at 0.2%, citizens of the United States will reach a higher education attainment level of only 46.6% by 2025. The shortfall in college graduates to meet the anticipated need for college-trained individuals will be just under 23 million (Lumina Foundation, 2011). Moreover, fully 60% of jobs in the U.S. will require postsecondary education by 2018 (Klein-Collins, Sherman, & Soares, 2010). There is



still progress to be made in the United States to ensure that there are both the number of needed graduates, and graduates who have the desired skill set for current workplace needs.

Individuals are motivated to pursue higher education because of the benefits college degrees afford students; these benefits have become more evident since the recent recessions of 2006 and 2009 (Stone, Van Horn, & Zukin, 2012). The benefits for the individual are divided into two major areas: economic and social benefits. Individual economic benefits appear both in terms of the opportunity for employment as well as income earned while employed. According to NCES, in 2015 the employment rate for those with higher levels of educational attainment was consistently higher than those without a bachelor's degree. When the statistics are closely studied, employment rates appear to rise correspondingly with level of education. Individuals who earned a college degree had on average an unemployment rate of 5% in 2015, compared to those without a degree, who had an unemployment rate of 10% (Kena et al., 2016).

The information on income is even more persuasive. The median income for individuals with a degree who work full-time and year-round in 2015 was \$52,000, more than \$21,900 higher than high school graduates (Kena et al., 2016). A typical Master in Business Administration (MBA) graduate can expect a starting salary of \$80,000 to \$88,000 a year (Lewin, 2011). When drilling deeper into the data, the pay premium for those with a bachelor's degree has grown substantially in recent years. In 2008, women with a college degree earned 79% more than those with a high school diploma and men earned 74% more than their high school graduate counterparts. A decade earlier women earned 60% more and men 54% more than their respective counterparts (Lewin, 2011).

There is an investment in earning a college degree, and there does appear to be a direct return on that investment. The individual who enrolls in college at age 18 typically has earned

enough to compensate for a delayed start in the workplace and average educational debt by the time they are 33 (Baum, Ma, & Payae, 2010). According to Lewin (2011), after 11 years of work, college graduates' higher earnings compensated for four years out of the labor force and for student loans at a 6.8% interest, to cover the average tuition and fees at a public four-year university.

The economic benefit of a college degree is clear when an individual is initially employed but it is also evident after the employment years and through the pension plans that are offered and accepted by employees. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2009), in 2009 the opportunities for individuals with college degrees to participate in employer-sponsored pension plans was twice the rate of those individuals who did not complete a college degree. Actual participation among individuals who completed their college degrees was also much higher. There is very little question that there are measurable economic benefits that come along with a postsecondary degree. In addition, there are less tangible benefits: the societal benefits.

Research supports the idea that education improves quality of life in ways that are not purely economic. For example, college-educated individuals typically have more stability in their careers (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics [USDLBLS], 2010, 2016), and report higher levels of job satisfaction (National Opinion Research, 2006). In addition, research shows that individuals who earn a college degree have a higher quality of life than those who do not; two of those indicators include a much higher level of employer-sponsored health insurance (Economic Policy Institute, 2010), and the opportunity to exercise regularly or engage in leisure-time exercise (National Center for Health Statistics, 2010). In addition, individuals pursuing advanced education are less likely to live at or below the poverty level, utilize public assistance programs, smoke, or suffer from obesity (Baum, Ma, & Payae, 2010; U.S. Census

Bureau, 2010). Finally, individuals who attain postsecondary degrees are more likely to engage in educational preparation activities with their own children (Baum et al., 2010; NCES, 2009), and to engage in volunteer opportunities (USDLBLS, 2009).

The information shows that there does appear to be a direct correlation between the attainment of higher education credentials and the opportunity for employment and higher income. Individual students are entering into a rapidly changing educational environment and it is critical that those hoping to obtain a college degree are cognizant of this fact.

### **Changing Educational Landscape**

The individual pursuit and attainment of a college degree occurs within an academic environment that is facing monumental change (Carlson, 2013; Clinefelter, 2014). Among the key changes that are well documented are rising student debt (Reed & Cochran, 2012) and the meteoric growth and the rapid decline of for-profit educational institutions, which has resulted in intense scrutiny (Beaver, 2016; Kimmel et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2012; Zagier, 2011). Other changes include alternative pathways to credentialing (The Learning House, 2016; Murray, 2008; Selingo, 2013), the growth of online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2012, 2013; Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012, 2013; Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2016; Kimmel et al., 2011), and the general dissatisfaction of employers regarding the employability of many college graduates (Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Stroh, 2010; Sullivan, 2012). All of these factors call into question the perceived value of a college degree or academic credential.

**Student debt.** It is well documented that students are now graduating from colleges with record levels of debt (Reed & Cheng, 2009; Reed & Cochran, 2012). According to Deming, Goldin, and Katz (2012), approximately two-thirds of college seniors who graduated in 2011 had student loan debt averaging \$26,000. By 2016, the average student loan debt was over \$37,000.

This means that , in 2016, there was over \$1.4 trillion in student loan debt, over 44.2 million Americans had student loan debt, and the delinquency rate had risen to 11.2% (Student Loan Hero, 2017). Prior information showed that surveys conducted by the Department of Education identified that 96% of graduates of for-profit colleges took out loans to finance their education, on average borrowed more than their public and private school counterparts (Reed & Cheng, 2009). Furthermore, students at for-profit colleges were twice as likely as other students to default on their loans (Martin & Lehren, 2012). As a result, the economic investment becomes a more critical consideration for those who have attended for-profit institutions. The existence of for-profit institutions in itself has changed the face of higher education in the United States.

**Growth and decline of for-profit institutions.** At the time of this research proposal, the growth of for-profit educational institutions was meteoric. That growth seems to have escalated, peaked, and is now on the decline. However, there are still strong implications and shockwaves from the presence of this segment of higher education. According to the Department of Education between 1990 and 2010, enrollments at for-profit colleges increased by 600%, totaling nearly 2 million students, or 12% of all postsecondary students (Beaver, 2016). There had been a dramatic growth in the number of for-profit postsecondary institutions that offered complete degree programs, as well as the number of students that enrolled in them, which generated much controversy from more traditional colleges, students, regulators, and politicians. The for-profit controversy was initially ignited by a U.S. General Accountability Office (GAO) report (2010) which uncovered questionable recruiting practices and fraud allegations in federal financial aid programs (Lewin, 2011).

Another key issue in the for-profit debate is the question of program and degree quality, and, as a result, the employability of the graduates of the for-profit institutions. Opponents of

for-profit institutions argue that students leave college with unreasonable levels of debt and very little opportunity for professional career advancement (Cellini & Chaudhary, 2011). Lang and Weinstein (2012) found that in addition to skyrocketing indebtedness for students that enroll in for-profit institutions, there is little positive news about employment opportunities. The authors found that there is a large, statistically significant positive correlation between obtaining a certificate or degree from a public or not-for-profit institution and future employment. They found no evidence that students gain employment opportunities from obtaining a credential from for-profit institutions. The U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions hearing chaired by Senator Tom Harkin concluded that the training these students received was so inadequate that they could not make a reasonable wage or ever begin to pay back their student loan debt (Staley & Trinkle, 2011).

On the other hand, proponents of for-profit institutions argue that they fill the needs of underserved college students who are otherwise ignored by traditional academia (Deming et al., 2012). Either way, the existence of for-profit institutions has further emphasized the significance of the debate on the value of a college degree (Staley & Trinkle, 2011). Even though there has been a dramatic slowdown in enrollment at for-profit institutions, students and employers are still left with the issues created by this educational segment (Selingo, 2016). These institutions are but one piece of the puzzle of the changing higher education landscape. Another critical component is the addition and utilization of alternative pathways to credentialing.

**Alternative pathways to credentialing.** When individuals picture the typical college student, it is often the traditional eighteen-year-old entering ivy-covered buildings with a group of similar-looking peers. The common expectation is that these students will follow a linear path to complete their education. In reality, the straightforward path is not chosen by over half of

students enrolled in college today (Selingo, 2013). Selingo contends that today students are “swirling” through higher education more than ever before. Students attend multiple institutions both onsite and online, often at the same time. They extend time to graduation by taking time off between learning blocks, either to work or for cooperative education (co-op) experiences. Students often turn to alternative education providers such as massive open online courses and other public course providers. According to the National Clearinghouse Research Center (2013), fully one-third of students who earn undergraduate degrees transferred at least once during that degree attainment. Notably, students transferring from a four-year to a two-year institution were the most prevalent. In addition to reverse transfers, another growing area documenting variances and skills is credentialing.

Charles Murray (2008) revisited the idea of competency-based learning in his book *Real Education*, where he contends that the answer is not better or more degrees, but no degrees at all. He finds that individuals entering the job market should have a known and trusted measure of their qualifications and that measure should express what they know and are able to do, not where they learned it or how long it took them to learn it. In 2014, more than 11 million adults with no college experience held a certificate or license that was granted by a professional organization (Ewert & Kominski, 2014). This phenomenon is now beginning to impact the higher education landscape through competency-based education (CBE). Western Governors University, Southern New Hampshire University, and the Wisconsin University systems began considering and utilizing this form of attainment of college credit for student experience in 2013 (Pierson & Riley, 2014). Competency-based programs depend on a show and “proof” of learned skills often in the form of work portfolios (Carlson, 2013; Schneider, 2013). In 2015, more than 600 higher education institutions were operating CBE programs, up from only 52 the year before

(The Learning House, 2016). Overall the need exists for flexibility in the offering of education credentials. As Selingo (2013) summarizes, “the nature of the workplace and occupations is changing so dramatically that thinking of college as one place, one time is quickly becoming outdated” (p. 6).

**Badges.** The concept of badges was developed a few years ago as a way of moving away from formal academic credentials and offering an alternative way to show “credit” for demonstrating competency or skills earned. The idea has expanded to a “digital badge” as an online record of achievements, tracking the gained skills of individuals. According to Ewert and Kominski (2014), the “Badge Alliance,” which tracks the use of badging specifically, notes that nearly 20 higher education institutions in the United States currently offer badges for both formal credit and informal learning activities. Not only are there different methods of validating learned experiences, but also growing modalities of gaining those experiences

**Continued growth and acceptance of online programs.** Overall, higher education enrollments have remained flat or declined in the past three years. Enrollments were down in the fall of 2015 alone by 1.7% (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2016). To combat this trend, higher education institutions have looked to online education to supplement enrollments, and there has been a corresponding rise in the number of students taking courses or completing degree programs online (Allen & Seaman, 2012, 2013; Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013; Lytle, 2012; Morehouse, 2017). In 2016 there were an expected 3.5 million students working toward degree completion online, and it is projected that this group of learners will increase by 5 million in 2020 (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2016). Online education appears to be one of the largest and fastest growing segments of higher education (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2016). In fact, its overall

growth has been termed by Dr. Clayton Christensen of the Harvard Business Institute as the “largest disruptive innovation” in education since the printed textbook (2011).

Online courses have been an alternative for the nontraditional student, often a busy working adult, to complete a degree or obtain an advanced degree (Council of Adult Experiential Learning [CAEL], 2008), and the population of nontraditional students is rapidly expanding (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012; Soares, 2013). The NCES reported that in 2011, fully 73% of current college students had at least one characteristic of a nontraditional student, which include part-time attendance, 25 years of age and above, engaged in full-time work, and/ or have dependents (NCES, 2011). By 2016, at least 85% of students enrolled in college were considered nontraditional learners as defined by at least one characteristic of the CAEL definition (CAEL, 2017). Soares (2013) reported that in 2013, only 15% of current undergraduate students were considered traditional.

Initial studies in the profile of the online student found that students that progressed successfully in a timely manner through an online course of study were typically female (Allen & Seaman, 2010, 2011, 2013), older than 22 (Allen & Seaman, 2010, 2011; Dutton & Dutton, 2002), worked full time (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012; Dutton & Dutton, 2002) had family obligations (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012), and experienced higher levels of self-efficacy than a traditional student (Holcomb, King, & Brown, 2004). The research shows that nontraditional students are more likely to participate in online education. In fact, 60% of nontraditional students choose online delivery as their preferred learning modality (Klein-Collins, Sherman, & Soares, 2010).

Indications, however, are that the online option is also becoming more popular for traditional students. Kimmel et al. (2011) report that, “traditional colleges and universities have



increasingly added online programs as an extension of existing curriculum” (p. 1). According to the newest *Online College Student Survey*, younger students are one of the fastest-growing segments of the online student population with the age decreasing at both the undergraduate and graduate level. The mean age of undergraduate online students decreased from 34 years old in 2012 to 29 in 2016. The average age of graduate students in 2016 was 33, down from 35 in 2012 (Clinefelter & Aslanian 2016). It appears that as the number of online programs and providers grow, more students find the program they desire in an online format. The increasing number of institutions offering online programs also helps to increase the reputation of online learning.

In addition to the appeal of convenience, flexibility, and access for the potential online student, academic institutions increasingly identify online courses and programs as important to their strategic direction moving forward (Allen & Seaman, 2010, 2011, 2013; Kim & Bonk, 2006). According to *Presidential Perspectives: The 2012 Inside Higher Ed Survey of College and University Presidents*, increasing online courses and programs is the second most strategic priority of institutional CEOs behind establishing or enhancing collaborative partnerships for more effective and efficient management of their individual institutions (2012). Institutions are willing to make the investment in resources to achieve the gains of the online world. Although online courses have been available for over 25 years (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012), it is a relatively new development that the availability and use of technology has caught up with the needs, desires, and preferences of students. Indeed, online learning allows institutions to serve more students at a lowered expense (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012).

### **Employer Perceptions**

While the higher education landscape may be understandable to those inside the higher education arena, it is confusing for many of the stakeholders; basic questions of cost, student

debt, payback on investment, and the employability of graduates rise to the forefront. Colleges are under increasing pressure to prove value and justify costs, which complicates the issue of the true value of an academic credential or degree to graduates and employers. Carol Schneider, past president of the Association of American College and Universities states,

Our employer studies show that employers basically find the transcript useless in evaluating job candidates. The people doing the hiring these days have no idea if students can write a coherent paragraph and their transcripts do not really tell employers what skills they have actually mastered. (as cited in Pierson & Riely, 2013, para. 1)

To reinforce this concept, Carlson (2017) states that “often skills employers are looking for are not conveyed in a college transcript: the ability to communicate, lead, bounce back from failure and empathize with different people” (p. 4).

In summary, government and business leaders agree on the absolute necessity of more Americans attending college and earning higher degrees. At the same time, employers report having less confidence that colleges and universities are preparing students well and providing good value. As emphasized by Staley & Trinkle (2011), colleges and universities must provide proof of value and show that they are meeting objectives, as well as documenting actual learning.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The success of the relationship between student demand for academic programs, and the willingness of institutions to offer academic programs, is often determined by the employer’s assessment of program value and the acceptance of the degree as a qualifying credential for employment. Within the rapidly changing landscape of higher education, one thing that must remain constant is the need for the college degree or academic credential to have value. Thus, a logical step in considering the “worth” of educational credentials is to investigate how other

important constituents of higher education, “the outsiders,” such as employers, view the value of academic credentials that prospective candidates have earned.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that employers use to evaluate academic credentials when hiring employees. The study investigated the attitudes and perceptions that employers held relating to the credentials of position applicants. The primary questions asked in this study were:

1. How do employers evaluate academic credentials?
2. What factors are important to employers?

Understanding that additional questions would arise as the research evolved, some preliminary follow-up questions (prompts) were identified:

1. Please tell me about your role at the organization, how long you have been employed with the company, your responsibilities, etc.
  - a. Tell me about your educational background. How have you learned the skills needed for your job?
2. What types of positions do you typically hire for the organization?
  - a. What expectations regarding educational level does your organization have for potential employees?
  - b. What skill sets are you looking for in those positions?
  - c. Do you require an academic credential (a degree) for most positions? Why?
  - d. What does a college degree tell you about the candidate?
3. Let’s discuss some of your past hires.

- a. Tell me about the best hire you have made or observed in your organization.  
Why was this individual such a positive attribute for your organization?
  - b. On the flip side, has there been a hire that did not work out as well for the organization?
  - c. Are there any conclusions that you draw from these examples?
  - d. Do you think all college degrees are equal?
  - e. Do you create different strategies for orientation, training, and career path planning for a new hire depending on the type of credential?
4. Are there any additional comments you would like to share?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is important as it delved deeply into the current thoughts, feelings, and resulting actions of employers in one region of the country in a landscape of higher education that is rapidly changing. There have certainly been past studies that look at very similar issues and questions; however, the environment at that time was very different. This study is significant to a variety of higher education stakeholders. First, all students could learn more about the attributes that employers value when evaluating prospective employees' academic credentials. The higher education landscape is a difficult one in which to maneuver even when adequately armed with knowledge and experience; navigation is considerably more difficult for a student who is unfamiliar with the nuances of the higher education system. It is helpful for students to have access to current research on employer perceptions of what creates "value" in an academic credential.

Second, administrators that oversee traditional, nontraditional, hybrid, and online programs can be informed about ways to improve their programs and address legitimate

employer concerns. Academic administrators and faculty are responsible for the design and implementation of degree programs, and they need to understand the perceptions of the individuals that hire and employ their graduates. These administrators are in positions to address concerns and improve the quality, credibility and employability of the programs they offer their students. The recommendations that come from this research may also inform program administrators of actions to better market to and educate potential students and employers about program quality. Third, it is critical that faculty who teach in individual programs and majors have a clear idea of what skills employers are looking for in potential candidates; they need to know what organizations consider valuable.

Initially, employers who participated in this study had an opportunity to outline their thoughts and concerns about academic credentials that are earned in a traditional four-year college. However, as conversations progressed, it was obvious that employers were very interested in also talking about credentials earned in a variety of programs and modalities. If the perceptions (and realities) are addressed in a complete and timely manner, employers may potentially gain a stronger and better educated workforce.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions explain how specific terms will be used in this study:

*Academic credential:* A qualification, achievement, personal quality, or aspect of an individual's background, typically used to indicate they are suitable for something. Employment recruitment is based mainly on academic credentials. Typically, it is a document or certificate proving an identity and qualifications (Brown, 1995). In this study, originally the term "academic credential" was used to indicate a traditional four-year college degree, but as the study

progressed, it became apparent that credentials may also include other ways of documenting achievement and skill.

Types of Course Delivery:

- *Traditional course*: Course with no online technology used. Content is delivered in writing and orally, and less than 10% of the program is delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2013).
- *Web-facilitated course*: Course that uses web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course. A portion of the course (10-20%) is delivered through technology. May also use a course management system (Allen & Seaman, 2013).
- *Blended/hybrid*: Course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, and has a reduced number of face-to-face meetings (Allen & Seaman, 2013)
- *Online course*: Course that uses web-based technology to deliver all or most of the course content. Typically, there are no face-to-face meetings (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

*Employers/gatekeepers*: The individuals within an organization that do the screening and hiring of candidates (Nelson & Quick, 2013).

*Nontraditional student*: A student who has at least two of the following qualities (CAEL, 2008):

- Delayed enrollment in postsecondary education beyond the year after high school graduation
- Attends part-time
- Is financially independent from his/her parents

- Works full-time
- Has dependents other than a spouse
- Is a single parent
- Has no high school diploma or GED

*Organizational culture:* A pattern of shared basic assumptions that an organization has developed through the process of solving problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough in the past to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (Schein, 1992).

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Premise of the Credential**

The premise of credentialing is that the degree, as a credential, serves as a tool for entry into a specific field or level of employment. However, what exactly does the credential represent? Does it represent knowledge acquisition and an acknowledgement of abilities or capabilities in a specific field? Another question that was explored by this study was, does the degree that has been earned represent equal access and opportunity for the credential holder regardless of the method of delivery or the institutional type? This study used the concept of credentialism as a framework to determine what the academic credential represents, from the employer perspective.

### **Foundations of Credentialism**

According to Brown (2001), enrollment in higher education has increased in conjunction with the higher occupational entry-level requirements in the contemporary workplace. There are at least two perspectives on the theory of this growth. Some, e.g., Brown (1995), contend that

historical forces have made many U.S. occupations accessible only to people who hold certain college degrees. Conversely, others have found strong ties between education and economic growth (Jorgenson, Ho, & Stiroh, 2005; Levinson & Holland, 1996; Walters, 2004). These “strong ties” are considered to be a critical element of human capital theory, and were thought to be the incentive for strong educational growth through the early 1970s. Although the field of human capital theory was officially established in 1960, there have been decades of strong research supporting the field and its application (Blaugh, 1987). According to Blaug, human capital theory suggests that individuals and society derive economic benefit from investment in people. Schulz (1962) contends that although human capital investment generally includes health and nutrition, education often is the prime factor used for analysis, as it appears to be the foundation and incentive for other factors.

There have also been challenges to human capital theory as a result of newer, more critical, theoretical perspectives within sociology. The strongest criticism comes from proponents of the credentialist perspective. The literature suggests that although there were scholars who challenged the concept of human capital theory earlier, Randall Collins’s work on the “credential society” (1979) was the foundational piece for credentialist thought. He argued that the monopolies were concerned with the accumulation of cultural capital and social exclusivity rather than competition for school-taught technical skills that are needed in jobs. Collins stated, “there is a weak connection at best, between formal education credentials and skills required on the job” (1979, p. 19). He believed that what is learned in school has much more to do with conventional standards of sociability and propriety than with instrumental and cognitive skills. Collins further argued that the value of education depends less on specific



content and more on having acquired the formal credential that allows an individual to move on to the next level.

David Brown (2001) expanded on the concept of credentialism when he suggested that this theory sees “the expansion of educational degrees as the growth of culturally-based stratifying entry barriers to occupants and organization” (p. 20). Brown used Collins work as a “jumping off” point in his 1995 work, *Degrees of Control: A Sociology of Educational Expansion and Occupational Credentialism*, which contends that a basic premise of credentialism is the “overeducating” of society. Brown contended that diplomas have more significance in the economic, cultural, and political dimension than they do in the educational arena. He further stated, “Credential requirements for jobs are less concerned with concrete work skills than with demanding that recruits hold similar, school-taught, cultural dispositions to the incumbents of positions” (2001, p. 20).

Brown (1995) expanded on the following propositions of credentialism, which form the basis of understanding the concept:

1. The content and occupational significance of credentials are more cultural and exclusionary than technical. Correspondingly, degree thresholds are more important in credentialed labor markets than years of schooling or technical knowledge.
2. The formality of credentials (the information in the degree itself) is an abstraction from the actual knowledge of degree holders that delimits which authorities may question the competence of the degree holders. As a result, formal qualifications are linked to positional power.
3. Credentials are monopolized by competing occupational status groups as exclusionary and cultural; entry barriers to positions as well are used by hiring

parties as measures of candidate trustworthiness in positions that embody discretionary powers.

4. Historically, credential inflation at the top of the credentialing hierarchy drives educational expansion.

### **Challenges to Credentialism**

The concept of credentialism is not without criticism. Labaree, for example, finds credentialism to be an inaccurate way of accessing value, as the public value of education is generally a combination of preparation of capable citizens (political benefit) and the training of effective workers (the economic benefit) (1997). In essence, the public benefit of educating citizens is not being realized and education, therefore, is positioned only to benefit individuals. The result is a glut of graduates – not the over-education of individuals, but rather the over-credentialing of individuals. Labaree further states that there is a spiral of credentials or inflation, where individual levels of education gradually flood the market, forcing them to seek higher levels of credentials in turn, which creates and maintains a very wasteful system. Credentialism may very well undercut real learning. The goal for many individuals is to attain the diploma, the credential, for the value of what it can be exchanged for, not for the learning itself (Brown, 1995; Sedlak, 1987). The system appears to be more political and social than educational, meaning that market forces mediate the class position of students and their access to the “right education” to acquire and “cash in” the credential for a position of value. Brown (1995) states, “The economic, cultural, and social capital that come with higher class standing gives the bearer an advantage in getting into college, doing well in college and in translating college credentials into desirable social outcomes” (p. XVI). These findings are supported by Taylor and McGugan (1995), who assert that credentialism is often nothing more than an attempt

by a privileged minority to prevent others from joining them. In their view, credentialism is producing an overqualified, underused work force toiling away at the same old job.

The following set of assumptions guided this research:

1. Research participants are willing to share their experiences and perceptions with the researcher.
2. The participants' organizations will allow the hiring managers or gatekeepers to be interviewed.
3. The information and data collected will be sufficient to analyze and build a theory regarding the value of academic credentials.
4. Information gained from the interviews will reflect the reality of those being interviewed in their situation.
5. Credentialism will be an appropriate lens through which to analyze this data.
6. Grounded theory methodology will be well-suited to analyze this issue.

### **Ethical Concerns**

With this researcher's over 25 years of experience in higher education, including 20 in nontraditional and adult education, I may have held a bias regarding what I expected to hear. In my tenure within nontraditional education, I first served as a student advocate, and then an administrator. While I remain a strong advocate for students and the opportunities an education provides for them, as an institutional advocate, I lobbied strongly for the viability of strong academically sound and rigorous programs delivered in a variety of modalities. I was aware of this bias throughout the study. In preparing my interview protocol, I prepared possible follow-up questions for clarification and more in-depth explanations to ensure that I had a strong

understanding of the interviewee's true ideas and experiences. This "check and balance" helped me avoid projecting my expectations on the participants' perspectives.

An additional ethical concern I had related to my network of professional relationships. With a professional career spanning more than thirty years, I have formed personal and professional relationships with many human resource employees, and this relationship could have impacted access to individuals and organizations. I ensured that I adhered to all protocols and procedures that I had developed to maintain the integrity of the research.

### **Overview of Study**

This study determined how employers evaluate academic credentials of prospective employees. Chapter I provides the statement of the problem, purpose, and significance of the study, as well as the research questions, definition of terms, and theoretical perspective of credentialism. Chapter II focuses on the current literature concerning the factors that influence the acceptance of academic credentials. Employer attitudes, perceptions, and concerns about the value of the academic credentials (degrees) are discussed. Chapter III presents the research design, sample selection, participant profile and recruitment, data analysis procedures, and protocol. The grounded theory map is also initially presented, as well as the data analysis protocol. Chapter IV includes a detailed explanation of the five themes developed through this qualitative research, and a detailed explanation and analysis of the data gathered. Finally, Chapter V presents a discussion of the findings, implications of the findings, lessons learned, and recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE**

More students than ever are enrolling in higher education with the specific goal of obtaining the academic credentials that will lead to a good job, and, hopefully, a lifelong career (Clinefelter, 2014; Kimmel et al. 2013). At the same time there has been a wave of criticism and a questioning of value from business leaders and employers expressing concern that higher education institutions cannot adequately prepare students for the world of work (Ewell, 2009; Hart, 2008, 2010; Rhodes, 2012). Given this apparent contradiction, how do students select institutions and academic programs that will be valued by employers? The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that employers, specifically, gatekeepers, use to evaluate academic credentials when hiring employees. The literature review begins with a section on the changing academic environment in order to situate the study in the proper context. There are three overarching themes presented in this area: the changing demographic of the college student, the meteoric growth and the rapid decline of for-profit educational institutions, and the acceptance of alternative modalities of academic program delivery, most notably online program delivery.

The literature review continues with a review of the research that focuses on needs in the workforce identified by employers and concerns with the academic preparation of graduates for the world of work. The chapter will conclude with a section on factors that influence the perceptions of employers on the value of academic credentials: accreditation, physical presence, school reputation, or “brand,” and personal experience with the school and its graduates. The

scope of my research will hopefully contribute to the body of research in the area of the value of academic credentials and how that value is determined by employers. The current literature review is not considered complete, but rather one that will evolve in scope and breadth as the qualitative research unfolds.

### **Changing Education Environment**

There is no question that American higher education is experiencing dramatic changes on many fronts. The expectations and desires of students are morphing, student profiles are rapidly changing, and the public is demanding accessibility, affordability, and accountability from higher education institutions (Bailey, 2011; Kanter, 2011). Along with increased accountability, there have also been increased costs for degree attainment. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2010) reported that between 1982 and 2006, the cost of higher education in the U.S. grew by 439%, more than four times the rise in the consumer price index over the same time period. Along with the escalating costs of higher education, there has also been a change in the face of the end users of higher education, the students themselves.

### **Nontraditional Students**

According to William Clohan, former Under Secretary of Education,

We call students over twenty-five who are working full-time non-traditional students because when they first entered educational research and policy discussions they differed from the traditional undergraduate student. Today, these “non-traditional” students are the majority of the student population in higher education. Consider that now more than sixty percent of students enrolled are now over twenty-five and more than sixty percent of students are also working full-time while pursuing their education. (Clohan, 2010)

The enrollment increase in the nontraditional student group has reportedly come from three distinct areas: a) workers who have lost their jobs and find themselves in a position where they must develop or update their skill sets or completely retrain (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011); b) veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with the goal of either gaining new skills to work in a civilian workforce or adapting their military skills (Katopes, 2009); and c) adults who have obtained a GED and determined that for career advancement they need an additional academic credential (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

As early as 1984, Knowles determined that the older nontraditional learner tends to be more self-directed, task- and goal-oriented, and has a need to apply the concepts they are learning in the classroom to their lives and workplaces. Although CAEL determined a clear definition for the nontraditional student, other studies have used various definitions. Osgood-Trenton (2001) defined nontraditional learners based on four factors: a chronological age of 25 or older, a level of responsibility that included multiple commitments, a level of experience that shows mastery or expertise in an area outside of the current study, and a set of expectations with clearly defined goals. These students have an established life interest that determines their learning style and there is a strong need to ensure that those learning styles are addressed. Initially, these needs and interests were best addressed by for-profit institutions. Brenemen, Pusser, and Turner (2006) perhaps sum it up best when they state, “the for-profits have found a niche by tailoring courses, times, and places of instruction to the needs of working adults and has captured a place in the market left open by schools...in traditional education” (p. 6).

### **Rise and Rapid Decline of the For-profit Institution**

A second very significant development in American higher education has been the rise and subsequent decline of for-profit institutions (Beaver, 2017; Kimmel et al., 2011). Just over

30 years ago, fewer than 100,000 students were enrolled in for-profit institutions. According to a Senate report released in July 2012, there were 766,000 students enrolled at for-profit institutions in 2001. By the fall of 2011, there were over 2.4 million students enrolled in for-profit institutions; constituting a growth rate of 225%; the growth rate of enrollment across all postsecondary education was 31% (Fain, 2012). Historically, only 19% of for-profit institutions offered complete degree programs; but in recent years 90% of students enrolled in these institutions are completing an undergraduate degree or advanced degree, and half of these institutions offered both complete undergraduate and graduate degrees (Wilson, 2010).

The height of enrollment in the for-profit industry was in 2011, when 2.4 million students were enrolled, or 12% of all students in higher education (Beaver, 2017). A 2012/2013 update from Eduventures (2013), an educational research firm, listed the twenty largest online institutions by headcount: of these, thirteen were for-profit institutions, including six of the top seven. The Department of Education reported that while the twenty largest public institutions had nearly 950,000 students enrolled in 2011, the twenty largest for-profit institutions had more than 850,000 enrolled. Led by the University of Phoenix, the institution that many feel reinvented the concept of accessible education, a major draw to for-profit institutions has been the variety of delivery modalities, the student service provided, and the ease of access and entry into educational programs (Breneman et al., 2006). Perhaps one of the leading changes instituted by the for-profits has been the appearance of online learning.

### **Growth of Online Programs: The Numbers**

One of the best-known chronicles of online education is the Sloan Annual Survey, which, since 2002, has been tracking and reporting annually on the state of online education in the United States. At the time of this study, the 2013 Sloan Survey stated that 6.7 million students



took at least one class online in the fall of 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2013). In fall of 2013 that number increased by 410,000 to a new total of over 7.1 million students enrolled in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2014). To put these numbers in perspective, the raw numbers of students taking online courses continue to show a strong increase, but the percentage of growth is now based on a much larger base of numbers (Allen & Seaman, 2010, 2013, 2014). This is an annualized growth rate of over 16% in comparison to the overall higher education growth rate of only 2.5% during the same time period (Allen & Seaman, 2014). More recently, the numbers are even more significant when looking at individuals enrolled in complete online programs. Clinefelter and Aslanian (2016) found that in the fall of 2016 over 3.5 million students were in enrolled to complete online programs, and 14% of all higher education student enrollments were in fully online programs (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012).

### **Growth of Online Programs: The Institutional Perspective**

According to Parsad and Lewis (2008), 66% of two- and four-year Title IV-eligible degree-granting institutions offered online, hybrid, or other forms of distance education courses during the 2006-2007 academic year. Data reported in the Sloan C Survey (2014) indicate that “there are virtually no public institutions among those institutions with no online offerings” (p. 13). As the numbers of online students grow, findings in the literature consistently demonstrate that student outcomes in online courses and programs are also strong. Bernard et al (2004) found that online students had a slight advantage in meeting course objectives over their face-to-face counterparts. Perhaps the most encompassing study was conducted by Russell (2005), whose meta-analytical study of 400 university courses and programs concluded there were no significant differences in the educational outcomes for students in online and traditional courses. The Department of Education’s meta-analytical study in 2009 also found that online

education was as effective as traditional education courses for both undergraduate and graduate populations; in fact, this study again found a slight edge for online students as they reportedly spent more time on tasks. Along with the growth in numbers, the portrait of the online student has also changed.

### **Characteristics and Motivations of the Online Student**

A review of the literature shows that the growth of online courses and programs has attracted a new and different type of student, rather than cannibalizing the current on-campus programs, as many college administrators initially feared (Mangan, 2001; Thomas, 2001). Thomas (2001) estimated that five out of six online students were employed full-time and would not be able to attend courses in any other modality, so online was the only option. Although there has been a good amount of research regarding the characteristics of the online student, much of it has been contradictory (Stewart, Bachman, & Johnson, 2010). For example, some scholars have determined that women are more likely to select online degree programs (Allen & Seaman, 2010, 2011; Aragon & Johnson, 2008), whereas other studies show there is no significant gender difference (Jenkins & Downs, 2003). Aslanian and Clinefelter (2012) conducted a survey of 1,500 online students in the spring of 2012 to clarify demographics of the online student. They determined that 40% of online students were younger than 30, 80% enrolled in complete degree programs, and the majority enrolled in an institution within 100 miles of their home. When the motivations of online students were studied, most undergraduate students were continuing their education online to change careers, and the graduate students more often sought career advancement (Aslanian & Clinefelter 2012, 2013). Bocchi, Eastman, and Swift (2004) studied four cohorts in the Georgia WebMBA to determine specific attributes of online MBA students. They found that the average age was 30 to 35 years old, that most

students had an undergraduate degree in a business-related field, that one-third were women, and all were employed at the time of their program. Although the program required a minimum of two years of work experience, the average student had 11 years of professional work experience. When asked about the motivations for their program choice, the top four responses were (in order): attending a program that was accredited, attending a program that fit professional goals, fitting or “appropriate” professional and personal goals, and 24/7 access to courses.

The field of business originally dominated the field of study preferences according to specific credentials, and since the appearance of online programs, one-third of all online enrollments have been business students. This trend has continued: the 2016 survey of all institution types found that 26% of all online undergraduate students were enrolled in business courses or programs, followed by health courses, computer and IT courses and programs, and the arts (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2016). The field of study preferences for students enrolled in private, not-for-profit institutions are roughly the same, with the most commonly enrolled courses and programs being business, health professions, criminal justice, and the arts (Clinefelter & Magda, 2016).

In the most recent 2016 profile of online college students, Clinefelter and Aslanian (2016) found that the typical student was trending younger on both the undergraduate and graduate level. This trend has stayed consistent for the past four years, 2012 through 2016. Another consistent trend over the past five years has been that 75% of online college students select a program offered by a college or university within 100 miles of them (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2016). It appears that people who select online programs also want to select an institution that has a physical presence the student can visit, if the need should arise.

Further, it appears that online experiences lead to more online experiences. Positive experiences with online courses or degrees lead to enrollment in additional programs, courses, and degrees in both public and not-for-profit institutions (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2016). Stewart, Bachman, and Johnson (2010) confirmed the above results in a study of a four-year open enrollment university when they determined that students interested in both traditional and online programs were motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic goals and orientation, but that online students placed greater emphasis on course schedule concerns and time constraints.

As Mortagy and Boghikian-Whitby (2010) claim, “Discussion about online education continues to lack consensus among the academic community which has led to the persistence of several contradicting perceptions. In 2004, Dublin identified 25 controversial issues relating to online education and many of those issues still exist today” (p. 23). Today the literature still provides contradictory findings about online learning. There is consensus, however, from academic administrators on the importance of online learning as a strategic goal for their institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2012; Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2016; Kimmel et al., 2012; Taylor, Parker, Lenhart, & Patton, 2011). There is also concern about the acceptance of online learning by their faculty and the latter’s willingness to adapt and change their teaching methodologies to meet the needs of online students (Kim & Bonk, 2006). In a more recent report, it was found that while there may be some hesitancy by faculty, these barriers are being overcome. According to a recent report of private not-for-profit institutions in 2013, 80% of the faculty were not supportive of online programs, but the number has now fallen to only 50%. While this may appear to be a monumental number, it is representative of a positive change in acceptance of online programs (Clinefelter & Magda, 2016).

## **Employer Acceptance of Online Credentials**

A final area of concern that appears to have changed very little in the past decade is the concern over the lack of acceptance of online education and online credentials by potential employers. The recorded acceptance rate of employers has remained at or about 40% for the past seven years. To provide an understanding of employer acceptance of online credentials, it is helpful to look at comparative studies by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) to determine the attitudes of hiring managers on individuals with online degrees. The SHRM survey results from 2010 indicated that 71% of more than 500 hiring managers saw an increase in applicants with online degrees. As a result, they will be encountering more applicants with online credentials and will need to address organizational stances on candidates holding online degrees or credentials. In a snapshot of three years of the SHRM studies (2007, 2009, 2010), some interesting data emerged. In 2007, 76% of the 578 employers that were surveyed stated that online degrees were perceived as more credible than five years prior; in 2010, 87% of those surveyed hiring managers agreed. The survey results also showed that 65% of hiring managers in 2007 and 73% in 2010 felt that individual online courses and programs were more credible than entire degree programs completed online. Overall, the SHRM data indicated that less than half of employers feel that online degree programs are as credible as traditional programs.

When this study was originally proposed in 2014, the acceptance of online programs and degrees showed mixed results. Currently, there appears to be a gaining acceptance of online degrees. The Public Agenda conducted a study of 656 human resource professionals to determine how employers perceived the value of online degrees. The participants shared that they preferred a traditional degree from an average school over an online degree from a top

university; however, they were open to looking at specific candidates, and considering what they might offer the organization (Taylor, Parker, Lenhart & Patton, 2012).

There does appear to be support for the idea of employer bias against credentials earned online as exhibited by the opinions of hiring managers, but is this an anomaly or a result of employer policies? An examination of hiring policies revealed that there was also a bias for traditional over online coursework (Seibold, 2007). In her national survey of organizational human resource policies and preferences, Seibold reported that there still was a strong preference for traditional degrees, and the rationale was tied into the managers' own experiences and lack of exposure to online education. Additional analysis to uncover the rationale for the apparent bias shows that there is a perception of lack of interpersonal interaction in online programs, and a perception that there was not a true relationship between the student and instructors (Adams, 2008; Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Adams, Lee, & Cortese, 2012; Kohlmeyer, Seese, & Sincich, 2011). Adams (2008) considered the factors behind the lack of acceptability of online degrees in hiring: his study of 123 hiring managers determined that the leading objections were lack of face-to-face communication, lack of a reputation for rigor, and lack of mentoring in learning experiences in the online environment. These are the same results found in the majority of the studies on acceptability of online degrees as valued academic credentials. Yick, Patrick, and Costin (2005) summarized this by stating, "There is a perceptual disparity in academia that distance education is second best" (p. 3).

More recently, one study found that employer acceptance of online programs does appear to be changing: Watson (2016) found that 83% of individual employers accept and look at traditional and online degrees as equal. Watson identified that the two concerns that employers, or gatekeepers identified were the relatively low reputation of specific online institutions and the

lack of social interaction skills associated with online programs. Clinefelter and Aslanian (2016) also found through their annual studies an increasing acceptance of online degree programs.

### **Employment Environment**

Value is intrinsically linked to the marketplace, and this principal is certainly true with academic credentials. Given that students are enrolled in higher education primarily to earn a degree to gain either entry to or advancement in the workplace (Kimmel et al., 2013; Staley & Trinkle, 2013), are these students graduating with the skills and attributes that employers require for the global and diverse workplace? This is a significant question. According to Stone, Van Horn, and Zukin (2012),

Students who graduated during the past several years are facing historic obstacles in achieving the foundations of the American dream and express low expectations for their future prosperity. The resilience of this year's (2012) and recent college graduates are being tested as they struggle with student debt, a slow job market that offers few toe-holds in their chosen careers, and nagging fears about a lack of preparation for global labor market competition. (prelude)

At the time of this proposal, the environment may have been a little different than the current context. In 2010, the NCES estimated that about 2.4 million graduates entered the workplace and there was stiff competition for jobs (Petrecca, 2010). At the same time, the Congressional Budget Office projected the unemployment rate to be ten %. As a result, these 2.4 million graduates were competing with 15 million Americans already looking for work, many of them unemployed or under-employed graduates from prior years (Rampall & Hernandez, 2010; Simon, 2010). As of February 2017, the national unemployment rate was 4.7%, down from 4.8% in the previous month, in line with market expectations. The number of unemployed

people was almost unchanged at 7.5 million, while the labor force participation rate increased by 0.1 percentage point to 63% (Trading Economics, 2017).

Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzic, and Kaiser (2013) contend that there are multiple causes of unemployment and two major types of unemployment. They cite cyclical unemployment, which is a result of lower aggregate levels of demands for goods and services, which results in fewer jobs. There is also structural unemployment, which the authors define as a mismatch between the qualifications employers are seeking and the skill sets of the labor force. Although they found that the unemployment rate in 2011, often hovering around 10% nationally, was a result of both types of unemployment, structural unemployment is on the rise in the United States (Chen, Kannan, Loungani, & Trehan, 2012). The same concern remains in 2016 and is a cause of major concern for job-seekers. In this current environment of unemployment where the competition appears to be fierce, how does an applicant or academic program differentiate him/her/itself from similar applicants and programs?

### **Identified Employer Needs: Historic and Current Perceptions**

The first long-term study of what employers want from the college-educated workforce was done during the Reagan administration in 1990 by the Department of Labor. The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) surveyed business managers, union leaders, and public and private employers to determine the needs of the workplace. The survey results found that there were five major needs identified:

1. Resource skills: the ability to identify and allocate resources
2. Interpersonal skills: the ability to work with others
3. Information skills: the ability to access and use a variety of types of information
4. Systems skills: the ability to understand complex interrelationships



## 5. Technology skills: the ability to understand and use technology

Of the above, the SCANS study determined that the most critical need identified by employers was interpersonal skills (Hogan et al., 2013).

An inverse analysis showed that the three biggest identified workforce deficits were poor problem-solving skills, poor personal management skills, and poor interpersonal skills. Over time this idea has been reinforced with only minor differences in results (Brown & Hesketh, 2006; Hogan & Brinkmeyer, 1997). The research identified specific studies that define what strong interpersonal skills mean in the workplace: someone with whom interaction is rewarding (Hogan, Lock, & Brinkmeyer, 1997; Judge, Higgins, Thoreson, & Barrick, 1999). More recently, in their study of the manufacturing industry, Van der Heijde & Van der Heijde (2006) interviewed over 300 management employees and determined that employability was determined by five factors: occupational expertise, personal ambition, personal flexibility, corporate sense or interpersonal skills, and balance.

From an inverse perspective, a study that was done to determine the factors that “derailed” executives in employment. McCall and Lombardo (1983), who coined the term “employment derailment,” followed fired executives for decades and determined that these displaced executives were as bright, well-educated, experienced, hardworking, and as successful as their employed counterparts. The glaring difference was that the “derailed” executives typically had an abrasive interpersonal style and more than likely had a history of poor relationships. The interpersonal aspects of one’s job preparation and personality is second to none in terms of the skill set employers want.

More recently, Carlson (2017) reported in an extensive study of employer needs in the workplace that the need for softer skills is important. The vice president of Enterprise Holdings

stated clearly that although the company wants a college degree, it is not necessarily looking for specific majors or technical skills. The vice president states,

Empathy, communication skills, experience in working with a team of people, all of those skills end up being most important on the job, we have a wide funnel in our management training program and these are the skills we are looking for. (p. 23)

Similarly, in a recent poll by the Chronicle of Higher Education, it found that what is needed by current graduates as they entered the workplace is communication skills, and the ability to bounce back from failure and find a way forward in less-than-ideal situations (Carlson, 2017). Adams (2014) found in her report of the National Association of College Employers (NACE) that the skills employers were looking for in college graduates were critical thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork skills, professionalism, oral and written communication skills, IT management, leadership skills, and career management skills. In a wider survey, NACE (2016) outlined the critical skills employers rated most highly on a five-point scale (see Table 1).

Table 1. Most Highly Rated Skills by Employers.

Skill	Rating
Ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization	4.63
Ability to work in a team structure	4.62
Ability to make decisions and solve problems	4.49
Ability to plan, organize and prioritize work	4.41
Ability to obtain and process information	4.34
Ability to analyze quantitative data	4.21
Technical knowledge related to the job	3.99
Proficiency with computer software programs	3.86
Ability to create and/or edit written reports	3.60
Ability to sell or influence others	3.55

*Note.* Adapted from National Association of College Employers, 2016.

The literature has been consistent in what employers desire in the workforce and many graduates are leaving their programs without these critical skills.

### **Meeting Employer Needs**

Although the United States spends \$380 billion annually on higher education, it is unclear whether there is a return on this investment (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Recent data relating to higher education quality finds that the product of American higher education may no longer be “the best in the world” (Reindl, 2006). A study by the American Institutes for Research found that one in five four-year college graduates lacked the analytical and computational skills to complete an office supply order or to even correctly estimate auto mileage (Reindl, 2012). The results were comparable among all institutional types. Hart conducted a series of national surveys of over 300 employers in each of three years (2006, 2009, 2010) and determined that only one in four hiring employers felt that employees had the required skills needed for the current workplace. The employers shared that they would be focusing more on four-year college graduates in the future and that expectations were going to be even higher for those hired in the future (Hart, 2010). Nine out of ten surveyed employers stated that their future hires must take on more responsibility, work harder, and solve more complex problems if they are to succeed in the workplace (Hart, 2010).

Carnevale and Smith (2013) contend that the true value of academic credentials must be in the quality of skills “up and down” the line, ranging from technical competence to the ability to take on final responsibility for products and service irrespective of the job description. The authors also assert that graduates need robust skills to adapt to the changing nature of the workplace. The needed skill sets are communication skills, problem-solving skills, interpersonal

and teamwork skills, and skills of influence. Staley and Trinkle (2011) also found communication skills to be vital for all graduates, but that they were often missing.

Sullivan (2012) studied hiring trends in the manufacturing industry specifically and found that even at the height of the recession, over one-third of American manufacturers had unfilled job openings. He hypothesized that “there was an inability to close the gap between managerial skills that American manufacturers want in the workplace and the skills available in the workforce” (2012, p. 247). This skill gap in the manufacturing field can be documented back to the early 1900’s (Ball, 1991; Brauer, 1993) and is not isolated to the U.S. (Handler & Healey, 2009; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005; Shah & Nair, 2011). Sullivan (2012) concluded of all the manufacturers that he surveyed, that none of them were satisfied with the skills of recent college graduates. He concluded the manufacturers were seeking human resource skills, work experience, and technical competence that were bundled in ways that current graduates just do not have. Other studies have been conducted with similar findings, i.e., that employers are looking for the “total package” in an employee (Guendoo, 2007). Additional studies have been done in a variety of industries and the study results are similar: the academic credentials that graduates hold do not prepare them adequately for the world of work (Callaghan & McManus, 2010; Clark, 2017; Saunders & Zuzel, 2012).

### **Current Practices for Credential Evaluation**

As early as 1927, formal schooling has been tied to socioeconomic growth, and the investment of the resources to attain an educational credential was determined to be an advantage for salary attainment (Bills, 2004). A key assumption is that formal college and degree attainment will produce the qualifications and knowledge for which the employer is willing to pay a premium. Collins first hypothesized in 1979 that education credentials have evolved as a

preferred means for sorting and selecting workers in the labor market. Even though this concept is being widely questioned by some, the practice has continued. Ng and Feldman (2009) found that the college degree is a signal for employers that the holder of the degree has a desirable degree of human capital that should serve the organization well. How, then, do employers evaluate individual credentials that potential employees hold? There have been studies that address the employer expectations of the curriculum and the “major” focus of the education (Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Holtzman & Kraft, 2010; Stark, Poppler, & Murnane, 2011). This same research also highlights the skill gap in communication and people skills that graduates have compared to the expressed needs of business and industry. There is a gap in the literature addressing how employers determine whether an academic credential has value for their organization.

The literature identifies certain distinctions that appear to impact and enhance the acceptance of academic credentials for employment (Bailey, 2011; Brooks, 2005; Guendoo, 2008). The distinctions that are supported by the literature are the issues of accreditation, the presence of a traditional, “bricks and mortar” campus, a strong institutional reputation or brand, and the hiring individual’s personal experience with the educational institution and/or delivery method (Seibold, 2007).

### **Accreditation**

As previously mentioned in this study, the issue of program and institutional accreditation is critical (Adams, 2005; Guendoo, 2008) with a particular emphasis on regional accreditation and program accreditation (Lorenzo, 2008). A 2008 survey by Zogby International found that 83% of hiring executives say that regional accreditation strongly impacted the hiring decisions they made. Lorenzo (2008) cited that employers look for regional accreditation and

professional accreditation in the respective field – e.g., for business, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, for engineering, the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, and for education, and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education – as the standards for credential quality.

### **Bricks and Mortar**

A second distinction in the perception of credential value is the presence of a traditional or “bricks and mortar” building affiliated with the institution. Human resource directors and CEOs believe that degrees have more value if they come from institutions that have campus-based programs in addition to any distance programs that may be offered (SHRM, 2010). In the 2010 SHRM poll of 412 hiring individuals, 57% of hiring managers considered the online degree to be equal in value to a traditional degree from those institutions that also had a bricks and mortar campus. Only 34% of hiring managers valued the equality of the degrees if the institution had no physical presence (SHRM, 2010). The U.S. News and World Report annual ranking of the top ten online bachelor’s degree-granting programs noted that the top programs all had traditional campuses, as did the top 25 online MBA degree-granting programs (Brooks & Marse, 2013). The presence of a bricks and mortar setting enhances the appeal of online programs.

### **Brand Recognition**

A third distinction found in the literature is that of brand recognition. The literature shows that positive name recognition and a strong positive institutional reputation may enhance the positive perception of courses and programs that are delivered by that institution (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009; Bailey & Flegle, 2012). The concept of brand has been common in the marketplace for decades, yet its presence in the higher education space is relatively recent. Lockwood & Hadd (2008) suggest that academic offerings, student experiences, institutional

prestige, and “intangibles” comprise the higher education brand promise. Brand experiences are the result of human interactions that boost, or diminish, students’ and employers’ emotional engagement with the institution; prospective students, families, and employers alike are keenly aware of brand. Rovai and Downey (2010) determined in their study of distance programs that branding is used to differentiate educational programs and institutions from the competition and to entice individuals to select their institution for enrollment. Research suggests that the majority of students and employers may be brand shoppers (Lockwood & Hadd, 2008; Rovai & Downey, 2010).

Much of the research on whether or not “brand” strategies are successful in valuation of degree has been conducted internationally and the results are contradictory. Bradley and Nguyen (2004) determined the index of school quality (reputation or brand) had a larger effect than academic performance in England. In a study of 18,722 graduates in China, however, Zhou (2003) found that educational reputation or brand had very little effect on whether or not graduates were hired. In a study based in the U.S., Dale and Krueger (2002) found that reputation was not a major factor in employer selection of new employees. Most recently, Kong and Jiang (2013) found that graduates from a “well-reputed university” in China had much better job opportunities upon graduation. There are also studies that determined that brand and reputation may have a positive impact on starting wages of new employees (Broecke, 2012; Long, 2008; Strayer, 2002).

Findings from studies about online education settings indicate the positive effects of brand recognition (SHRM, 2007, 2009, 2010). Each year the percentage of those hiring managers that accepted online credentials from well-recognized educational institutions has improved. Further, when hiring managers were asked about the factors that give value to an

online MBA, the majority listed school recognition as a top factor, second only to accreditation. If an institution and its graduates are known to be strong, the credential that is earned from that institution is perceived more favorably than a credential from a school that has no physical presence or recognized brand (Bailey & Flegle, 2012).

### **Personal Experience**

The final distinction found in the literature is that there does seem to be wider acceptance of degrees in a variety of delivery modalities as a credential for employment if there is some personal experience on the part of the hiring manager with either the institution or the specific delivery modality (Carlson, 2017; Stewart et al., 2010). As identified earlier in this literature review, positive personal experience with online education can change the perception of the value of online education. This increased positive perception may occur as a result of online for credit education (Guendoo, 2007; Johnson, 2009), the fact that as more people opt for online programs, exposure will grow (Clinefelter & Magda, 2016), or as a result of positive exposure through corporate online education and training. As Lorenzo (2009) states, “in the corporate sector increased utilization of training, professional development and certification programs that are conducted over the internet...has contributed to the overall acceptance of online education” (p. 4). As hiring managers’ exposure to online education in various forms increases, so does acceptance of that method of delivery of education. Bailey (2011) also identified in his research that the employers that he interviewed felt that there was a “generational shift” in the acceptance of a variety of academic program delivery methods and as time goes on, there would be wider acceptance of a variety of credentials. He found that the credibility of the MBA credential earned online was directly related to accreditation, school recognition or “brand,” and the ability of students to utilize real-world scenarios as part of their education. If these benchmarks were



met, fully 50% of those employers interviewed found credentials earned in a variety of methods to be equally acceptable.

### **Summary**

Selected literature was reviewed to establish a foundation for the current study. The literature shows that the former description of the “nontraditional” student now describes the majority of students on American campuses (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). In addition, there has been a meteoric growth of for-profit institutions, students, and programs (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Wiley, 2010). Concurrently, along with the strong and diverse growth in programs, delivery methods, and alternative educational pathways there has also been a strong concern expressed by employers about the preparation of college students for the world of work.

Despite the economic comeback, the employment environment for recent college graduates remains a very competitive one. The research finds that often the skill sets employers have identified as critical are missing from college graduates. Specifically, employers want communication, resource, and problem-solving skills (Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Kaiser, 2013). In addition, there are factors which do provide an employment advantage to students from an employer’s perspective, and those distinctions are a fully accredited institution, the presence of a traditional “bricks and mortar” campus, a strong institutional reputation or brand, and the hiring individual’s personal experience with the educational institution itself and/or delivery method (Seibold, 2007).

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

This chapter provides a description of the grounded theory research design used for this study. I offer a narrative on the theoretical perspective applied in my study, and how I used it to guide my study. I describe the process used for gathering data to address the research questions presented in Chapter I. Finally, the research design that was used will be presented, including sample selection, participant profile, a description of the method for data collection, procedures for data analysis, and measures to ensure reliability and validity. A detailed grounded theory map is also included.

As Creswell (2013) states, qualitative research is conducted when a problem or issue needs to be explored. He contends that qualitative research is used when a deeper understanding of factors related to an issue is needed. As discussed in Chapters I and II, the landscape of higher education is rapidly changing and one constant appears to be that individuals are depending on the bankability of their college degrees. With all of these seismic shifts and long-held beliefs about the academic environment being questioned, how do employers currently evaluate academic credentials for future employees?

The purpose of this study was to identify which factors may be present that inform the perceptions of hiring managers on the acceptability of academic credentials for employment and which factors lead to the forming of these perceptions. Creswell (2014) points out that quantitative research tests theories and has the advantage of doing a comparative study with large

numbers of subjects; but with this large number of subjects come limitations in the amount of probing questions and clarifications that can be used to delve deeper into the issues. The qualitative research approach allows for clarification and further explanation of quantitative findings reported by others, often using a series of personal semi-structured interviews. As Creswell (1998) points out, qualitative research is,

an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds, a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 99)

Grounded theory was selected as the methodology for this study. Grounded theory was first introduced in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss, who felt that many of the methods used in qualitative research in sociology were inappropriate (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Glaser, 1978). The major difference in their approach was they felt that theories should be “grounded” from the field, especially in the actions and interactions of people. From this data, theories of actions or interactions could be suggested (Creswell, 2013). Creswell defines a theory as an explanation of something or an understanding that the researcher develops from the information gained through personal interviews. The grounded theory approach allowed me to utilize a framework to study and weigh the data from those whom I interviewed (the field participants) and use this data to study the process, action, or interactions and construct a possible theory concerning how employers evaluate academic credentials for employment.

The literature I reviewed revealed that there are possible factors from an employer’s perspective that affect the perceptions of value of an academic credential. Some include accreditation (Adams, 2008; Bailey, 2011; Bailey & Flegle, 2012), the reputation or “brand” of

the institution (Bailey, 2011; Bailey & Flegle, 2013; Lockwood & Hadd, 2008), personal knowledge of the institution and its graduates (Stewart et al., 2010), and the reputation of the curriculum (Bailey & Flegle, 2012). The use of grounded theory allowed me to probe, question, and clarify employers' perceptions to gain a clearer understanding of the factors that lead to the acceptance of academic credentials and the process used to make those decisions. The grounded theory methodology was appropriate for this study as I had a strong desire to first identify the factors that affect the acceptance of the academic credentials, but also to understand the thinking process employers use in making hiring decisions. In other words, why are some academic credentials deemed more valuable than others? As the interviews progressed, it became apparent that credentials took on meanings more than simply the academic degree that was earned. The grounded theory model for my study is introduced below in Figure 1.

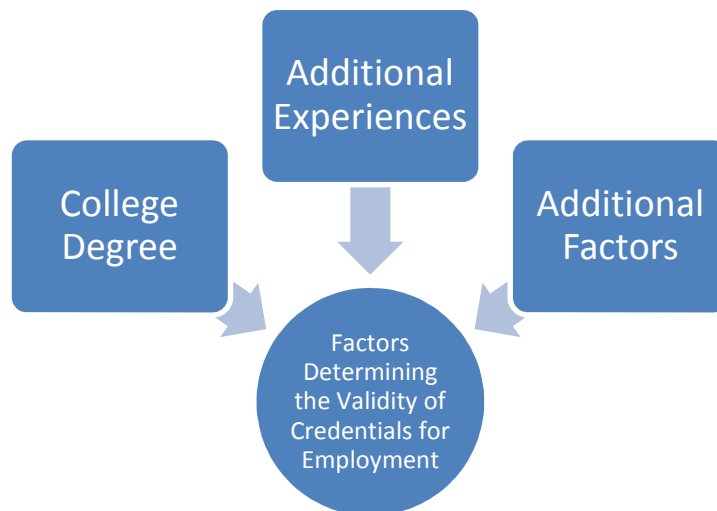


Figure 1. Grounded Theory Model.

I used the concept of credentialism as the lens for this study. Credentialism can be defined as “the expansion of educational degrees as the growth of culturally based stratifying

barriers to occupants and organization” (Brown, 2001, p. 20). Brown explains that credential requirements for jobs are less concerned with concrete job skills than demanding that recruits hold similar cultural dispositions to the incumbent job holders. The foundation of the credentialist theory interpretation for this study was to determine if the value of the specific academic knowledge (the credential) was used in terms of exchange value in the labor market (Bills, 2004). The data that gathered from the individual personal interviews were viewed through this theoretical lens to see what factors translate into a legitimate credential for employment. The following propositions as determined by Brown (2001) were used as a premise for the analysis: 1) the content and significance of the credentials are more cultural and exclusionary than technical; 2) the formality of credentials is an abstraction from the actual knowledge of the degree holder; 3) credentials are monopolized by competing occupational status groups and are used by hiring parties as measures of candidate trustworthiness; and 4) historical credential inflation may drive educational expansion. As previously mentioned, the concept of credentials took on a broader meaning during the interviews because it was defined by the participants as alternative ways of documenting skills and abilities of potential employees.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

As this study utilized North Dakota employers as the subjects a employers of business graduates, participant recruitment and selection began with the identification of the largest state employers, sourced from North Dakota Job Services information. North Dakota Job Services ranks the 50 largest employers in the state annually; the most recent compiled list is from 2014 and was used as the database to gain the participation of 20-25 companies to be used in this study. Employers on the list were approached until there was a participation list of 20-25 representatives from the identified companies.

Creswell (2013) suggests that the sample size of a grounded theory study should be 20 to 30 individuals with the possibility of becoming larger if needed. He further suggests that with 20-30 participants the theory that is generated can become well-saturated. The participants that I interviewed were individuals responsible for hiring functions, often known as the “gatekeepers” of the hiring process. In their positions, the interview participants had the knowledge necessary to address the research questions of the study. Criterion sampling as defined by Creswell (2013) was used to ensure that all interview subjects met the identified criteria. The criteria for selection was that the employers were one of the 50 largest North Dakota employers. In addition, the individuals interviewed had direct responsibility for the screening and hiring of applicants. It was interesting to note that more than 50% of those individuals were the heads/directors of a human resource department. This is critical, as it aided in knowing and understanding the direction of the human resource department, and did not just represent one individual’s perspective.

With the initial list of 50 companies generated, following Bailey’s (2011) methodology, each company was assigned a number for identification and an investigation was done to ensure that the correct contact information was available. An initial e-mail was sent to the identified human resource individual inviting them to participate in the study. If a response was received in 7-10 business days a phone call was placed to extend the invitation to participate in the study. The first 25 companies that responded to the invitation and agreed to participate in the study were used for the study. Twenty-one participants were recruited, and through the snowballing method three additional individuals from staffing and recruiting agencies were interviewed. Most of these individuals aided the individual organizations in a hiring capacity. It was thought they could provide some general observations of human resource decisions in individual

organizations as well as some trend information. This purposeful sampling of the participants in 24 interviews allowed for rich data to be collected for analysis.

After the participants were secured, I called or emailed the individuals to schedule an interview date and time. The preference was for the interviews to be in person at a place of the interviewee's choice; telephone interviews were used as a possible alternative. Seventeen of the interviews were held in a face-to-face format and seven of the interviews were conducted by phone.

### **Profile of the Participants**

I conducted individual interviews with 21 human resources leaders working in one of the 50 largest organizations within the state of North Dakota. The original list was taken from Job Service North Dakota's 2015 Labor Market Information Center employer list. I also interviewed three leaders from regional employment agencies. These interviews were a result of suggestions from individuals first interviewed as they often utilized the employment agencies to assist in the recruitment and hiring process for their companies. In addition, I determined that the employment agency leaders had a very clear idea of the human resource trends in the region. In total, I interviewed 24 human resource professionals.

Eighteen of the participants were female and six individuals were male. Tenure in the human resource field was between two and a half years and 30 years. The participants worked in a variety of organizations, such as municipal government agencies, public school systems, health care facilities, higher education institutions, social service agencies, manufacturing, transportation, banking and finance, and staffing industries. The size of their organizations varied from 150 employees to 1600 employees. See Appendix C for a profile of participants.

## **Description of the Interviews and Data Analysis Procedures**

The interviews were conducted in September and October 2016. Seventeen of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, generally at the place of employment of the interviewee. Seven of the interviews were conducted by telephone, as this was more convenient for the interviewee. The interviews varied in length from 45 to 90 minutes. See Appendix B for the interview protocol.

The interviews were transcribed within 72 hours after taking place. An independent transcriptionist was hired to do the transcribing. After the interviews were conducted and transcribed, each interview and transcript was identified by the initial identification number. The master list of the participants and their employer affiliations was locked in a secure location to ensure confidentiality. I read the transcripts multiple times and marginal notes were generated. The transcripts were then compared with the researcher's anecdotal notes taken during the interviews. The anecdotal notes included comments on nonverbal communication and cues, as well as use of pauses and silence.

The interviews were then coded using an open coding model, which identified 248 codes summarizing the experiences of the individuals interviewed. The open codes were organized into specific axial codes, which resulted in 24 codes and provided an overview of the information gathered. These axial codes were then divided into thematic areas. There were five major themes that emerged based on the coding process. These were: 1) the background of human resource professionals; 2) positions and processes of hiring within the organization; 3) evaluation of applicants; 4) evaluation of credentials; and 5) enhancing colleges variances for employment. The five major themes that were developed, as well as the codes leading to the development of these themes, are outlined in Chapter IV. See Appendix E for the complete coding book.



## **Grounded Theory**

I choose to use a grounded theory approach in the qualitative analysis of this study. Grounded theory is defined as a set of systematic inductive methods for conducting qualitative research aimed toward theory development (Charmaz, 2009). Grounded theory provides guidelines on both data gathering and analysis of data. The critical element of the grounded theory approach is the central phenomenon, which is the most frequently recurring theme that appears in the information (Creswell, 2009). Below are the procedures for data gathering and data analysis, resulting in the initial grounded theory map.

### **Procedures for Data Gathering**

As Creswell (2013) suggests, in qualitative research “the qualitative researchers collect data through themselves as the researcher, through examining documents, observing behavior and interviewing participants. They may use an instrument, but it is one designed by the researcher using open ended questions” (p. 45). With this in mind, the method of data collection used in this study was an individual personal face-to-face interview with 17 participants, and 7 personal interviews by phone. All participants were hiring managers or gatekeepers for their organization. The subject pool was drawn from the industry list provided by North Dakota Job Service of the fifty largest employers in North Dakota.

An interview guide or protocol was generated with open-ended questions as well as some possible follow-up questions (see Appendix B). The interview questions were developed based on the issues that were addressed and the ideas that were generated in the literature review. Appendix B shows the question development and alignment. The core section of the interview was bound on the front end by open-ended questions, and more probing questions were asked at the end of the interview, when the interviewee was invited to talk about additional issues related

to the topic. The information gathered from the open-ended probes allowed the participants to identify issues that were not addressed in the primary questions and allowed for their personal perceptions, viewpoints, and stories to be shared. Each interview lasted approximately 45-90 minutes.

Patton (1990) strongly suggested that interviews should be audio-recorded as recordings have the advantage of capturing data more faithfully than hurriedly written notes, thus allowing for the researcher to focus on the interview. The interviews in my study were digitally recorded in all cases; every interviewee agreed to be recorded. Every interview participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality.

The interview protocol was used in all cases, ensuring that the questions were asked in the same order with the same potential follow-up questions. This helped to ensure that there was no interviewer bias. The human subject informed consent form was filed with the Institutional Review Board to ensure there was compliance with all policies and that all appropriate permissions were obtained. The informed consent form is attached as Appendix A.

### **Research Questions**

The primary questions asked in this study were:

1. How do employers evaluate academic credentials?
2. What factors are important to employers?

### **Procedures for Data Analysis**

I followed the data analysis steps for qualitative grounded theory recommended by Creswell (2013). All the interviews were audio-taped and detailed notes were taken during each interview. Audio files were transcribed within three days of the interviews by a paid transcriptionist. I then read through the transcripts many times, adding margin notes to each

interview protocol to begin to identify initial trends and codes in the data (Creswell, 2013). The codes were then analyzed to begin to explore an initial database strategy. I used a matrix spreadsheet to record the data from the interviews. Multiple steps were then taken to code the data. As Creswell suggests (2013), all interview data were scanned to identify major organizing thoughts that were consistent and appeared in multiple interviews.

The next step in the data analysis process was to describe, classify, and interpret the data. I coded the data by separating the text from the transcripts into smaller categories of information and then assigning a label for each code. I used the process of “lean coding” where I began with nine predetermined codes, and then expanded the codes and categories as more of the transcripts were coded and reread. The data set was continuously scrutinized to map codes and categories of information as they emerged to begin to form a story or a theme.

I used nine preexisting themes from the information cited in the literature. However, I remained open to emergent codes that arose from the information that the interviewees shared. With the combination of preexisting and emergent codes, I mapped the data that described the perceptions of those being interviewed and used this to develop the major themes. Appendix D presents a list of existing codes. Creswell (2013) defines a theme as “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (p. 186). I used the process of understanding the processes, actions, and interactions of the participants to better determine the concepts being presented.

With the information coded, I then organized that information into a theoretical “map” or “picture” that illustrates a theoretical model of the information that has been found. The last step in the coding process was selective coding, which is the development of a coding paradigm that builds a story that connects the categories (selective coding) and ends with a set of theoretical

propositions. I used this procedure to code all data and generate a theory based on the findings of the interviews.

The next step in the process was to interpret the data, getting beyond the codes and the themes into larger units or interpretations of what it means. This is the point where I began to integrate the concept of credentialism. I constructed a theory based on the information generated through the interview process to determine how employers evaluate potential employees' academic credentials.

Although I had originally considered doing follow-up interviews with participants if there were questions or additional issues that came up during interviews, I determined that I did not need them. There appeared to be a saturation point with the information that I had where very few new ideas were being shared.

### **Information Trustworthiness and Credibility**

The validity of the research in this qualitative study came from the process I used in researching and reporting the data. For this qualitative study, I used Creswell's (2013) framework as my foundation for validity which he contends is "a process rather than verification" (p. 250). He finds there are certain strategies to effectively validate qualitative research, which I included in my research. I demonstrated prolonged engagement by building trust with my interview participants through the interviews and also built on relationships that I had previously with some of those interviewed. I was also cognizant of what was salient to the research questions in this study. I used triangulation by making use of multiple interviews to corroborate findings and evidence. I also used artifacts that were provided to me by the participants to validate the information they shared. I analyzed publications that were shared both internally and externally as well as publications for the recruitment of employees. It was

important that I remain unbiased during this process and I remained aware of potential biases throughout the process. I kept a researcher notebook that included anecdotal notes as well as preconceived ideas and notes.

One of the key components of credibility in qualitative research is member checking, which consists of returning the data, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so they can judge the accuracy and the credibility of the information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I shared with select participants a preliminary draft of the transcription of their interviews to ensure that I had the facts and their ideas correct. I selected the participants by offering everyone the opportunity to read the transcripts. Only four individuals asked to review the transcripts; the others indicated they wanted to see the completed findings.

The last technique that Creswell (2013) suggests to ensure credibility is the use of “rich, thick description” (p. 252) which I utilized. By audio-taping the interviews I had the opportunity to pay attention to nonverbal communication as well as the use of pauses and silence during the personal face-to-face interviews, which aided in the depth of the descriptions and the memos.

Reliability in this study was gained by keeping detailed field notes while interviewing the participants, as well as audio-taping the interviews, having them transcribed quickly, and reviewing them to ensure all ideas were interpreted. I used spreadsheets to document the information. Confidentiality of all data was maintained throughout the study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The first limitation of this study may be its localized nature. This study was designed to be implemented and conducted in North Dakota, so the results may be localized and regionalized. One thing worthy of note is that North Dakota is probably not “typical” in the employment arena. At the beginning of the data gathering portion of this study, North Dakota

was experiencing an energy boom and had the lowest unemployment rate in the nation. In the past year as the energy boom has slowed down, North Dakota now has the fifth lowest unemployment rate of 2.9% following New Hampshire and three other states at 2.7% (USDLBLS, 2017). At the time this study began, North Dakota was on the heels of an energy boom and this may have colored the way that human resource individuals looked at their own organizations and the workforce.

A second limitation of the study may have been that there were a variety of majors that were represented throughout the employer interviews. An underlying premise may have been that the study would look at predominantly business-related majors and this was the case; however, additional majors and careers entered into the discussion. As a result, it may be difficult to draw implications with regards to specific majors. The additional fields included education, healthcare, finance, engineering, accounting, and telecommunications. The results may have had the possibility of a bigger impact if all the organizations were from one industry, but in a small state like North Dakota, this would have been very difficult as the population and organizations are limited.

The third limitation of the study may have been that there were 12 months between the actual interviews and the analysis. I believe that the thoughts and feelings shared by participants were the same or very similar. Although every attempt was made to ensure credibility and reliability of the process and the information gained the time delay may have impacted some of the information that was reported and analyzed.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the research methodology used for this study. The study explored the factors that employers use to evaluate academic credentials of potential employees. The

research design proposed and used was a qualitative study that utilized a grounded theory approach adapting the use of credentialism as a foundation for the theoretical construct. The target population for the study were the 50 largest North Dakota employers as identified by North Dakota Job Service, with the goal of recruiting 20-25 participant employers to be used for the study. Measures to ensure trustworthiness and credibility as well as data analysis procedures were also described.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how employers determine the value of academic credentials when making hiring decisions. The study investigated what qualities and factors employers consider value-added when determining if potential employees will be an asset to their organization. The primary research questions asked in this study were: “How do employers evaluate academic credentials? What factors are important to employers?” Using an interview guide or protocol (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) that was open-ended in format allowed additional discussion areas to surface related to the interviewees’ roles in the organization, how long they had been employed with the organization, and their responsibilities. The discussions typically focused on educational backgrounds as well. Participants also talked about the types of positions for which they hired at their respective organizations. In this vein, there was conversation about the most and least effective employees that were hired into the organization, shedding light on specific qualities that appeared to be workable within the organizational setting and those that seemed to detract from effectiveness. Finally, there was discussion about the equality of academic credentials, including ones earned in ways other than the traditional four-year degree.

In this chapter, I present the findings, organized around five major themes. These major themes were developed through open coding. The open coding process typically breaks down the data offered by participants and applies a word or phrase that will capture the action, attitude,



and result of the topics being discussed (Merriam, 2009). Axial coding was then done, which is the process of relating categories and properties to each other, resulting in refined category schema or themes (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2013). I developed the open codes as well as the axial codes as I reviewed the rich and thick descriptions offered by the research participants. Many of the participants offered personal stories that aided in the narrative analysis of the information that was presented. The complete code book can be found in Appendix E.

### **Findings**

After following the open-ended format of the five general questions in the interview protocol, the data gathered from the conversations with participants were assigned to the categories or findings as follows. Five major themes were developed:

1. Background and skill development for human resource professionals
  - a. Time in human resources
  - b. Acquiring of skills
2. Organizational hiring characteristics
  - a. Positions typically hired for in the organization
  - b. Hiring process and orientations
3. Evaluating applicants
  - a. Attributes of the strongest and weakest hires
  - b. The importance of a cultural fit between the candidate and the organization
4. Evaluating credentials
  - a. What college degrees tell employers about the individual
  - b. Equality of college degrees
5. How college experiences can be enhanced for future employment

- a. Stronger Collaboration
- b. Developing Internships or Cooperative Experiences
- c. Clear understanding of both entities

### **Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory was the approach selected for this qualitative study which, through interviews with 24 human resource professionals in the state of North Dakota, sought to develop a theory on the factors that determine the validity of college credentials for employment. The basic grounded theory map is presented in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Grounded Theory Map.

The above themes will be described in detail with supporting evidence in the subsequent sections.

## **Theme One: Skill Development for Human Resource Professionals**

This theme addresses the information that was gained from the interviewees using the first question that was asked. This question was, “Please tell me about your role in the organization, how long you been employed with the company, your responsibilities, etc.” The question further probed the managers’ educational backgrounds as well as how they obtained the skills needed for the job. The conversations in this area typically included both the technical skills that were needed for the job as well as the softer skills that made them successful in the human resources (HR) profession.

**Educational background.** Most individuals felt that they had learned the skills needed for their job while on the job and through networking with other professionals in the field. In addition, they spoke of the importance of ongoing education and training within the field and gathering key information from individuals both locally and nationally. This section summarizes the axial codes of time in HR and methods of skill attainment.

Overwhelmingly, the HR professionals interviewed discussed the education that prepared them for their current position as having been learned “on the job.” The college majors of participants varied from English to education to communication, to human resource management degrees. An interesting finding that emerged was that although individuals had an undergraduate degree in one of the above areas, and this degree may have helped them enter the organization, many times, the specific skills needed for the HR position were learned on the job and as an individual advanced through the organization. Most felt that it was these “on the job” skills that allowed them to advance into an HR role. Participant #8 spoke of her increasing responsibilities at the organization, where she began as an administrative assistant and worked her way up to an HR position:

We had about 30 staff on board [when she joined the organization] and the president handled all the HR things. So, he had all the files in his office. I was, being his administrative assistant, his right arm. That's what I knew how to do honestly. That's what I'd done my entire career. I was good at it. The organization started growing at about 17% a year, we added programs and added locations so the president said we needed to hire someone to manage the employees and all the staff issues and I think you're the one to do it. I said I did not want the position originally. For two years I did not take the position, but then it became apparent that someone needed to do it and along with the support of the president I had the support of the board so I did it.

Participant #11 echoed similar experiences:

I started out as a part-time temporary typist and then I moved into probably like an office manager position. I was doing receivables, payables, payroll and all that stuff but that's before, when we were quite a bit smaller. Then I transitioned into HR and just kind of naturally took over the HR component of the organization. I came from Northwestern Bell and I had gotten some HR training there even though I wasn't in the HR role, but again, as an office manager. Some of the duties were thrust upon me. As a result, I learned the roles I needed to be successful in my role for the organization.

What was notable was that these were two of the three individuals of the 24 who did not have a formal college degree. They acknowledged, however, that times were very different when they began at their organization. Participants #8 and #11 both indicated that when they retire from the organization, in the next few years, they suspect that the organization would select someone to lead HR who has a relevant degree and who will perhaps be SHRM-certified as well.

Participants who held bachelor's degrees generally indicated that often they entered the organization in one arena and eventually gained HR responsibilities as they moved through the organization. The perception was generally that the move to the HR department was an upward move. Participant #12 chronicled his experience:

I have been in my current position of HR since October 2013. However, before that I started as an intern working on a lot of the programs that I'm currently managing and I did that for about a year and a half before moving around within the organization. Then I came back to manage all those programs. So right now, I handle all the recruitment activities as well as the HR activities and that is my focus.

Another individual within the banking profession, Participant #5, stated:

I was with the organization for 13 years as a manager, which means I oversaw the consumer entities and as we grew I simply grew into the role of the HR director, hiring, training, coaching, development, and all that good stuff. I was then promoted to managing all the HR functions within the regional locations.

Newer HR directors, those that had been in their position for less than five years, appeared to be more intentional with their degree choice than those who had been in the position for over 20 years. Participant #6 described her educational background:

Well, I went to a state university for about a year and a half and that was just general business and then I transferred to another university in a metropolitan area where I graduated with a bachelor of arts in communication studies. I had at least a couple of HR classes and I learned that in addition to business courses they would be extremely important. So, in addition to my communication degree, I have accounting and HR

courses as I was able to design a program that included what I needed to enter the HR field and it worked well at least for me.

**Training and development.** Many of the participants, regardless of their educational background, sought out training and development opportunities to enhance their HR skill sets.

Participant #8 stated:

I am always paying attention to the laws that are changing and availing myself of any of the issues that have been changing in the field. I have to pay attention to the benefits that we are offering and I'm always on top of those things; just because when I started in this role and first learned some of the components things were different. To remain competitive, we have to be knowledgeable. We are no longer in our infancy (in our organization) and we are expected to be up-to-date on current issues.

Participant #1 echoed those feelings:

Well, really, although I have a degree, and I had learned basic things through my education, things and foundations about the human resource programs, the majority of the information or the real skills I use have been learned through experience, working with other professionals and networks in addition to what I have availed myself of.

Participant #10 went into her position with a great deal of experience as well as a formal degree in the HR field, and she explained her progress in this manner:

I got my current position, as well as my positions before because of my degree. But right now, I must say that I learned more on the job in the first couple of years than I did in any degree program. I learned the practical skills, the interaction skills, the interpersonal skills, and what really led to success.

Finally, Participant #2 stated:

My background is not specifically in HR. I went to a university and graduated with a degree in English and a minor in communication. After graduation I really didn't know what to do. I landed in human resources and that just appeared to be a great fit. I have learned much of the skills that I need for my job on the job. Of course, I've done some self-study and I've gone through the SHRM testing and I believe I'm competent [laugh]. You, yeah, you need help staying up to date with all of the information.

Most of the human resource managers and professionals said that they relied a great deal on continuing education, training, and networking as well as the training that was offered through the SHRM. The HR managers felt that the certifications offered by SHRM were critical and that they were looked at as positive by the HR community of professionals. Participants #1, #2, #3, and #11 specifically spoke of the importance of SHRM training opportunities as well as the national certifications that SHRM offers. One human resource manager in a social services agency stated, "I understand and utilize very focused study in the human resource field. There is simply not the time to study and look at everything." This was a typical approach, as evidenced by Participant #8: "I avail myself of what training that personally, I need in my situation and I am probably the best judge of what that training is." There was a strong sense that continuing education opportunities are available if the HR manager decides to pursue it.

Another source of information for the HR managers were professionals in other areas that the organizations regularly contacted and contracted with the organization did not have expertise on site. For example, Participants #6, #7, and #16 all spoke of the ability to easily access professionals in the legal field, if there were areas about which they did not feel comfortable or confident. Other participants stated they had legal or other types of expertise on staff, and could easily collaborate with those individuals. Participant #24 explained the importance of being able

to network both inside and outside of the organization to get the information that the HR professional needed to do an effective job.

### **Theme Two: Organizational Hiring Characteristics**

This theme is a compilation of the data gathered and centered on the second question posed in the interviews. The overriding question was, “What types of positions do you typically hire for in the organization?” Within that question area, experiences and qualifications for educational level were discussed, as were skill sets and the job requirements of an academic credential or degree. Finally, there was a subset question on what a college degree tells the employer about the candidate. To inform this section, the axial codes of positions hired and the hiring process were used.

**Description of positions typically hired for in the organization.** The HR individuals themselves, or their department, hired both “professional” degreed positions as well as those positions that do not require a college degree. The balance of hiring positions ranged from a 50/50 split in a social services organization to a manufacturing firm that required 90% of the positions open in their corporate office to have a college degree. Participant #15 stated:

I would say 90% of our positions are degree requiring. We are trying to scale up moving from two-year associate degrees to the four-year degrees and in some areas, it may come through. We have seen, however, this is not always going to be the best plan. For example, a district service manager works with organizations and dealerships so perhaps those dealerships don't have four-year degrees, but the rest of the organization does. You may see some variance there.

It was also a common occurrence to interview and hire individuals with a college degree for positions that did not require one. One individual in the engineering and manufacturing



industry stated that while the positions advertised often did not require a college degree it was not at all unusual to interview individuals that held them. Participant #10 explained degree requirements for their openings:

I think when you look at the turnover in services and office support in our organization, we probably have 75% in the non-degree area and 25% in the professional. But we have a lot of people that move around in and across our organization, which might create another position opening. A lot of people start and grow here. We do require a degree or the equivalent for professional positions, that is what the job description generally says, usually there is a degree preferred. You know one thing that is interesting, oftentimes requests will come in for a degreed position for a support position and we believe that we would find stronger candidates if the “or equivalent” was met. Our organization has a formula that says two years of experience is the equivalent of a year of college, so that is what we go with.

The concept of weighing an earned degree against practical experience was mentioned by another experienced HR manager. Participant #17 stated that while her workplace certainly welcomes a well-educated workforce, they realize that often people have learned a great deal from experience and watching and learning from people and this factor must be weighed. More specifically, Participant #20 said:

Most of our job descriptions have on them the degree that is required. But I’m just saying that we also look at equivalent experience. Yeah, we’re asking for a degree definitely but it isn’t, I mean we look at a lot of great people in the room that have tons of great experience and in fairness we’re going to consider them. You know there are people in this world that have eighth-grade education and they have done miraculous work so we

don't want to count anybody out because others have. Certainly, I would not turn down Bill Gates.

Another concept that was discussed during the interviews was the common concept of hiring individuals without a degree and then promoting the individual after initial employment. Participants # 2, #6, #10, and #20 spoke of the benefits of hiring individuals without a degree in hand and allowing that individual, whether earning a degree or gaining additional and relevant experience on the job to be promoted within the organization. This seemed to be the case with internships as well.

Participant #6 spoke about the successful use of internships in their organization and also personally had used an internship to gain entrance into the organization and then a permanent position. He stated that his first opportunity to experience work in a governmental agency was through an established internship and it changed his career trajectory. Participant #22 stated in her observation:

We use "temporary to hire" with our client companies which is really like the internship.

We have found that once an organization has an opportunity to work with the potential employee as a temporary employee or an intern really, they have a much better idea about the qualifications of that potential employee. The employee also has the benefit of understanding what the organization is really like. Whether you call it a transitional hiring or an internship it is a positive experience.

Participant #15 shared that over 50% of the individuals that were originally in their organization were hired through a corporate internship program. These individuals did not have an earned degree when they started employment, but they completed the degree upon permanent hiring. The manager stated that this was one of their strongest recruiting tools and it was extremely

successful for them. In fact, more than 75% of their new hires in their largest department could be credited to their internship or co-op experiences.

**Hiring processes and procedures.** Most participants (90%) considered the hiring process to be a collaborative approach between HR departments and the hiring manager of the department with the open position. Typically, the hiring process began with the posting of the position and the gathering of the initial hiring data, which was most often managed by the HR department. After that point, there was a wide variety of processes and procedures in place.

One of the key variables was the role the HR department played in coordinating and working with departments that were hiring employees. This varied from the simple job posting of a position and ensuring that basic qualifications were met, a process found in healthcare, human or social services, and educational settings. Another hiring method was a parallel partnership throughout the whole process (municipality) to a very segmented and defined role, which was common in K-12 and higher educational settings. Participant #1 explained the typical hiring process in her organization:

Well, the HR function is really to manage the complete hiring process and to add support and help the process when we can. We will post the position online through a variety of jobsite boards and organizations. We will then collect all the application material and once we have all the information we will turn this over to the program manager or hiring manager depending on which is appropriate. That manager does all the interviewing and makes the choice of the candidate. Then it goes to HR to make the offer, handle all the rest of the process. So, it really is a shared process.

A slightly different process was explained by Participant #13:

Well, our process is a shared process. The managers basically do all the screening and recruiting for the positions. We are in a bit of a staff shortage currently so primarily our office, the HR office, helps the department put together a job description, job requirements, preferences, putting the information out there, and once the applicants respond then we screen through the applicants for the qualifications the department is looking for. Following that we do additional screening and then send the file to the department to say these people have met the minimum screening requirements and these are the individuals that you can interview. The department then interviews the individuals and ranks and rates them and tells us who they would like to hire. At that point in time, it comes back through the system. We check to make sure everything is okay that they've included everything that's needed and then the file goes to the affirmative-action office to review the hire for one last time and to make sure that we met all the compliance issues. As soon as it is approved it comes back and then a job offer can be made.

There were also examples of an HR department getting involved earlier, to ensure that there was a strong cultural fit for the organization. Both Participant #20 and #21 spoke of the importance of these initial interviews. Participant #20 stated that in addition to the HR department screening applicants for the correct qualifications, the organization also had them involved in the initial interview for the sense of a "cultural fit" between the potential employee and employer. This may have been a result of the strong role and corporate influence that this particular HR vice president had within the organization. Participant #21 explained his rationale for participation in the interviews:

We in HR and training and development have a great deal of respect for the individual managers and their role in the hiring of their people. We also realize that for an individual to be successful in our company there should be a match or a cultural fit of the organization and as such one of us from the HR department will sit in on one of the first interviews to aid the managers if they have any questions with the potential fit for the applicant.

Participant #14 explained the role of the HR department and noted that as a rule they may be even more involved in the actual hiring of the individuals:

We have recruiters within the HR department that are recruiting individuals that may be interested in our organization. They [recruiters] do the actual recruiting and screening for the positions. We have found being based on a business model what is critical is that individuals have the initial screening, which makes sure people fulfill the requirements for the position and have the background and experience. I [the HR director] profile people using different tools and find out how they react to stress, how they manage people, how they communicate. We have found what is the most likely pitfall for our employees is if they do not fit within our culture. I preemptively kind of deal with that to increase our rate of success if you wish.

One thing that was very common in many of the organizations was the critical role of the hiring manager in the actual process of employee recruitment and hiring. A hiring manager was typically one of the individuals involved in the first face-to-face interview of the candidate. As one HR professional stated:

It is critical that the human resource department screens for qualifications, yet the hiring manager of our organization typically has the first opportunity for an interview session

with the candidate; this gives both the manager and the candidate a good feel for the position and the individual being considered.

Some participants reported that every interview with an applicant was conducted with at least two individuals from the company to ensure compliance with interview guidelines as well as an opportunity to gather multiple perspectives about the applicant. An individual from a benefits services company stated, “with multiple interviewers, it is easy to catch nuances in the interview setting.”

Overall, the interview process varied, from a very structured style to a more fluid one depending on the hiring manager’s style, the needs of the individual position, and the amount of the flexibility the individual organization had. Often the difference is between a privately held organization and a governmental or public company.

### **Theme Three: Evaluating Applicants**

This theme organizes the data about attributes of the strongest and weakest hires for the organization, what college degrees or credentials tell employers about the applicant or the individual, and the equality of all college degrees. The questions that were presented to gather this data were taken from primary question three, which probed about past position hires with a focus on the best hire in the organization and why that employee was such a positive addition. Conversely, if there has been a hire that did not work out as well, I asked why that may have occurred. There was a follow-up question which focused on the conclusions that can be drawn from these examples. Codes were included under every major idea to help explain the idea and meaning for the hiring managers.

**Best hires within the organization.** The codes for the best hires were attitude, communication skills, technical skills, emotional intelligence, culture fit, and flexibility. The

consensus was that the best hires were typically those individuals that were a strong cultural fit with the organization. In addition, they communicated well and got along well with stakeholders, such as customers, clients, students, and other coworkers. Participants also talked about the best hires being effective communicators within the organization. Participant #21 spoke of the importance of communicating both with people on their team, as well as interfacing with other teams. Participants refer to this as the ability to build bridges within the organization. Participant #9 explained the importance of the function of communication on a variety of levels:

We are looking for people that want to communicate, that want to be a part of the team.

We are looking for people all the time, we want individuals that are supportive of one another and we look in interviews for people that are sending the message that they want to work together and be supportive of one another. We're looking for people who enjoy working with other people, they are committed to their position and their environment.

Basically, we are looking for a passion, a passion for the business and a passion for serving the customer both internally and externally.

Other characteristics of best hires were positive and optimistic attitudes and displaying a passion for their work. A very easy interpretation of the best hire was an individual that added value to the position and the organization. One example of this value was offered by Participant #7:

We value someone in the organization that takes initiative, someone that comes up with new ideas. Also, someone who has a sense of humor, they get it, they do it, and they're not afraid. They are also willing to ask questions if you don't understand something.

Yeah, and another thing that we look for is the sense of worldliness, if they don't know

something that you may be talking about, they know where to look and can go find it, or read up on it. I don't know, I would almost call this a "sense of curiosity."

Participant #22, who oversees staffing, stated:

You know, I don't know if I can specifically pull out a person that we have looked at and has done a good job for the organization that they work for, there are a lot of them. But I think overall, if I'm to do a profile of a person, it would be someone with a strong work ethic, truly motivated, can communicate well and they want their career to grow. They want to do a successful job for their organization that they are currently in now, as well as for their own career.

Finally, Participant #14 simply stated, "Culture is everything, and in addition it is learning to deal with a culture and an organization that is dealing with constant change."

In addition to cultural fit, participants acknowledged that most organizations in all industries experience constant change and the ability of an individual to be flexible within environments of constant change was critical. Participant #10 spoke to the changing environments of the current workplace: "Our workplace has changing demands that are constantly forcing us to adapt and thus the individuals that are successful can deal with the constant rate of change and are comfortable with constant change." Participant #3 stated, "With our industry constantly changing, we are such a fast-paced workplace; what is needed is flexibility in dealing with transition and constant change but also an underlying commitment to the mission of the organization." Having a strong understanding of and commitment to the mission of the organization was mentioned by half of those interviewed. So not only a cultural fit, but an understanding of mission is critical for the best hires.



The majority of those interviewed felt that basic competency skills were almost a given. In other words, individuals who were recruited, interviewed, and hired were expected to know the technical skills generally for their jobs. Participant #6 stated:

We expect individuals that we hire to have the basic skills of their job description. If we hire an engineer they should be capable of the engineering skills, if we hire an accountant they should have the basic accounting skills. We expect a foundation of technical skills, but we can train a lot of the very specific organizational related skills.

Participant #1 further explained the situation when they are hiring new employees:

We expect individuals to have an awareness of the skills they need to do their job. They can look to us for specific training and nuances within our organization. We try to really create an environment that encourages people to learn and excel. We are glad to work with people if there is a true desire on their end to learn.

Participant #12 further explained:

We would hope that the candidate would have training in that area of study, they would have a skill set to come in and just perform the duties of that job successfully and relatively quickly, or at least have the foundation and the principles of the profession that they study to get their schooling. But it goes back to what I said before, and that is what is the person getting out of the degree. It's really how you're learning to think differently.

In summary, the HR professionals, although they may not have used consistent phrases, did land on similar important factors for making a potential employee successful in their organizations. Their identifiers for the best hires were:

1. Cultural fit within the organization
2. Excellent communication skills

3. Positive attitude
4. Technically competent
5. Excited to learn, sense of initiative

**“Bad” hires within the organization.** Characteristics of “bad” hires were considered almost the opposite of the strong hires by participants. The first key characteristics of the bad hire is an individual who has shown a lack of interpersonal skills to effectively deal with customers, clients, and coworkers. They are individuals who do not add a great deal of value to the organization. In fact, a bad hire may be more of a cost than a benefit. The information that was gathered in this sub-theme was often relayed through stories. Participant #1 shared the story of, on more than one occasion, hiring individuals who were technically very good in their professions, yet could not communicate these levels of proficiency; as this was a critical component of the job, the individuals were simply not very successful in that role, and, in fact, did not end up staying in the organization.

Participant #21 identified the same outcome, yet the story was a little bit different:

We have had situations where we have hired someone for a position and for whatever reason, once they were into the position they were not willing to learn the skills that were needed to do this job. Some of those skills were technical but overwhelmingly, the interpersonal skills to deal with others was not apparent. Because of this, they were simply not a good fit for our organization.

Participant #22 offered a profile of a bad hire from a staffing perspective:

We would love to say that we’ve never had a bad hire, but there has been. There have been organizations and people that, for whatever reason, didn’t work out. I would say the biggest thing that happens in those positions is the person has gotten too comfortable in

the position or in the job. They really didn't want to go to the extra mile. They really didn't want to work in that position. I think often it is also a situation that they were good in the interview, but when push comes to shove they just couldn't communicate effectively on the job for whatever reason and do the things they needed to do in terms of the job and getting the job done effectively. There was no ownership or accountability on the part of this employee at all. Those are two things we really need to see.

In sum, of the poor hires, the first key characteristic was an individual who showed a lack of interpersonal skills to effectively deal with customers, clients, and coworkers.

**Cultural fit with the organization and commitment to the mission.** Fifteen out of the 24 participants discussed the critical role that culture and mission fit played in the recruitment, selection, hiring, and onboarding of new employees. Participant #20 stated, "Culture is everything in our organization. We have a unique culture and it is so important that we hire people to join our team that will both embrace and succeed in our culture, and as a result in our mission." This same executive used the phrase, "happy employees, happy customers." Participant #9 shared that her organization opted to use group "coffee and chat" interviews for the final candidates so they would have the opportunity to experience the culture and interact with the current team members. This was thought to be a benefit for both current employees and potential employees.

Participant #20 also highlighted the importance of workplace culture and fit: "We hire for cultural fit; if we don't, we can make real hiring mistakes." Participant #3 explained it this way:

Our culture is all about working together in teams, how you work in teams, and how you communicate with others within your team and outside of the team is going to say a lot

about your success. If a potential employee can't do that, simply they can't work successfully within our environment.

Participant #6 appeared to have a slightly different viewpoint about the type of culture their organization had, but recognized the importance of the culture match. She said:

Our culture here is very different, it might not work for everyone. It is like a large family with almost unwritten rules. It is a great culture to be a part of, there is a lot of autonomy and flexibility but some people might not be comfortable in this kind of culture. So, part of the interview process is to attempt to explain this unique culture to the potential employee and see if there is a culture fit.

Another individual from the educational field, Participant #10, spoke of the importance of not only a culture and mission fit with the organization, but also a good fit with the specific department the individual would be working in. They also made the point that at times the culture may shift, so there should be a comfort level with a culture that may change.

Finally, Participant #14 simply stated, "Culture is everything."

#### **Theme Four: Evaluating Credentials**

This theme includes insight on how organizations use the college degree or credential as a method of evaluating potential employees. It also includes what employees expect of those who have earned a college degree, as well as a discussion about the quality of college degrees. This theme was informed by responses to the fourth question, "Do you think all college degrees are equal? What factors do you look at or value?" The axial codes used to inform this theme are degree levels, major, name recognition of the institution, accreditation, and personal experiences with the organization. Information about course delivery methods are also included.

**Screening tool.** The first message that came through very clearly was that college degrees are often used as screening tools. There were many times that the degree or college credential appeared to be a method of screening candidates. Participant #5 indicated that, “We may well use an earned degree as a screening tool if there is a lot of competition for a position; it may be a way of us to narrow the candidate field.” It was not uncommon where there was a multitude of strong candidates to use a degree as just one method of screening. In many of these situations, the major earned was not as critical as the earning of any four-year degree. Participant #2 said if a degree is required for a position, it is generally used only as a screening tool as a way to qualify a pool of candidates quickly.

Participant #8 explained the use of a college degree as a screening tool within her organization:

Once an individual has turned in a resume, we look for a foundational degree, because book learning and actually working are two different things. So, if they have that foundational degree, that is what will at least get them in the door for an interview and possible employment. The training in the learning of how to do the actual job within our organization is a whole other ball game and we take responsibility for the organizational training.

Participant #22 added the perspective of a recruiting specialist when she responded to the issue of using a degree as a screening tool:

You know that’s interesting, because I think for the most part, degrees are looked at by most companies as a screening tool. If you need a degree, do you have a degree? Then it’s obviously the question of an accredited degree, is it from a real college? So, it’s looked at as a screening tool, if they need a degree do they have that degree? If not, is

there something in place if we are interested in that candidate that we can make it work or qualify that candidate.

Certainly one of the functions of the college degree was that of a screening tool. In addition, most of the participants agreed that the college degree was important to have and to consider, but the degree that was earned was only a part of the bigger picture. Participant #20 stated:

Granted, a college degree is a part of the puzzle, but just a piece; I would say that this is especially true with the advanced degree. There is certainly a benefit to advanced education, but there's also a strong benefit to getting into and understanding the job and putting the needed time into “working” and learning the job and the organization rather than just adding degree upon degree.

**Characteristics of individuals with a college degree.** Participant #16 seemed to sum up the thoughts of many of those interviewed when asked about the actual meaning of a college degree. She stated that she expected individuals that applied to positions within their organization with a college degree to have the following qualifications:

1. motivation to complete something
2. mastery of the content area (at times degree requirements were very specific)
3. communication and softer skills
4. the ability and desire to learn and constantly continue the learning process

Others echoed the same thoughts, but perhaps phrased a bit differently, and in fact an underlying concept running through a majority of the interviews was that the expectation of the individuals with a college degree is that applicants would have an openness and awareness of the bigger picture of a situation and the job responsibilities, and understand how the different

components or pieces of the puzzle work together. Those interviewed felt that an individual with a college degree should have an openness for learning, and the continuous learning process.

Participant #4 stated that she expected employees with a college degree to have the following characteristics:

We need individuals to work here that bring a full scope, fully understand the work they are doing and being able to surround themselves with the right information and technology to do their job. We look at people with a relatively full skill set because we are moving towards having a knowledge worker here. We desire people here that are very highly trained, academically oriented; it's a high stress job so we need people with the full skill set.

As previously mentioned, employees with a strong skill set are critical to organizations.

Participant #14 spoke about the importance of looking for and trying to blend skills of an applicant with the individuals and teams that are currently in place:

To some extent you have to have a good community of people with the right blend, good individuals with college degrees and academic backgrounds as well as people who have the more operational abilities. I think that balancing is what is working well for us. If you can find the balance of a lot of people with degrees, because having degrees changes how you think, how you act and how you communicate, and mix that with good operational skills you will have a winning team.

A similar perspective was offered by a staffing perspective, Participant #22:

Most of our client companies want individuals that can work independently but are also able to work effectively as a member of a team or even a team leader at times either in a ground face-to-face setting or even in a virtual setting, which can be a challenge.

Thus, it appears a variety of communication and interpersonal skills may be generally attributed to those individuals with a college degree. Those interviewed spoke to the importance of the individual skills that a potential employee can bring to the table, but also how those skills will integrate with the team in place.

Participant #4 stated, “We expect an individual that has a college degree to be able to critically think and problem solve through a clear majority of situations.” Most participants were very clear that communication skills, the “softer skills” or interpersonal skills were critical expectations of the college graduate. The specific skills that were identified and considered critical were basic presentation-of-self skills and professional communication skills. Participant #7 said, “We expect all employees, especially the college graduates, to have a basic understanding of professionalism and behave in a professional manner in any situation when they are representing our company.”

Participant #12 highlighted again the role of softer skills and transferable skills in attainment of a college degree:

I think you have to look for transferable skills and look at the person because it really brings diversity into this whole process in the thought process and everything. I look at the experiences that we have had in our organization, and some of our best programmers are communication majors. They know how to communicate, they know how to deal with people. So, there has to be some level of experience, but the other things are so important. The skills that they learn, the thought process and communication skills that are needed to be successful.

In sum, it was shared that although soft skills and interpersonal skills are critical in the current workplace, and it should be indicative of those with a college degree, it was



acknowledged that there may be additional ways to gain these skills. One participant shared that there are instances where the attitude of the candidate may be much more important than the actual degree that was earned. At times attitudes and experience will trump the degree. There are many organizations that, if they have flexibility, will certainly exercise it for the right candidate.

Participant #19 echoed this thought: “Degrees may be less important in some unique circumstances; in those situations, we may look at applicant experiences in addition to, and in some circumstances, instead of the actual degree.” Participant #10 indicated that there are specific formulas that have been developed to allow the HR department to look at work experience instead of the college degree. The message seemed to be that college degrees are certainly valuable, but employers can be flexible if circumstances and experiences of candidates allow for that to happen.

**Equality of college degrees.** The data that were gathered in this theme is part of the fourth major question in the interview protocol: “Do you think all college degrees are equal? A sub-question is, “What factors do you look at and consider?” Sub-themes in this section include: 1) understanding of degree level; 2) understanding of college major; 3) recognition of local institutions and their majors; 4) institutional accreditation; and 5) personal experience with the schools. This section is informed by the axial codes of levels of degree, major, name recognition of the school, accreditation, personal experiences with the school and delivery methods.

**Levels of the degree.** When I asked the question, “Do you think all college degrees are equal?” almost all (90%) participants thought that the conversation was centered around the level of degree (i.e., associate’s, bachelor’s, or advanced degrees). There was discussion about the necessity of either a two-year degree or a four-year degree, and what possible differences that

might mean in the organization. Participant #15 indicated that, “We are moving toward four-year degrees for most positions. We do have an understanding however, that for some positions in certain areas a two-year or an associate’s degree may be actually preferable”. Both participants #10 and #13 stated that at times in their organizations they also see situations where a four-year degree may be preferable to a two-year degree, but in reality a two-year degree and adequate experience are more than acceptable. Participant #13 stated:

I think with the whole issue of a college degree, what some of the individuals in the individual departments think is that a degree somehow says you have a very dedicated person. I think that’s kind of the underlying tone. I think a lot of times we (in HR) are asking what does the degree really do for that particular position? Why are you looking for that degree? What’s the reason? And sometimes we have to share the perspective that a more technical degree and perhaps more experience is really the best option to go for the particular job opening.

Another option that appeared to be an increasing reality for more organizations in a variety of fields was the benefit of alternative credentialing or certifications as a measure of preparation and a method of documenting skills and abilities. Participant #6 spoke of the importance of certifications in addition to the earned degree, in some cases *instead* of the earned degree:

Sometime for us a particular certification is more valuable than a degree. The certification speaks to certain skills that you can count on. They are skills that can be transferred to a variety of organizations. The certifications can also aid in the pay grades for individual positions, so credentials can also be a benefit for the employee as well.

Participant #16, also from the transportation industry, stated that the skills they looked for were often more quickly and reliably documented through certificates. In this vein, Participant #15 stated her experience with certifications:

Again, as I mentioned, degrees are important, but I tell you in many ways certifications are more important to us. They may be more of a potential reward for the employee. We have found that certifications are measurable and transferable and that's why they are valuable to not only the individual but the organization as well.

Participant #23 spoke of the benefit of certification in the software industry, stating that there is immediate credibility with many certifications as well as an immediate economic payoff for the certificate holder. Certifications that were mentioned include a Certified Information Security Professional, Microsoft Certified Solutions Associate, and the Cisco Certified Network Professional.

Some participants felt that applicants and new employees need real world experience and documented application of the skills that they have acquired, and that certifications were one way of demonstrating that. One way of validating these experiences, in addition to a degree, is the concept of badging or stacking badges. Participant #24, who works in the educational field and who also follows HR issues very closely, stated:

We have to become more comfortable with a variety of ways to measure education and experience. We have relied on degrees forever. Now there's increasing uses of badges and stacking badges to indicate completion of certain skill sets and we in business and industry need to know what that means and how to measure it.

Participant #20 brought this conversation to another level with discussion of the importance of continuing education and learning, but for the “right” kind of learning for the individual as well as the organization. She shared:

We have a great deal of respect for those individuals that have college degrees. Of course, we value it, and we look for it. It is important to point out, however, that sometimes I witness when someone gets or has a four-year degree and then moves on quickly to obtain a master’s degree or graduate degree of another sort, they really would be better served to focus on the work they are doing, observe those who are working around them, and learn from some good practical experiences, and mentors.

Those that were interviewed provided evidence that there may be a clear understanding of the differentiation between degrees and degree levels, but perspectives vary on the attainment of degrees when looking at the big picture of credentials and experience.

**College majors.** There was certainly understanding that for certain positions a specific major was necessary, and in other fields, just “a degree” was needed. Participants mentioned requiring specific majors for fields like accounting, engineering, information technology, and teaching. These specific requirements varied depending on industry and organizational purposes. Along this line, as previously mentioned, Participants #7, #10, and #16 noted that a degree is acceptable, but what was important may be certifications in certain areas that are valued by their respective industries. Participant #16 specifically pointed out that:

We really run the full gamut on some of the positions we are hiring for. In certain positions, we hire specific degrees if they are needed. Yet we have found that there are areas that certifications are more important. With the certifications, there is a certain understanding and guidelines that align with specific skill groups or certifying agencies

so we are aware of exactly what we are getting with the potential employee. At times a certification is more important than a degree.

Another perspective shared by Participant #14 was that if a specific major, either technology or accounting degree, was not needed for a position, their company looks toward individuals that have liberal arts degrees. From his standpoint, liberal arts graduates possess transferable skills, such as the ability to learn and adapt. Further, a staffing executive, Participant #22, added that liberal arts or general studies degrees may appeal to some nontraditional students and also may lead to the attainment of transferable skills which may translate into a good employee with both experience and education.

Participant #19, a regional staffing executive, spoke of the importance of general education and the transferability of skills when she said:

I wish more employers honestly would look at the transferable skills and what someone has to offer; many times people will look at a resume and they're only looking for specific key words. I think that individuals that have liberal arts training also generally have good transferable skills and they ought to be considered and utilized.

**Name recognition of institutions.** Another concept that was important in the conversations about specific institutions was the concept of name recognition of the schools. The conversation typically focused on “local recognition” and this is the third idea shared by the HR professionals as they explained their thoughts of area institutions and where their strong majors may lie. As a result of this employer’s knowledge they felt as though they had the opportunity to recruit strong potential employees. For example, those interviewed believed that North Dakota State University is considered strong in engineering and agriculture, while the University of North Dakota is known for programs in the areas of accounting, business, and

nursing. Participants said that they might consider where the interviewee graduated from if they were very familiar with a specific program and had hired other employees that had graduated with the same degree from the same program. Participant #3 shared the following thoughts:

Because we are predominantly in the business of healthcare and we are in a community which has a school that is strong in the healthcare field, generally that will carry a lot of weight with our recruiters as well as with the hiring managers. We also have a good understanding of what that school's curriculum may be and we then have a good idea of what the graduates typically should know and that is helpful from an on-boarding and training perspective.

Along the same lines, Participant #12 explained that in addition to having local knowledge of institutions, individuals in their organization (the HR department) work and network with specific academic departments, so there is an awareness of that department and, potentially, their graduates. Program knowledge, appreciation, and confidence in the educational process was also mentioned by Participant #15:

Our number one employee pool is really our local institutions as they are a known entity. We have an understanding and an amount of cooperation through our internship program. Right now, our conversion rate is about 40% on entry positions filled with prior co-op students and it's all about timing, when did they graduate? What location do they want to live in? We are so comfortable with the program offerings and then through cooperative and internship experiences at the institution. We have tried them, they have tried us and we have found out that it's typically successful. We have interviewed them and them us for over eight months. Currently we have this good relationship with one school and

certainly would like to expand it to additional schools. We have engagement with that potential employee and the student for so long, that is a type of guarantee of success.

There was an acknowledgment and recognition that local institution names may have a positive recognition and therefore individuals that attended the school may benefit from that. Positive national recognition or names of schools did not enter any of the conversations; however, there was mention of the fact that negative press of national for-profit schools might leave a negative lasting impression. Participant #8 suggested:

I don't think generally we really are concerned with where the degrees come from.

However, the only exception might be when you hear about a big national school that is having some problems in terms of whether it's being sued; sued by students or employer dissatisfaction like, honestly, the University of Phoenix. There might be a concern. Also, I think a few years ago, we even had that with one of the private institutions locally that probably, for a while impacted those students with those degrees.

**Institutional accreditation.** The fourth measure identified was that at least 75% of those interviewed said they looked for institutional accreditation. This was highlighted by participants who worked in education, manufacturing, social services, and healthcare. These participants played a role in their own organization's accreditation processes and spoke about their own experience with accreditation and its value. Participant #7 specifically pointed out that her organization was successful based on their accrediting bodies so she really looked for accredited programs because the assumption was that it must be critical for the schools as well. Participants affiliated with organizations that used accreditation standards and guidelines realized the work and effort that goes into becoming accredited, so they looked for accredited schools. Participant #18 said the following:

We have a wide variety of programs that must be accredited by different accrediting bodies with different accrediting standards. Although there are certainly differences in the accreditation processes and requirements, we understand the importance of accreditation and what goes into it. It takes a lot of work and it is difficult to achieve. So, we have a respect for accredited institutions.

Those interviewed spoke to the importance of accreditation but interestingly, not one individual mentioned or referred to a specific type of accreditation. There did not appear to be a noted difference between national, regional, or program accreditation. There was no consensus on the importance of regional accreditation as opposed to other types of accreditation, probably as there was no knowledge of what the various accreditations really mean.

**Personal experience with the school.** Personal experience with institutions and graduates of those institutions and, in some instances, programs, had the strongest impact on professionals in regards to their personal preferences for schools and the students from those schools. If they had an experience with the school, either through attendance at that school or working with that school in some capacity, this was a very strong indicator of whether or not they would consider a potential employee from that institution. Participant #16 stated:

I think it is helpful that we know people from the individual schools. People that work here, they are familiar with the institution they attended and graduated from. This might carry more weight when they are looking for other people to work with. When I look at just my reaction and response, I think that I'm a little bit skeptical of some of the newer online programs, it is probably because I'm not as aware of those online programs and what those programs might include. For a lot of us, we just haven't really worked with those programs, thus, we aren't hiring individuals personally related to those programs.



The inverse, a negative perception of the school, can also occur because of personal experience.

Participant #4 stated the following:

I have had personal very specific experiences with new hires from an online school and programs and those students lacked specific skills and experiences, and thus, I tend to discount individuals from that institution. I know others in our organization do as well. Alternatively, I have worked with local institutions and have seen evidence of their stronger skill-based learning and thus feel more comfortable employing graduates of that institution.

Participants #1, #3, #5, and #10 all indicated they had either graduated from or taught at a specific institution, and because of that they understood the program, and had an appreciation for the graduates.

**Delivery methods of programs.** There was not a lot of consensus or concern regarding delivery methods of a program, major, whether it was a course, a major, or a complete degree, and what that meant for potential employees. To determine if there was a preference for the way educational courses, programs, and degrees were delivered, interviewees were asked to explain their perception of the different methods of program delivery and whether they or their organizations had preferences. Most stated that it was simply not something that they had thought about. Many participants said that this was the first time they had thought about the different methods and ways of earning a degree. It appeared as though those who did have a preference stated that the preference came from their personal experience. Participant #21, when asked if there was a difference in the method of delivery of the degree, stated: “I would say no, but I don't know why I would say that, it is simply not something I consider.” Participant #10 indicated that “There is not a difference in our office [Human Resources], but I cannot be sure

once it leaves our office and goes into the departments if the ‘always equal’ perception remains.” Participant #16 said that she felt there was no basic difference and if individuals perceive the difference they were not sharing that with the HR department.

Another perspective shared by Participant #20 was a bit more ambivalent:

The way that I really look at it is if someone has a degree, it’s good. I don’t think that it has typically come up in a conversation except if we have two awesome, very well qualified candidates, and if we just can’t make a decision on the candidate and there is no individual input, then we might look at where their degree comes from, but again we would look at experience on top of that. We have no policies that dictate a preference and I think online degrees are going to become more and more popular, so we must be accepting of those programs.

Participant #4 also recognized that there were an increasing number of online programs that were good strong programs and it was up to business and industry to become more educated about them and other ways of delivering education. She did mention that as her organization becomes more familiar with and utilizes more online training, the acceptance of online degrees should naturally become easier.

Participants that had thought about any difference in degrees had either earned their degree in a nontraditional fashion or had a family member, friend, or coworker who had earned the degree this way. Participant #16 said that she was very familiar with nontraditional degrees as that was the way she had earned her degree; she felt that not only were the degrees equal, but in many ways the nontraditional degree may have advantages. This individual felt that the nontraditional format may force individuals to be better at managing multiple priorities and time, and to find innovative ways to work collaboratively with others.

Participant #18 noted that different delivery methods might highlight different qualities that the candidates and potential employees may bring to the table depending upon the position that was being hired for. In this case, the organization may be looking for different skills and a skill match. In a nuanced way, this might enter into the hiring process. Participant #23 noted:

I think the different degree options that there are now allow individuals really to customize the way that they learn best and the way that something is going to fit into their life. They know what is going to work for them and what is not. In addition, particularly in our field, often an individual will attempt to select a learning environment that is going to help them in their permanent “real-world” job. I think we must give people credit for the choices that they make.

In addition, Participant #4 shared:

I think that the responsibility is on the organizations and the institutions to become more aware of, educated about, and comfortable with degrees that are delivered in a variety of methods. As we see a multitude of different ways of delivering education, we must be open to those if we want to hire the strongest candidates in our organizations.

Following along the same line, Participant #14 stated that she believed the nontraditional method of delivery and format was going to become the norm and it would take some “training” for HR professionals to learn to effectively assess those students, candidates, and potential employees. Many of the participants said that they thought a blended or mixed delivery format offered the benefits of both without the inherent drawbacks of either an all online program or degree or a very traditional degree, which may be difficult for some students to fit into their lives. There was recognition that as the workforce becomes more diverse, the way we deliver education to and for that workforce must also become more diverse.

It was acknowledged by interviewees that there may be a slight personal preference for candidates who had earned their degree in the same method in which the interviewee had earned his/her degree. This did not seem to translate into an organizational or institutional preference.

**Individual student qualities.** The final defining factor that surfaced throughout these interviews was that what was critical was not the institution or the method of delivery of programs, but rather the students themselves and what they had done with the degree, and how students present the attainment of skills, through the college experience and other activities as well. Participant #6 said, “The difference is simply the students, what they put into the degree and what they got out of the degree. You can clearly see this in an interview.” Participant #1 shared the following:

Working as long as I have with as many new employees as I have, I would really say that the difference is the employee themselves, both in the attitude that they bring to the workplace and what they have shared about their initiative when they were student, what they learned and what they brought forward.

This “attitude” appeared to be something that was difficult to measure. However, it was a critical piece of the puzzle. Participant #14 shared his thoughts about personal initiative:

I think the difference really is with the student. It depends on the person themselves, what they do with the degree. It is important that a student takes initiative and determines what they want to do with that degree and really get ready to “sell” themselves and their degree, and there has to be a plan on how they’re going to put that degree to work. That is what I would encourage students to do, to really showcase what they have learned throughout the whole college experience.

Participant #3 shared the following thoughts:

Personally, my thought on the whole issue, this is me personally, is you really get out of the college degree what you put into it. I think you'll see that there are some colleges and students out there that if you are going to class, take the test you're going to get the grades and you pass. But you're not getting a whole lot out of it. I look instead at the initiative that is shown by people when they're in college. What they're getting out of it? What did they do to really learn? I look for how did they seek out opportunities to create and learn the skills that employers really want?

There was valuable information shared and consensus on the five themes in educational options that potential employees may bring to the table. There was also a diversity of opinions shared on delivery modalities of college courses and programs. Many participants mentioned that the responsibility was on those in organizations to help to assess and determine the organizational fit for many of current and future online and nontraditional programs and methods of delivery.

### **Theme Five: Enhancing the College Experience for Employment**

The HR professionals that were interviewed for this study exhibited commitment to both their organizations as well as to the individuals that were looking to become employed by the organization. This was exemplified by Participant #14:

What we are seeing right now both in our organization, and in our country as a whole is very optimistic, because the new employees, the millennials, and so on, the people who are coming in now, they are learning and they are passionate people about becoming engaged employees in the workforce. I think they are more idealistic, they are more passionate, they use the technology, and they think together instead of just having one

theoretical analytical focus. I think it's good, I think we are going to get a workforce that is going to change and I think it's about time, I think it's great.

Participant #20 shared she felt honored to work for her organization for so many years and would like to create that same opportunity for others. In that spirit, she felt it was important to enhance the opportunities for collaboration between universities and the organizations that will hire their students.

In discussing ways to further enhance collaboration between institutions of higher learning and businesses, participants noted that there were some things that could be done through relationships between institutions and businesses and organizations to improve opportunities for graduates. Those ideas were: stronger collaboration, development of internships, a better understanding of both entities, teaching students the valuable skills employers want, and a stronger understanding of professionalism and content areas and what they mean within the workplace.

**Stronger collaboration.** Participant #23 said, "There needs to be a much stronger understanding and collaboration between organizations and higher education institutions that prepare students for employment; we have found that when there is collaboration it will work wonders." Participant #14 stated:

I am not cynical, but there must be real listening going on when the other entity is asked for feedback and ideas. Those ideas, they need to be listened to and at least considered. Currently, there simply appears to be a disconnect somewhere along the line, I think individuals are well intended but things just don't seem to change in the educational arena.

A different perspective was shared by Participant #2:

One of the things that I think would be a huge value-added piece is requiring not only the students, but the instructors as well to have worked in the setting in which they are teaching or preparing students for. Of course, my experience is very different in that I didn't take the traditional HR courses in college and my learning was more so on the job, but while I think that learning within the college setting is critical, I also think it's critical for the person who's teaching that body of knowledge to not only have the academic knowledge, but they should have some experience through working in the setting or at least have been exposed to that setting.

Participant #12 also spoke of the need for shared collaboration:

I don't think there's a situation where it could be looked at as negative; if the educational institutions and the organizations collaborated and communicated it would be a win-win for everyone involved in the process. I think there would be an appreciation for what the other side is dealing with.

**Developing internships.** Although every organization did not have an internship program in place, participants spoke about its potential benefits. Participant #15 said that 90% of their professional hires come from their internship program. They have even expanded their internship programs to allow for two experiences, a cooperative experience during the sophomore year and an internship during the senior year. This allows for a stronger understanding of the organization and the culture for potential new hires. The earlier internship was also identified as a positive attribute by individuals in healthcare, banking, and the social service industries. It was stressed by most of those interviewed that internships were a good

opportunity for both the student and the organization to see how things operated from the other's perspective.

Although the educational setting is very specific, Participant #1 spoke of the value of student teaching experiences and equated them to internships and the positive attributes that help orient students, not only to particular work settings, but to the profession as a whole. There were multiple benefits cited for internships. Participant #20, a staffing executive, stated:

In the big picture, and it is what I see all the time, we find that organizations that utilize internships have a much clearer picture of what they need from new employees. They also benefit from knowing how they may have to modify their own positions.

For example, during an internship, potential employees would understand what the "real world" of the working organization looks like. Participant #4 stated:

We use a variety of different internship experiences, sometimes they are called different things, but we have found there is probably not a more effective way of acclimating individuals to the different work situations and duties and they get a real sense of what the potential positions might look like. In addition, we get a sense of how they will fit in our organization.

Participant #21 also spoke about the importance of internships, stating specifically that their organization is expanding the program because of its success and the fact that it is the strongest recruiting tool they have.

A staffing executive who has a strong vantage point of the larger picture shared that more and more of their client companies were moving toward some aspect of an internship program as the positive aspects were understood by both sides. This executive likened the idea to



“temporary to permanent” hiring in the staffing agency, which allows both sides to see the opportunities and to check the “fit” between the potential employee and the organization.

**Teaching students the skills employers want.** One consistent theme that ran through the interviews was that there appears to be a “gap” between what employers want and what higher education is teaching. Participant #14 stated:

This whole thing is really no one’s fault but it seems like we have been talking about the skill gap forever, organizations and industry say what they want, say what they need and it appears as though the educational institutions keep turning out graduates that simply do not have the skills.

Participant #2 shared similar ideas when she stated, “What it’s going to take is a much stronger mutual conversation about teaching what students need in order to be successful in today’s businesses.”

**Better understanding of both entities.** Participants felt that there needs to be a stronger understanding of the needs of both entities, both the higher education institutions and the hiring organizations. Participant #17 stated:

It is not the responsibility of the educational entities alone, we in the organizations that employ graduates need to get out in the classrooms, get out in the educational institutions and share our perspectives and get involved in helping define the educational goals. We need be willing to come to the table and share responsibility for ideas to develop a stronger workforce. We need to help with developing strong opportunities that we would like to see.

Participant #9 shared that, in his experience, educational advisory boards were a good start to achieve a shared understanding of business needs and educational opportunities to meet

those needs. As part of this type of approach, it was mentioned that collaboration should include the development of strong work-related curriculum that can be taught in the higher education setting. A staffing executive, Participant #21, stated:

I think we need to realize and employers are finding out that if they're going to survive and grow, they need to hire and then develop a workforce with real world workforce skills. The colleges have to commit to workforce skills but so do the businesses and organizations. They must be willing to commit to having people in their organization that can mentor and coach; it is not a realistic expectation anymore that the perfect individuals with the perfect set of skills will walk in the door for every position. There must be work on both sides.

Participant #10 stated:

Book learning is just fine, it all sounds good and reasonable until you're sitting in front of a client and in an actual work situation. Then it is clear what the employee needs to know. There really needs to be a better understanding of what the workplace calls for before that happens.

**Understanding professional and content areas.** A final trend that was shared was the importance of establishing a shared understanding of some mutual and general content area information that was important for potential employees and graduates to have. Some of the ideas that were shared were the understanding, as identified above, of the “real world.” Also identified was an understanding of what professionalism on the job means. Participant #7 stated, “Things are different when you're a student and when you're a full-time professional employee, and I think that we need to do a better job of giving potential employees an idea of what that professionalism looks like.” Participant #18 also stressed this when she shared, “We have such a

diverse workforce and client base now that we really stress what professionalism means on the job and with a diverse group of people. It seems as though this is something that students have not been taught.”

An additional idea that was shared is providing information to students and potential employees on the transferability of skills. This concept was identified by Participant #19, who noted that most skills and especially “softer” skills” can transfer from position to position and industry to industry. Graduates need to have a good understanding of how they can use this to their advantage when building a career path. Participant #9 stated that although they hope to retain all their employees for long periods of time, there is an awareness that some will change organizations and perhaps even fields. It would be beneficial for individual employees to grow and develop knowing that they are creating a skill set that can be transferred to other situations and settings if they choose. Participant #14 also spoke the importance of transferability of skills:

We all need to realize we are living in a rapidly changing society and the current workforce is not the same loyalty-based workforce we had a generation ago. People now are going to work and give their commitment to a workplace when they are there, but they realize, and we realize they’re not going to be there forever in most cases. So, we must work with the transferability of skills and how we can use those skills.

Returning to the topic of organizations and educational institutions working together, Participant #23 said that there are three things that can be greatly improved and enhanced:

There needs to be stronger workforce development on all levels, an understanding of the importance of a good cultural fit, and a recognition that there is strong competition for good, well-prepared employees, and those employees can be an asset to themselves as well as the organizations that they choose to work in. Both organizations and higher

education institutions needed to work to ensure that they were doing the optimum job in preparing graduates for strong employment in opportunities. It is a win-win for both.

### **Summary**

This chapter summarized the data that was gathered from interviews with 24 individuals in the human resources field in the state of North Dakota. The information that was gained was divided into five major categories. The categories were background and skill development for human resource professionals, organizational hiring characteristics, evaluating applicants, evaluating credentials, and how college experiences can be enhanced for future employment. These categories were explained and the data was integrated under each major heading and codes were integrated. The next chapter includes a discussion of the meanings and understandings found in this research, implications of the study, and its relevance. I will conclude with suggestions for future inquiry.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how employers determine the value of academic credentials when making hiring decisions. The study investigated what qualities and factors employers consider value-added when determining if potential employees will be an asset to their organization. This study was a grounded theory study that used the theoretical concept of credentialism to weigh and factor the information that was received. As mentioned in Chapter I, the basis of credentialing is that the degree, as a credential, serves as a tool for entry into a specific level or field of employment. The larger questions asked by this study were: “What does the credential represent, and does it represent knowledge acquisition, as well as acknowledgment of abilities or capabilities in a specific field?”

There are gray areas when determining the value of a college degree as a credential. I uncovered four critical findings that helped me understand these gray areas in my interviews with HR professionals. First, while college degrees are looked at as a valuable credential for employment, there are certainly other issues that may deter its acceptance, or, at a minimum, call for a questioning of the degree as the only credential for employment. Second, employers seek attributes in new employees that have traditionally been referred to as “softer skills,” like communication skills, teamwork, flexibility and adaptability, and conflict resolution skills. Definitions may vary slightly in the definition of soft skills, but in the interviews they typically included communication skills, teambuilding skills, conflict resolution skills, and self-

presentation skills. Third, the overriding attribute of being able to fit within the organizational culture was identified as critical by participants. These attributes (soft skills and culture fit) may or may not be learned by an individual while in pursuit of a college degree or a specific major. Fourth, it was generally not as important where or how the individual earned their college degree; rather, it was what the individual student had done with both their college experience and life decisions that appeared to be important in the hiring process. These four findings are discussed in detail below.

### **The Value of a College Degree**

Overall, there is value in obtaining a college degree. Employers attributed certain qualities to potential employees simply because they had earned a degree, regardless of academic discipline. These attributes include tenacity, completion of goals, interpersonal skills, and the willingness to embrace lifelong learning. Participants expressed, however, that these same attributes could perhaps be gained in other ways that might be less expensive and less time-intensive than completing a college degree; in other words, there are methods that would provide a timelier payoff for the potential employee.

In many ways, the findings in this study corroborate much of the current literature (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010; Fry & Parker, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2014), which find an increasing dependence on the college degree as a screening tool. Nonetheless, there was an indication by participants that there is some flexibility in relying on only a college degree as a credential. There was an appreciation for situations where the HR individuals could be flexible in the degree requirements and utilize a combination of education and experience. This appears to be documented in the literature as well. Blumenstyk (2015) found that one-fourth of employers place less value on the bachelor's degree in hiring today than they did a decade ago.

In addition, the same study found that 70% of employers said they would ignore the requirements of a college degree altogether if other characteristics of the candidate were a good fit. This study echoed sentiments of participants who indicated interest in alternative ways of assessing candidates' qualifications. Most employers are interested in the "whole package" of potential employees, perhaps considering a combination of education, training, life experiences, and work experiences.

The value of a college degree as described by employers is valued less than I expected, but this perspective does make a great deal of sense when education and degrees are considered within the current, changing face of higher education. The value proposition of higher education has always been that of career entry; an employer typically assumes specific qualifications and competencies of a candidate who has earned a college degree. This study confirmed that idea, that the value of the credential to the college student or the eventual employee is the idea that the degree will open the door for career entry and advancement.

### **Changing Landscape of Higher Education**

All of the findings must be weighed within the context of the changing environment of higher education and, as some have determined, the disruptive nature of higher education (Bernstein, 2013; Christensen, 2011; McAfee, 2013; Selingo, 2016). No longer is education only for a privileged segment of society. Students, the public, and policymakers are demanding accessibility and accountability from our educational institutions and this has brought about changes. Christensen (2008) suggested that higher education was due for a total reinvention and the resulting institutions would be unrecognizable. In fact, there have been some critical changes since 2011, and there is consensus on at least three occurrences or trends in higher education. The first is that there must be a discussion on how the academy teaches, what is effective to the

current students, and how best to prepare them for gainful employment. This study reinforces this concept. The second trend is that both the public and policymakers continue to demand more information on the Return on Investment (ROI) of college education. In other words, is college worth the investment (Blumenstyk 2015; Selingo 2016)? Third, the concept of lifelong education has arrived. Both employers and employees are now beginning to value lifelong education, which may be delivered in ways other than the traditional college degree. Individuals outside of the academy are realizing that there are numerous learning pathways and at times they may meet the needs of employers and employees more effectively than traditional college classes. This is witnessed by the growth of certifications, badging, and stackable badges. Perhaps Selingo (2016) stated it best:

The first half of this decade (2010's) marked a significant shift in how Americans accessed higher education. A college degree was long seen as a qualification that students earned at one time in life. Now the path through higher education increasingly includes multiple credentials that students earn throughout their lifetime as their career shifts in an ever-evolving economy. Students are stacking their credentials, mixing multiple bachelor's degrees with associate's degrees and professional certificates to create a mosaic of experiences that they hope will set them apart in the job market. (p. 71)

Among the employers that I spoke with in my study, there was certainly a recognition that the integration of different methods of skill attainment and measurement is the direction in which employers are moving. They clearly understood the problems with considering only a college degree as a credential for employment. The first problem is that college is expensive and costs continue to rise. According to Bernstein (2013):



While median income for a two-parent two-child household went up by 20% between 1990 and 2008, the cost of a four-year public college education went up by three times that amount. Total student loan debt is now larger than credit card debt in the US and cannot be discharged even in bankruptcy. (para. 6)

The bigger problem is the inverse relationship between college costs and the value of a college degree to prospective employers. As college degrees get more expensive they appear to be less valuable in the workplace. Moreover, it takes students longer to complete their degrees, and dropout rates are rising. Selingo (2016) reports that only slightly over half of individuals that enter college leave with a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, of those who do graduate, nearly 50% find themselves underemployed in jobs that do not require degrees, so in addition to the high price tag of a college degree, many students don't obtain its benefits.

A related issue is the rapidly expanding movement of nontraditional or alternative credentialing. Per Staton (2014), the value of college degrees will decline when employers or other evaluators avail themselves of more efficient ways for applicants to demonstrate aptitude and skills. This was a point that came through extremely clearly in my interviews. Participants spoke of the gradual movement of looking very seriously at work experiences and measurable talents in addition to and, in some cases, instead of the college degree. Those interviewed overwhelmingly agreed that the skills that individual applicants with college degrees, and at times without college degrees, displayed, may be more important than the degree itself. It was continuously mentioned that credentials and badges may constitute alternative and very measurable ways to assess skills. Those key skills were interpersonal skills or "softer skills," flexibility and adaptability in the workplace, a willingness to learn, and most importantly, a willingness to embrace and adapt to the corporate culture. The information shared at the

interviews appeared to mirror Heinrich's definition (2016) that identifies softer skills as communication, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and diplomacy (p. 126).

### **Attributes of Value**

#### **Technical Skills Versus Soft Skills**

This study echoed the findings reported in existing literature that employers look for two types of skills: work-related technical skills and soft skills. Hard skills, also known as specific job-related skills, are typically content-based skills that are formally assessed (Chamorro-Premuzic, Ateche, Bremner, Greven, & Furnham, 2010). Softer skills are defined as "skills, abilities, and personal attributes that can be used with a wide range of working environments that graduates operate in throughout their lives" (Fraser, 2001, p. 1). Parsons (2008) describes soft skills as character traits that enhance a person's interaction, job performance, and career prospects. An increasing amount of literature focuses on the importance of soft skills in gaining access to employment and long-term success. For example, Klaus (2010) found that 75% of long-term job success depends on people skills, while only 25% is dependent on technical knowledge. Watts and Watts (2008) determined that hard skills only contribute 15% of one's workplace success, whereas 85% of success is due to soft skills. Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, and Zehner (2013) found that employers, when hiring new graduates, place the highest importance on soft skills and typically attribute the lowest importance on harder skills and institutional reputation.

Robles (2012) identified the ten skills that were perceived as most valuable by business executives when hiring new employees: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic. Finch et al. (2013) determined that there were specific soft skills that will positively affect employability

including written communication skills, verbal communication skills, professionalism, interpersonal skills, and the ability to work in a variety of settings. In another study of North Dakota employers that determined knowledge deficiencies by business graduates entering the workforce, the five key deficiencies were all softer skills: oral communication, teamwork, project communication, problem-solving, and written communication (Radermacher & Walia, 2013). In sum, research conducted in many areas shows that soft skills influence employability and advancement in all occupational settings.

This study corroborated the importance of soft skills as key attributes of potential employees. All participants talked about the importance of soft skills: communication skills, teamwork, flexibility, and adaptability, as well as a cultural fit. Many said they were willing to train for technical skills or specific work-related skills, but training on the softer skills simply was not an option as it had not been successful in the past. Participant #17 simply stated, “Information or job-related technical skills can be learned, people skills or intuition not so much.”

### **Importance of Organizational Culture**

Organizational culture and the ability of a potential employee to effectively fit into an organization’s culture can perhaps be considered a soft skill, and yet, the concept of an organizational fit came through so strongly in the interviews that I felt it should be considered individually. With the numerous definitions of the concept of organizational cultures, it is important to revisit its basic understanding. Many researchers have come to the consensus that culture refers to a system of values, beliefs, and behaviors that are shared among employees of an organization. Schein (1996) provides a good working definition:

The culture (CU) of the organization is both the consequence of the organization's prior experience and learning, and the basis for its continuing capacity to learn. What the organization can or cannot do will depend very much upon the actual content of its culture and how that culture aligns or integrates the various sub-cultures of its sub-systems. (p. 4)

In addition to research that defines organizational culture, there have been many studies discussing more specific aspects. For example, Hofstede (1991) found that an employee's behavior in the workplace is influenced by three different cultures: international culture, occupational culture, and organizational culture. Schein (1996) found that organizational culture emerges from three distinct locations in an organization. First, there are the observable artifacts in an organization, such as attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, technologies, products, and perhaps even jargon and stories. The second source of organizational culture is the espoused values of the organization. Generally, leadership has significant influence over the espoused values. The third source of organizational culture is the basic underlying assumptions that fuel and drive the business. These assumptions develop over time, and if these assumptions are managed well there is almost an unconscious belief and acting out of the behaviors.

The importance of culture came through very clearly in 90% of the interviews in this study. Although participants identified many individual corporate cultures and the components that made up those individual cultures, there were three organizations that stood out regarding the importance and the unique characteristics of their organizational culture and the impact it has on employees. The first example was a financial institution that has an extremely strong, positive, customer focused, philanthropic, and public (community knowledge and awareness) culture. Culture is the very essence of this organization; in fact, they have a vice president of

culture who is responsible for setting the stage and tone for the organization. They have been extremely successful, as indicated by their employee satisfaction surveys; the attitude and behavior of their employees as well as recognition in the community of who they are and exactly what they do.

The second standout organization was a telecommunications organization. This organization espoused values of entrepreneurial spirit, innovation, customer service, and initiative. These values were evident through the screening, hiring, and on-boarding process for new employees. The intense testing and behavioral interviewing that was used in the hiring process was specifically designed to ensure that there was going to be a good cultural fit with potential employees. This organization has a reputation in the community for being on the “cutting edge” for the values they espouse and the service they deliver.

The final example of a strong organizational culture was a transportation company. This culture was different than the majority of organizations that were identified and utilized for this study. The critical difference was the perception or analogy of a “family.” The organization is family-owned and has been from its inception. There is a very high value placed on individuals and helping them through situations of need, much as you would in a family. Although there are certainly mission statements, value statements, and strategic plans, this organization appears to be far more informal. Employees do not talk about the culture; rather, they exhibit the culture. There are numerous examples that can be shared about the nature of the “family.” A typical example is that, although the organization has a healthcare plan, when the deductibles could not be met by a seriously ill employee, the owners of the organization stepped in and paid the deductible as well as additional financial aid for the family. Another example was when an employee’s child was very ill and the employee had to take time off; that time off was granted

without the use of any formal leave time. While not everyone may be comfortable with this informal type of culture, there is a realization that to achieve success on every level there must be a cultural match when hiring employees. This organization is now in its second generation of leadership and the goal appears to be to keep the business in the family, as they have identified potential future leaders within the family.

### **Equality of College Degrees**

In the fall of 2014, there were 5.8 million students enrolled in some type of distance education courses including online programs. Of those students, 2.85 million took all their courses online, and an additional 2.97 million took some courses online (Allen & Seaman, 2016). This number represents one in seven, or 14%, of all higher education students who are now exclusively attending college online. Approximately 27% of students at public institutions took at least one distance learning course, 23% of private institution students took at one at least one distance learning course, and 60% of private for-profit students took at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2016). These numbers continue to grow, especially at public institutions. In a recent study conducted by Stamats which looked at adults over the age of 24 returning to school to complete either an associate's, bachelor's, or master's degree, it was determined that the number one delivery modality that students were looking for was an all online delivery (Morehouse, 2017). This was a very different finding than that of only a decade ago.

In addition to the strong growth in terms of numbers, there has also been strong confirmation of the educational quality of online programs. Allen and Seaman have chronicled online education for the past 16 years, and have found a steady increase in the acceptance or value proposition of online and distance courses and programs, as compared to traditional courses. Allen and Seaman (2016) state:

The proportion of academic leaders that rated online education as good or better than face-to-face instruction was 57.2% in 2003. The relative view of online quality has improved over time, with the pattern of slow but steady improvement in online learning outcomes where in 2015, 77% of the respondents rated online as good or better than traditional courses. (p. 29)

In this study, in terms of the discussion of delivery method of courses, programs, and degrees, employers found this to be a non-issue: they did not differentiate or prefer one delivery method over another. In fact, many participants said this was the first time they had really considered different delivery methods. When the value proposition of the degrees was discussed again, there were no acknowledged differences. So, method or modality of delivery is not a factor in the perception of degree quality or value.

An idea that was suggested by participants was the possibility of exploring blended programming, in other words, the combination of face-to-face learning and online aspects or enhancements. Allen and Seaman (2016) indicate that academic officers have a far more favorable view of course outcomes when they are delivered in a blended format rather than simply online. In fact, academic leaders rate learning outcomes for blended instruction as superior to traditional face-to-face instruction. The conversation about blended learning did occur in my interviews and participants felt that it would be a good compromise.

When looking at the value of college degrees, one final factor must be noted and that is that more than the reputation of the institution, or the delivery method of the course and programs, the key attribute of value appeared to be the students themselves. It was important that graduating students present themselves, their educational experiences, and non-academic

experiences as strongly as possible to get the most out of their degree and what they have to offer a potential employer.

### **Presentation of a Theory**

After all the interviews were conducted and the data were analyzed in answer to the question, “How do employers determine the value of academic credentials when making hiring decisions?” – utilizing the sub-questions of, “How do employers evaluate academic credentials?” and “What factors are important to employers?” – I would offer the following points regarding a theory of the value of academic credentials determined by employers.

1. Credentials are a piece of the puzzle. Four year degrees are important, but so are other attributes. The earned degree is often not the only piece or even the most critical piece of the puzzle for employers.
2. There are additional factors that are considered to be just as critical, if not more, when making hiring decisions. These include:
  - a. The mastery of soft skills, like communication skills, teamwork skills, adaptability and flexibility, leadership and change skills. What is critical is the ability to get along well with others and communicate with individuals at all levels within the organization as well as with all stakeholders of the organization. This determination was made by consideration of the “best” and “worst” hire conversations. It did not appear that the attainment of soft skills was tied to any specific major. It was mentioned often that these “people skills” are picked up in general education or liberal arts types of courses.
  - b. A cultural fit is critical within the organization. It is important upon hiring but also for advancement in the organization. A cultural fit seems to indicate a true



embracing of the organization and its mission. This determination again was made by consideration of the “best” and “worst” hires within the organization, as well as the value-added discussion.

- c. The candidates themselves appear to be the critical component in the equation. Within reason, it is not necessarily important where the student went to school, (national name recognition was not an issue), or how the student went to school, (whether it was online, traditional face-to-face, or a combination). What was important was how the student represented themselves, their degree, and their overall college and life experience. In lieu of the traditional four-year degree or college experience, it was felt that potential employees could demonstrate and present what they learned through alternative methods. Potential employees need to have a good understanding and self-awareness of how they present themselves and possible ways to enhance self-presentation. Employers in this study looked at potential employees as individuals, not necessarily the institutions they attended or the majors that they pursued.

### **Implications of the Study**

I think that there are implications for this study on four different levels. The first implication relates to curriculum, the second implication is the need for cooperation between institutions and organizations, the third is the need for cooperative learning and internships, and finally, there are strong implications for the students of our higher education system.

### **A Case for a Liberal Arts Curriculum**

There are implications for curriculum development in higher education. The skills that employers are demanding of new employees, and all employees within the organization, are the

traditional softer skills. These skills are generally gained within a liberal arts or general studies curriculum. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002), liberal arts education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. Liberal arts education also aids students in developing strong and transferable practical skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings. These are the skills that employers are currently clamoring for (Humphreys & Kelly, 2014).

Per the Council of Independent Colleges (2015), employers demand technical skills, but more importantly, they also want employees to have mastery of the soft skills that are often honed in a liberal arts curriculum (Clinefelter & Magda, 2016). Additional research concerning the liberal arts has shown that the top five skills associated with success in the workplace are skills that can be learned and practiced within a liberal arts setting (Robinson, 2015).

Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) contend that with today's new technology wave and inventions available to the clear majority of individuals, what will be critical is that people create ideas and actions in a data-rich world and communicate about those ideas. Individuals learn these skills through the liberal arts.

### **The Academy and Real-World Disconnect**

There continues to be a disconnect between higher education and businesses and organizations. Workforce development is an essential component of preparing the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce and the ability for academics and industry to work together is critical to effectively make this happen. As demonstrated in existing literature, it is important that with additional scrutiny on higher education, there is a positive ROI, and that strong and effective partnerships are built and maintained. According to Corporate Voices (2013), there are four distinct benefits

to creating stronger higher education and business partnerships: 1) improvements in education and skill level; 2) boosted performance in the workplace; 3) diversity; and 4) increased employee retention rates.

As one example of an initiative that was undertaken in 2013, the Greater North Dakota Association held a joint meeting with college presidents and industry leaders throughout the state, where they committed to four initiatives to improve cooperation between the two entities. The four initiatives included: 1) process for improved communication between business and higher education institutions; 2) request for higher education to be flexible in terms of the needs of the workplace; 3) a mandate for business and industry to join with higher education institutions to tell the story of the institutions; and 4) a continued focus on students. The results, hopefully, will be a more skilled, talented, and prepared workforce for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Experiential Learning**

The third area in which this study has implications is in the realm of experiential learning, about which all participants spoke positively. This learning may have come in the form of worksite observations, cooperative education, student teaching, or traditional internship programs. The literature suggests many benefits of internships, for students, the higher education institutions, and the organizations.

The benefits for students to participate in experiential learning opportunities include job-related benefits and networking opportunities (Heinrich, 2016; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Velez & Giner, 2015). The internship generally can serve as a transition experience from college to the workplace. In addition, by performing job tasks and spending time with professionals in their chosen field, students have the opportunity to gain and develop knowledge about both their careers and different workplace settings. Heinrich (2016) found that there are benefits of college

students obtaining experience and applying the knowledge and skill that they are learning to authentic, real-life settings and situations; the more real it is, the more credible it is (p. 127). In an earlier study, Gault, Redington, and Schlager (2000) found that there were three distinct benefits for students involved in internships: less time for the graduate to obtain his/her first position, a monetary benefit for the internship involvement, and higher initial levels of job satisfaction.

There are also clear benefits for organizations that have internship-like programs. Extra labor capacity and the opportunity to try out a potential new employee are the most common reasons given by employers for using interns (HR Focus, 2005; Velez & Giner, 2015). Another organizational benefit is that internships may provide a savings in recruitment and selection costs if they are successful. Finally, acclimating from an intern to a permanent position is less intense from both a cost and time perspective than on-boarding a new and untested hire.

Although there has not been much research done on benefits for academic institutions, there are certain positive aspects of partnerships that were mentioned above. In addition, other benefits are being realized, including having an effective outlet for experiential and vocational learning and training. Positive relationships with the organizations also help to build credibility and knowledge about individual faculty and programs.

### **Implications for Instructors, Administrators, and the Campus Community**

For decades, it has been clear that there is a gap between what colleges provide their graduates and what the workforce needs, and yet, things are slow to change. One example concerns business majors. Mullins (2017) found that even though the AACSB International Task Force called in 2005 for more communication, leadership, and interpersonal skills to be integrated into the business curricula to make candidates more attractive to employers, steps do

not appear to have been taken. As the stakes become higher, it is more critical that those who teach provide not only technical skills, but also include in their curriculum key components of softer or interpersonal skills. Just as we have seen strong initiatives in writing across the curriculum, it may be encouraging to try soft skill implementation ideas across the curriculum. I would suggest that faculty members have an opportunity to make a strong difference in their classrooms by emphasizing the importance of softer skills. In addition, it is critical to incorporate interactive exercises that include leadership, team-building, and collaboration skills.

Accreditation guidelines from both the Higher Learning Commission (2016) as well as individual program and school accrediting bodies are increasingly emphasizing the need for providing curricula and evidence of the teaching of skills that aid in career readiness (Shuayto, 2013). In addition, there are opportunities to work collaboratively with career services offices. As previously mentioned, cooperative learning experiences are critical, but so are conversations about career readiness and the opportunity to present a well-rounded candidate.

### **Implications for Students**

Individual students have a great deal of opportunity to present themselves and their skills to potential employers. What came through very clearly in my interviews was, it did not make any difference where the student went to school or how they earned their degree, but it was what the student has done with the degree that matters, and how they prepared themselves for the workplace while in school. It is critical that students present themselves as well-rounded through their activities. The use of behavioral interviewing, in other words, what you have done in certain situations rather than what you would propose to do, is growing. A student can enhance their opportunities for employment by actively seeking out opportunities that will allow them to grow in people skills, teamwork, and leadership. Students can also try to select programs that

include soft skills embedded into their program. If the program does not include these skills, the student should seek out opportunities where communication and interaction are learned and valued. It is imperative that students attempt to get involved with curricula enhancements and conversations so they are addressing real-world needs. In addition, as previously suggested, involvement in internships and cooperative experiences are looked at as a positive asset by employers.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

There are many ways that the results of this study could be used as a “jumping off” point for additional research. For example, it would be extremely interesting to conduct the same study in different regions of the country to determine if the findings were unique to North Dakota in the current economic climate, or if these findings would be similar in other locations and in other economic conditions.

The second area that would be interesting to study and analyze would be organizational cultures and how individual organizations and cultures recruit, hire, and on-board new employees. Through the interviews with human resource professionals, the discussions about individual cultures and the impact of those cultures on the employees that work there was enlightening. It would be interesting and informative to look at and compare individual cultures.

In addition, when the issue and value of a culture fit was discussed, there was generally a strong commitment to the organizational culture, which was often seen as going hand-in-hand with the mission of the organization. One wonders if, with the emphasis on a culture fit, how does the issue of a diverse workforce enter into the conversation? Is there an organizational tendency to hire “people like us” or is there an opportunity for a truly diverse workplace? Can a culture fit and diversity coexist?

It was clear through this study that accreditation was valued and appreciated by those interviewed. However, what was not clear was a good understanding of what higher educational accreditation standards really mean. There appeared to be a clear difference between the insider understanding of accreditation guidelines and the outsider understanding. It would be interesting and informative for further research in this area in order to help institutions and organizations, but also instructors and professors, have a clear understanding of what the accreditation issues are.

Finally, so much of the information gained through this research focused on the attainment of credentials, but also the attainment of softer skills, which is the responsibility of the student. For this reason, I think individual case studies of how former students prepare and present themselves for the workplace and their success would be enlightening and useful for current students.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study aimed to understand how employers determine the value of academic credentials when making hiring decisions. The study investigated what qualities and factors employers consider value-added when determining if potential employees would be an asset to their organization. This study was a grounded theory study that used the theoretical concept of credentialism to weigh and factor the information that was received and analyzed. The literature implied that the degree may be an important factor when analyzing an individual's suitability for employment. However, according to the 24 individuals that were interviewed in this study, there were other factors that also went in to this decision, such as interpersonal skills, real-world or life experiences, and a strong cultural fit between the potential employee in the organization.

Chapter V concludes this research study. The data that was gathered fell into five specific themes: 1) background of human resource professionals; 2) positions and processes of hiring within the organization; 3) the evaluation of applicants; 4) the evaluation of credentials; and 5) enhancing college experiences for employment. When the above data was analyzed four very specific findings emerged. The first finding identified was that while college degrees are looked at as a very valuable credential for employment, there are other issues that may deter consideration of the degree as the only credential for employment. The second finding was the critical nature of softer skills when looking to hire new employees in an organization. The third finding was the importance of cooperative internship experiences for potential employees. The final finding was the concept that it was not where or how the individual earned their college degree, but what the individual student had done with both their college experiences and life experiences.

In this age of heavy scrutiny on the expenditures for a four-year college degree and the possible questionable outcomes of that degree, as well as the payoff of this investment for the graduate, this research study presents findings which should be helpful to students on how to gain the most benefit from degrees. One thing that was enlightening and encouraging is that the degree is as valuable as the student makes it. A similar statement could probably be said for any recognized credential. The advantages of both career entry into a field as well as advancement in that field are largely in the student's hands, in terms of the presentation of their skills, talents, and abilities.

Finally, within my interviews there was an acknowledgment that the HR field is changing and perhaps moving ahead, and as a new generation begins to take the reins, more specific skills and training in HR may be critical to manage the changes. Overall, HR professionals looked



positively at the changing workforce. It was surprising to see the amount of flexibility that the managers wanted to exercise in hiring individuals, both with and without typical four-year degrees. These findings did not undermine the value of the college degree at all, but rather showed that there is some flexibility in the requirements in certain areas. The HR professionals that I talked to were both open and excited to consider alternative methods of credentialing. There was acknowledgment that hopefully this would encourage even more flexibility as the practices of credentialing and badging become more widely used.

## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix A Informed Consent Form**

You are being asked to participate in an educational research study that involves interviews relating your experiences in the hiring process of business graduates for your organization. The interview will focus on the factors that you consider add value when making hiring decisions concerning individuals with degrees in business.

### **Who is conducting the research?**

The sole researcher for the project is Brenda Kaspari, a doctoral student at the University of North Dakota in the College of Education and Human Development. This research will be used in the completion of my dissertation

### **What is the research?**

This research is to determine how employers, often gatekeepers and hiring individuals, determine the value of academic credentials when hiring for open positions.

### **What will the participants be asked to do?**

Each interviewee will be asked to participate in an initial 45–60 minute interview. English will be the language that is used for all questions and the expected language for all responses. Following all of the initial interviews there may be 1–2 very short follow-up interviews to gather additional data. Each interview will be recorded using a digital audio recorder. There will also be supplemental note-taking. Following the interview the recording and notes will be transcribed and a copy will be provided to the interviewee for review and correction. The interviewee will get a copy of the transcript of every interview that is conducted with them and will have the opportunity to review and correct that transcript. There will be follow-up interviews with some of the participants to ensure credibility of the information heard and the interpretation of that information.

### **How much time commitments will there be?**

Each interview will not take more than an hour

### **How will confidentiality be maintained?**

All names of the participants will be changed in the transcripts. The reports of this study will maintain the use of pseudonyms. The audio files, consent forms, pseudonym lists, and any other documentation will be stored in separate locked file cabinets in my home. Other than persons who audit IRB (Institutional Review Board) procedures, the researcher will be the only person with access to the information. All files and documents will be stored as described for three years and after this time the documents will be shredded and the tapes erased.

### **Who will benefit from this study?**

The benefits of the study will be threefold. Those interviewed will have the experience of sharing their perspectives, institutions will gain the perspectives of employers and will gain some insight into how employers place value on academic credentials. Institutions may use this information to improve their business programs. Finally, employers, by sharing this information and insight, will hopefully be able to have business graduates that are well-matched to the current employer needs.

### **Whom to contact?**

If you have any questions about the research contact Brenda Kaspari at 701-388-5009 (W) or 701-588-4143 (H) or at [Brenda.kaspari@und.edu](mailto:Brenda.kaspari@und.edu). If you have questions regarding your rights as

a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Research Board at 701-777-4279

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may choose to discontinue your participation at any time and have any of your files destroyed with no adverse consequences to you.

Your signature below indicates you have read the consent form and understand its contents. You will be provided a copy of this form.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Protocol and Alignment of Questions**

The primary questions asked in this study will be: How do employers evaluate academic credentials? What factors are important to employers? These questions aimed to explore what employers consider the critical factors in determining the value of credentials of a potential employee. Understanding that additional questions may arise as the research evolves, some preliminary follow-up questions (prompts) have been initially identified below in the interview outline.

1. Please tell me about your role at the organization, how long you have been employed with the company, your responsibilities, etc.
  - a. Tell me about your educational background. How have you learned the skills needed for your job?

The origin of this question was to determine the specific attributes that human resource professionals brought to the table and how their experiences were gained.

- b. What types of positions do you typically hire for the organization?

This question was to determine the scope of positions that were hired by the individual organizations and if there were differences in hiring attributes in various positions

- c. What expectations or qualification of educational levels does your organization recruit and hire for?

The origin of this question was to determine if employers expected different attributes in different levels of education.

- d. What skill sets are you looking for in those positions?

The origin of this question was to determine what specific skill sets employers view as value-added.

- e. Do you require an academic credential (a degree) for most positions? Why?
- f. What does a college degree tell you about the candidate?

The origin of the above two questions was to determine what factors employers typically attribute to college graduates.

Let's visit about some of your past position hires.

- g. Tell me about the best hire you have made or observed in your organization.  
Why was this individual such a positive attribute for your organization?
- h. On the flip side has there been a hire that did not work out as well for the organization?
- i. Are there any conclusions that you draw from these examples?

The origin of the above questions about best and worst hires was to determine if there were specific attributes that employers consider value-added based on their past experiences. This was behavioral interviewing.

- j. Do you think all college degrees are equal?

The origin of this question was based in the literature review, which identified various attributes in determining the legitimacy and attraction of certain credentials.

- k. Do you strategize any differently for orientation of, training of, and career path planning for a new hire depending on the type of credential?

The origin of this question was to determine if there was a difference in the on-boarding practices of individuals with or without certain credentials.

- 2. Are there any additional comments you would like to share?

The origin of this question was to include any other issues that the interviewees felt were relevant or important to address during the interviews.

**Appendix C**  
**Profile of Participants**

Table C1

*Profile of Participants*

Participant #	Industry Category	Current Year in HR/field	Highest Degree	Field
1	Education	5/18	Master's	Business
2	Government	11/11	Bachelor's	Education
3	Healthcare	3/23	Master's	Healthcare
4	Healthcare	2/18App	Master's	Social Work
5	Banking	7/11	Master's	MBA
6	Transportation	2/5	Bachelor's	Communication
7	Human services	2/12	Master's	Human Resources
8	Human services	11/28	High school	N/A
9	Financial Services	5/8	Bachelor's	University Studies
10	Education	3/23	Master's	Human Resources
11	Human services	10/31	High school	NA
12	Government	3/10	Bachelor's	Business
13	Education	5/30	Bachelor's	Business/ Accounting
14	Communication	2/18	Master's	Communication
15	Manufacturing/ Agriculture	10/15	Master's	Management
16	Transportation	3/15	Master's	Management
17	Healthcare	5/15	Master's	MBA
18	Human services	11/31	High school	N/A
19	Staffing	6/15	Master's	MBA
20	Banking	11/17	Bachelor's	Education
21	Benefits	5/10	Bachelor's	Communication
22	Staffing	14/16	Bachelor's	Business Administration
23	Technology	4/15	PhD	Communications
24	Education	28/15	Master's	Human Resources



## **Appendix D**

### **Preexisting Codes and Themes**

Based on the literature the following pre-existing codes were determined:

#### **HR environment**

- Background and education
- Positions hired for

#### **Method of delivery**

- Traditional
- Online

#### **Current factors for credential evaluation**

- Accreditation
- Brand recognition
- Personal experience

#### **Type of institution**

- Traditional four-year public
- For-profit institution

**Appendix E**  
**Identification of Codes and Themes**

**Theme One: Background of HR Professionals**

Table E1

*Time in HR and Skill Acquisition*

Time in HR	Method of Acquiring Skills
2 years	Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)
2 years	SHRM
2.5 years	My degree: gave me a foundation, but I learned the majority from others in the field
3 years	Learned on the job
8.5 years	Looked to experts in the field
12 years	Watching and learning people in the organization
13 years	I grew up in the organization
15 years	I sought out what I needed to know
18 years	Worked through the system
25 years	Learned on the job
31 years	Accessing experts in the field
	Other professionals
	School was only a start
	Peers in their organizations
	I learned on the job
	College classes
	Continuing education
	I learned through a family business

**Theme Two: Positions and Processes of Hiring in the Organization**

**Positions hired by HR professionals**

- half professional positions, half non-degree positions
- Both degreed and non-degreed
- We have a variety of levels
- Some two-year, some four-year, some certifications required
- Variety of levels
- Most of our positions need a four-year degree
- We do both degreed and non-degreed

- We require a degree, we can work with experienced so
- Ideally a degree, but we have some flexibility
- Typically hired degreed positions
- Generally they need a degree
- Even for positions that don't require a degree applicants often have one

#### **Hiring processes used by the organization**

- Shared role
- Supporting role
- We are the process section
- We ensure cultural fit
- Follow the guidelines
- We profile candidates for all qualifications for the position
- Ensure that all processes are followed
- Provide assistance when needed
- We look for the softer skills during the interview
- We always include hiring manager
- Work with the process
- Help in any way we can

## Theme Three: Evaluating Applicants

### Best Hires in the Organization

Table E2

#### *Features of Best Hires*

Attitude	Communication Skills	Technical Skills	Emotional Intelligence	Culture Fit	Flexibility/ Adaptability
Drive	Excellent communication skills	Problem-solving	Collaboration	It is everything	Changing environment
Creativity	Interpersonal communication skills	Organizational skills	Working with a variety of people	Cultures the first thing we look at	Need flexibility
Desire to learn	People skills	They have to have the skills to do their job	Individuals that bring out the best in themselves and others	It is more than a temporary deal	Ability to ride the ups and downs
Optimistic	Storytellers	Technically they have job skills	Straight up emotional intelligence	Values-based culture	Position and people change. Individuals have to have the ability to go with that
We love to hire for attitude	Verbal/ nonverbal skills	A basic skill set	Vision	Culture fit is critical	Comfort level with change
Ability to lead others	Team skills	Job knowledge	Good understanding of work situations	It is the most important thing we look at	Ability to remain cool and calm
Motivated	Collaboration skills	Technical skills are given	Ability to know what to do	Unique culture, we need a fit	Flexibility is needed
Want to advance	Soft skills		Working with all stakeholders effectively	Culture fit necessary	
Organizational skills	Critical thinking skills			Culture both for hiring and retaining	
Self-starters	Collaborating			Culture fit is needed	
Passion, passion, passion	Flexible communication skills			There is not a fit won't work	

Attitude	Communication Skills	Technical Skills	Emotional Intelligence	Culture Fit	Flexibility/ Adaptability
Strong work ethic	Listening			Culture becomes our organization	Culture fit
People who can really think	Ability to work with anyone				
Love for learning	The ability to work with all stakeholders				
Curious	Ability to represent us well through their communication skills People skills are critical				

### Features of Problematic Hires

- Opposite of what we are just talking about
- Lack of a culture fit
- Interviewed well but on the job, were very different
- They wanted the title but not the job
- No motivation
- People were to evolve with their own personal issues
- An entitled attitude
- Inability to prioritize the work
- Technically sound, no interpersonal skills
- Can't work with others
- No, and I mean no communication skills
- Not willing to do what it takes
- Lack of getting along with people
- Technically they were very good, could not work with people
- People did not or could not work with them

## Theme Four: Evaluating Credentials

Table E3

### *What College Credentials Tell Employers*

Technical Skills	Softer skills	Attitude	Additional items
Proficient in their area	Ability to communicate	Tenacity	Look at grade-point
Have a foundation set of skills	Ability to get along with people	Ability to be in something for the long haul	Look at big picture
Job knowledge	Have the soft skills	Ability to complete	Everything the student is doing
They know what they should know after completing the program	Flexibility and communication	Willingness and openness to learning	Look at potential employee circumstances
Have the skills, job	Comfort level in different working situations	Individuals that have the ability to learn and adapt	Involvement in other activities
Have the book learning	Ability to work with a variety of people	Ability	Leadership
There needs to be a blend between the technical and communication	Critical thinking skills	Completion of tasks	Well-rounded
	Ability to teach what they know	Prioritizing	Use as a screening tool
		Managing multiple priorities	We screen with degrees
		Ability and desire to learn	Look at liberal arts courses as they help people learn to learn
		Lifelong learning	

Table E4

*Equality of College Credentials*

Levels of Degree	Majors	Name Recognition	Accreditation	Personal Experience with the School	Delivery Methods of Programs
Typically use a four-year degree	Occasionally there is a position specific major as requested	We recognize the local institutions and what programs are strong	Important to us	Trust the schools I work with	I never thought about it
Interested in both associate's and four-year degrees	Generally, we consider any major	If we know the institutions, it has an effect on their graduates	Look for accreditation	I am on an advisory board	There is no difference at our
Certifications are a big deal with us	We are not looking for specific majors	We network with local institution so we have a better understanding of them	I don't know what specific accreditation	If I've had a bad experience with schools or graduates it impacts my thoughts	No policies about it
When you use all levels of degrees	We want a degree and are not concerned about what the specific major is	Certain majors	We are used to accreditation standards, so we appreciate what goes into accreditation	I feel closer to those institutions that I personally know	I never think about it
We care a lot about a degree, not so much about a major	We need degrees for very specific fields like you nearing accounting, and maybe computer sciences	We equate certain programs from certain schools with certain expectations		Taught at a school so aware of it	I'm not even sure what the differences are
There is a distinction, we hire two- and four-year degrees	Some of our best hires within individual liberal arts degrees	National recognition is not that important to us		Graduated from the school so aware of the program	Nontraditional programs are growing

Levels of Degree	Majors	Name Recognition	Accreditation	Personal Experience with the School	Delivery Methods of Programs
We almost prefer a four-year degree and experience to a graduate degree Importance of certifications	Degree is a degree is a degree  Content-specific			Good experiences equal positive attitude	A degree is a degree  Aware of it because that's how I did it Different methods might appeal to different people I think people that are doing online or things like that probably is balancing more We need to get better understanding of nontraditional deliveries Getting to be the norm to online Certain cases, online is probably preferable Balancing for the student You might



## Theme Five: Enhancing College Experiences for Employment

Table E5

### *Suggestions for Enhancement of College Experiences for Employment*

Stronger Collaboration	Developing Internships	Clear Understanding of Both Entities	Understanding Professional, Content Area
Need to work with the schools	Critical	Benefit to both	Students need to have an idea of what the real world looks like
It goes both ways	Best tool we have	If we know each other we can support each other	School and work are different
Real listening	We do two internships	Benefit to the students	Need to understand the professionalism
Schools have advisory boards, need to listen to them	Both sides get to see each other	Not just education's responsibility	Focus on work skills can transfer
Those teaching need to have real-world experiences	Every organization needs one	Mutual	This is where an internship helps the school-to-work idea
Shared experiences	Temporary to permanent hiring	Teachers in business and business in school	Need to know what skills look like at work
There needs to be feedback	Opportunity to understand	Real world is critical	Basics of etiquette and professionalism
Knowledge on both sides	Concept of a real-world experience	Advisory committees are very good start, but they are exactly that start	Students need to take the responsibility for how they present themselves
	Growth of the concept		Possibilities are endless if students take initiative
	Almost all positive feedback		
	Learning experience for the student		
	Equivalent to student teaching		
	Real world		

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