What do you want to be when you grow up?

Vocational Work Stigma in the Utility Industry and Its Implications for Recruitment of Highly Qualified Candidates

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Abstract

At young and impressionable ages, we are asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"
This question seeks to answer who we want to be, embedded in the idea of what we do for work.
In this study, we partnered with a large utility company called Advanced Utility Company (AUC). In
recruiting quality candidates for vocational positions, AUC must consider the stories of stigma
surrounding vocational work embedded in their community and told to job seekers across their
lifetime. Moreover, they must consider how these narratives influence the jobs that quality
candidates pursue. This quality improvement project utilizes qualitative methodology to: (1)
understand the decisions and choices applicants face during the recruitment process for
vocational work. (2) describe the experiential interaction between stigma and an applicant's
decision-making. (3) inform tactics that influence quality candidates to pursue and enter
vocational positions at AUC. Findings suggest addressing structural instabilities, individual
identities, and social identities in AUC's recruitment process can support the recruitment of quality
candidates in times of increased demand.

Executive Summary

What do you want to be when you grow up? And how can we get you to come work for us?

Vocational Work Stigma in the Utility Industry and Its Implications for Recruitment of Highly Qualified Candidates

Introduction

When we first met our industry partner, Advanced Utility Company (AUC), they expressed concern regarding the changing workforce development landscape and challenges to meet recruiting goals. More specifically, they recognized that with the change of presidential office in the United States, policy decisions calling for more vocational workers to support national infrastructure goals were soon to come. One additional reason for their concern was associated with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. With more employees working from home across nearly all industrial sectors in the United States, the importance of broadband internet services has increased.

Our Partner Organization

AUC is a utility company serving nearly **1.5 million customers** with over **$5.7 billion in annual revenues** and employing **more than 6,300 workers. The company has a regulated requirement to provide reliable electrical power to homes, businesses, and industries**. It also maintains an extensive fiber-optic infrastructure supporting enhanced grid reliability and non-utility fiber-optic capacity needs. As an industry leader, AUC maintains its electrical and fiber-optic infrastructure above industry standards. Leaders believe installing and maintaining electrical and fiber-optic cables require **a highly skilled vocational workforce that will become increasingly challenging to recruit.**

Socio-Cultural Context

- Many community members in AUC's home state opt out of working.
- The U.S. Infrastructure Improvement plan will drive demand for vocational workers.
- Government policy and cultural preferences for degreed programs support the stigmatization of vocational careers.
- Generational gaps impact perceptions of the value of vocational skills.
- Vocational workers in AUC's home state are sometimes perceived to have a poor quality of life.

Organizational Context

- Past hiring practices at AUC set a foundation for stigma formation.
- Past hiring practices at AUC supported a white male-dominated vocational workforce.
- AUC's cross-sector partnerships, created to recruit skilled vocational workers, faces challenges.
- Current recruitment processes at AUC are too complicated for job seekers.

Problem of Practice

AUC's vocational workforce development programs do not have an effective strategy to address the stigma and negative perceptions of vocational work within their community. Therefore, they will struggle to meet recruitment goals in times of increased employment demand.

This quality improvement study explores stigmas and perceptions of vocational schooling and vocational work within AUC's target market while addressing potential barriers to entering vocational workforce development programs, such as electrical line work. Our objectives are threefold:

- Uncover **where and why** stigma exists surrounding vocational work.
- Uncover **how** stigma associated with vocational work impacts recruitment into the field.
- Recommend **what tactics** AUC can use to counteract negative perceptions and support efficient recruitment of quality candidates for vocational work.

Literature Review

Differing levels of social and ecological environments influence one's identity and job choice. These dynamic conditions help form stigma and contribute to the evolution of defined stigma narratives. Conditions within one's environment transform one's life and life course. We can better understand how experiences influence meaning and people's behaviors through habitus.

- Identity plays an essential role in how one's environment influences job choice
- Stigma is a barrier to considering a broad range of job choices

- Metanarratives about appropriate career decisions evolve over a life course and influence job choice
- Habitus is among the most significant sources of information on the socialization of stigma
- Habitus helps explain how comparing post-secondary options supports addressing vocational work stigma
- Effective recruitment strategies can support vocation job seekers in navigating the new world of work and addressing the vocational work stigma

Conceptual Framework

We used our acquired knowledge from two primary theories to build our conceptual framework and construct a **Persuasive Communication Recruitment Framework (PCRF)** that guides our project questions.

- **Enactivist Theory (Di Paolo, Rohde, De Jaegher, 2007):** 5 principles showing how an individual's perception of and reaction to their environment triggers their behavior.
- **Theory of Recruitment and Job Choice (Harold, Uggerslev, Kraichy, 2013):** Argues for the reconceptualization of job choice as the entirety of an applicant's behavioral choices during recruitment.

Integrating enactivist and job choice theories allow us to create a new framework focused on persuasive communications to address stigma. Our **Persuasive Communications Recruitment Framework (PCRF)** draws fundamental ideas of autonomy, sensemaking, emergence, embodiment, and experience from enactivist theory. In alignment with job choice theory, each stage of the PCRF examines job seekers' perceptions, motivations, and intentions to continue progression.
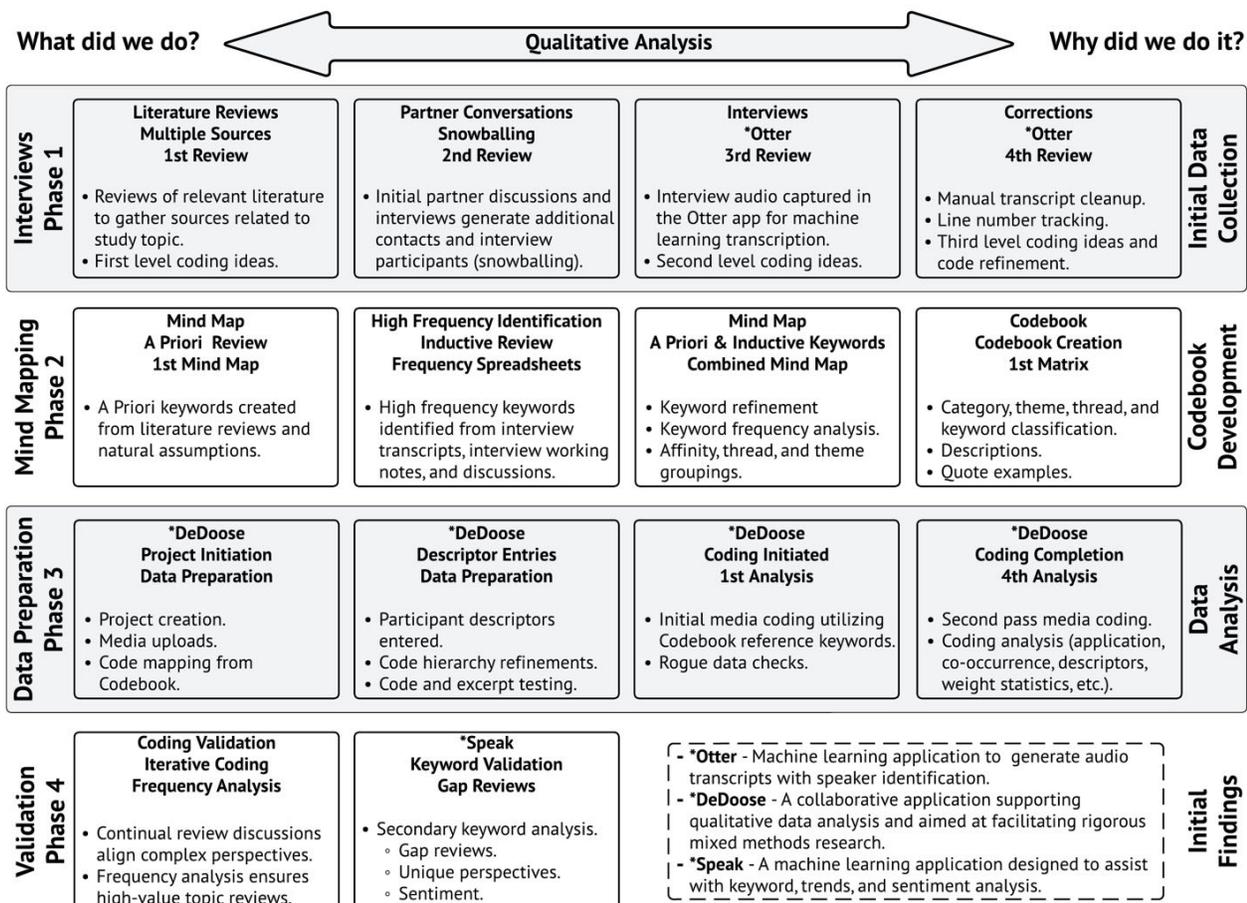
Project Questions

What are barriers to vocational work at Advanced Utility Company?
How do stigma and perception impact decisions to enter vocational work at Advanced Utility Company?
What strategies can Advanced Utility Company implement to increase the number of quality applicants?

Data Acquisition and Analysis

This quality improvement study utilized qualitative methodologies to obtain insight from semi-structured in-depth interviews with industry management, community college leaders, and other key stakeholders supporting the success of workforce development programs.

What did we do? ← Qualitative Analysis → Why did we do it?

Interviews Phase 1	Literature Reviews Multiple Sources 1st Review	Partner Conversations Snowballing 2nd Review	Interviews *Otter 3rd Review	Corrections *Otter 4th Review	Initial Data Collection
	• Reviews of relevant literature to gather sources related to study topic. • First level coding ideas.	• Initial partner discussions and interviews generate additional contacts and interview participants (snowballing).	• Interview audio captured in the Otter app for machine learning transcription. • Second level coding ideas.	• Manual transcript cleanup. • Line number tracking. • Third level coding ideas and code refinement.	

Mind Mapping Phase 2	Mind Map A Priori Review 1st Mind Map	High Frequency Identification Inductive Review Frequency Spreadsheets	Mind Map A Priori & Inductive Keywords Combined Mind Map	Codebook Codebook Creation 1st Matrix	Codebook Development
	• A Priori keywords created from literature reviews and natural assumptions.	• High frequency keywords identified from interview transcripts, interview working notes, and discussions.	• Keyword refinement • Keyword frequency analysis. • Affinity, thread, and theme groupings.	• Category, theme, thread, and keyword classification. • Descriptions. • Quote examples.	

Data Preparation Phase 3	*DeDoose Project Initiation Data Preparation	*DeDoose Descriptor Entries Data Preparation	*DeDoose Coding Initiated 1st Analysis	*DeDoose Coding Completion 4th Analysis	Data Analysis
	• Project creation. • Media uploads. • Code mapping from Codebook.	• Participant descriptors entered. • Code hierarchy refinements. • Code and excerpt testing.	• Initial media coding utilizing Codebook reference keywords. • Rogue data checks.	• Second pass media coding. • Coding analysis (application, co-occurrence, descriptors, weight statistics, etc.).	

Validation Phase 4	Coding Validation Iterative Coding Frequency Analysis	*Speak Keyword Validation Gap Reviews			Initial Findings

	• Continual review discussions align complex perspectives.
	• Frequency analysis ensures high-value topic reviews.
		• Secondary keyword analysis.
		  ◦ Gap reviews.
		  ◦ Unique perspectives.
		  ◦ Sentiment.
			• **Otter** - Machine learning application to generate audio transcripts with speaker identification.
			• **DeDoose** - A collaborative application supporting qualitative data analysis and aimed at facilitating rigorous mixed methods research.
			• **Speak** - A machine learning application designed to assist with keyword, trends, and sentiment analysis.		

"There are still people that are literally clueless on what to do. They're just looking for the next job that's going to pay them 50 cents more versus getting a short-term credential that can change the direction and the trajectory of them and their future family and generations."
- Study Participant

"Typically, with young people, let's say, the high school age students, it's still that American Dream of going to a four-year institution. Most parents, guardians, and grandparents look for their children, regardless of their background, to follow that model of success,"
- Study Participant

Summary of Findings and Recommendations by Project Question

What are barriers to vocational work at Advanced Utility Company?

- **Structural Instability** causes barriers to vocational work recruitment at AUC
  - **Finding:** Expectations that don't meet reality at key touchpoints for applicants or cross-sector partners hamper processes that drive efficient recruitment.
  - **Recommendation:** Invert the recruiting funnel to increase the candidate pool's access to personalized roles. Discuss opportunities for advancement early in the recruitment process. Create feedback loops to ensure continuous improvement through timely response to concerns.

How do stigma and perception impact decisions to enter vocational work at Advanced Utility Company?

- **Individual Identity** influences how stigma and perception impact decisions to enter vocational work at AUC
  - **Finding:** When individuals are not exposed to the breadth of vocational work options or given the opportunity to personally "try on" or watch others "try on" these options, they are less likely to show interest in vocational job types.
  - **Recommendation:** Create opportunities for potential applicants/job seekers to participate in self-directed learning regarding vocational roles. These opportunities should involve the ability to "try on" vocational roles in private and progressively in front of others.

What strategies can Advanced Utility Company implement to increase the number of quality applicants?

- **Social Identity** strategies influence the interest and recruitment of qualified candidates
  - **Finding:** Community perceptions and reinforced stigmatic narratives significantly influence potential applicant/job seeker interest in vocational job types. Influencers and people seen as experts are embedded within communities and can reinforce or deconstruct stigmatic narratives regarding vocational work.
  - **Recommendation:** Create opportunities for potential applicants/job seekers to challenge embedded stigmatic narratives. By crafting experiences that have cognitive and emotional charges, potential applicants/job seekers can understand how their perceptions are shaped by socio-cultural forces and begin to deconstruct the subjectivity of their perspective.

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Why do people choose certain jobs? What can organizations do to influence top talent to join their organizations? These are questions that captivate and challenge workforce development leaders. The leaders at Advanced Utility Company (AUC) have observed a distinct trend. They believe the stigma surrounding vocational work can negatively impact their ability to recruit quality candidates for critical roles within their organization. In alignment with Link and Phelan's (2001) work *Conceptualizing Stigma*, this study defines stigma as the co-occurrence of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, or discrimination of an individual or group based on one or more distinguishable or unique characteristics (p. 363).

At first glance, the question of why people work seems obvious: People work to survive because they need to make money for food and shelter. While this may be true for many workers, it is not valid for all and does not tell the whole story. As workforce development leaders recruit quality candidates for vocational work, they must understand the nuance behind why job candidates prefer specific jobs over others and how they can influence quality candidates to join their organization. This study takes an approach informed by Job Choice Theory and Enactivist Learning Theory to build a framework for persuasive communication in their recruitment process and support AUC's workforce development leaders in addressing this challenge. Internal and external data provide objective measures of how stigma affects key populations' perspectives on vocational work and how AUC can overcome the stigma associated with vocational work.

Asking to remain anonymous, Advanced Utility Company (AUC) is a pseudonym for our partner organization. AUC is an electrical utility serving nearly 1.5 million customers with over $5.7 billion in annual revenues. AUC employs more than 6,300 workers, with proficiencies ranging from accounting to zoology. AUC is one of its state's most respected companies, and its

brand is considered a vital component of its value proposition. However, despite its prominence and admiration, AUC finds it challenging to recruit quality candidates for essential vocational roles. According to a workforce development manager at AUC, there is a growing imbalance between the quality of applicants applying for necessary vocational positions and the number of trained workers needed to support projected demand (Anonymous, MWXIL1).

For example, at AUC, electrical lineworkers perform one of the most critical vocational jobs impacting day-to-day utility operations. Their pay is above the median individual income for citizens in their state and well aligned to their perceived value. Given this data and the perceived relative importance of potential earnings related to job choice, this study explores why AUC will find it difficult to attract additional quality candidates for vocational linework. Moreover, this quality improvement study seeks to uncover where and why stigma exists surrounding vocational work, how stigma associated with vocational work impacts recruitment into the field, and recommend tactics AUC can implement to counteract negative perceptions and support efficient recruitment practices.

SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

Flashback to 10 years, 15 years… the issue was who wins the project in a state to get the new shiny manufacturing plant or whatever it was. [We] Didn't have an issue with workers because unemployment was higher, and there were plenty of workers to go around… now it's kind of changed… we don't have enough people. You've got some people sitting in unemployment, and you have some people sitting on the sidelines.

=Anonymous, Study Participant

Many Community Members in AUC's Home State Opt Out of Working

Vocational industries add $2 trillion to the United States economy annually, yet across the nation, there is a widespread shortage of vocational workers (CEcD, 2019). AUC recognizes that current labor market forces impact individuals' choices to enter vocational work. For example, the percentage of citizens in AUC's state who work is among the lowest in the nation (Spencer, 2020). According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey for 2018, citizens of AUC's home state have lower levels of education. They are also less likely to participate in the labor force, and this low labor force participation rate is a significant problem for the state (Spencer, 2020). This market trend is significant because some believe that citizens with low levels of education are less likely to be exposed to the stigma surrounding vocational work and thus are more likely to seek vocational work. This stigma is embedded in traditional educational philosophies, however. Even some educators perpetuate a sense of vocational stigma, believing students should follow educational tracks according to their academic ability rather than their aptitude for or interest in a particular career. In addition, if the jobs available to those without a college education are impacted by stigmatization, this further reduces the pool of potential quality applicants.

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Infrastructure Improvement Plans are Driving Demand for Vocational Workers

AUC typically hires approximately 70 electrical lineworkers each year. U.S. Labor Bureau projections indicate the need for electrical powerline installers and repairers in AUC's state will continue to grow through 2029 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Near-term national policy changes designed to improve the nation's infrastructure could also increase the need for additional electrical lineworkers and repairers. For example, the current administration's Infrastructure Framework plan, a proposed $1.2 trillion plan to increase long-term investment in infrastructure and competitiveness, calls for several specific infrastructure efforts that could potentially increase AUC's need for electrical lineworkers above normal staffing levels (whitehouse.gov, 2021). These expansion efforts will rely heavily on lineworkers to help build thousands of miles of new transmission lines, new infrastructure to support electric vehicle chargers along the nation's highways, and significant increases in reliable high-speed internet service to homes, businesses, and schools. However, AUC is hindered in meeting its future hiring goals without a revitalized strategy to recruit quality applicants.

Preferences for Degreed Programs Support the Vocational Stigmatization

According to an AUC Workforce Development manager, a significant factor limiting the ability to recruit quality applicants into these programs is the stigmatization of technical and vocational careers (Anonymous, MWXIL1). To combat this and incentivize entry into vocational job types, the governor of AUC's home state created a program to add 500,000 new credentialed skilled workers to the workplace. Seen as a proactive approach, it also has its drawbacks. As one industry leader stated, "Whenever a goal is thrown out, people will jump off bridges and do all kinds of stuff to align to that goal so that the governor will say, good job so-and-so." Another example from an industry leader warns that when seeking cross-sector partners, efforts

sometimes become a numbers game, with participants looking to meet or exceed the governor's benchmark. Potential partners would ask, "How many certifications can we get here?" A workforce development manager stated, "They were just looking at it from 'We need numbers, I'm going to give them numbers'" (Anonymous, MWXIL1).

A cultural preference for degreed programs and the governmental financial support system that propagates a collegiate route also support the perpetuation of stigma and make it more difficult to convince quality recruits to choose vocational work over jobs requiring college degrees. Moreover, many social communities, such as families, promote postsecondary education as critical for occupational and life course success. Due to the negative perceptions of vocational work and positive perceptions of college education, it is challenging for any large organization, such as AUC to develop an effective recruitment strategy that combats vocational stigma.

Generational Gaps Impact the Perception of the Value of Vocational Skills

Contemporary perspectives on optimal postsecondary education vary by income level, educational level, and political affiliation (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2021). A recent study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) shows that 74% of American adults with an annual income of greater than $100,000 who have a bachelor's degree view college as "definitely" or "probably" worth it. However, when polling American adults with an annual income below $50,000, 23% fewer view college similarly (AACU, 2021). Additionally, data suggest that younger workforce members may not even consider vocations such as linework as an option. The AACU reports that individuals born between 1981 and 2012 (Gen Y/Millennials and Gen Z) are 10% more likely to rate college as

worth time and money than those born between 1946 and 1980 (Baby Boomers and Gen X) (AACU, 2021).

Furthermore, the AACU reports that members of the Gen Z generation (birth years 1997 to 2012) are 24% less likely to rate technical skills as vital to workforce success (AACU, 2021). As AUC prepares its recruitment strategy and considers whom to target, it must consider these trends. In addition, the leadership team must consider questions such as the following: What attributes make college more attractive to those in the Gen Y/Millennial and Gen Z generations, and can some of these attributes be transferred to vocational programs to make them more appealing? For example, study participants frequently referenced the college experience over academic pursuits as a primary reason young adults attend college.

Vocational Workers are Perceived to Have a Poor Quality of Life

Leaders at AUC recognize that addressing cultural preferences is not the only bottleneck; quality-of-life aspects also negatively influence a person's perceptions of vocational work. In this social climate, amidst the "Great Resignation" caused partly by the lifestyle shifts imposed by the coronavirus pandemic, applicants are looking for more than gainful employment. They want to join companies with cultures and values that align with their vision of self and their lifestyles. Quality-of-life concerns related to linework's strenuous and sometimes hazardous aspects will detract from the vocation's appeal. Conversations with some of AUC's Workforce Development leaders also indicate the job's conditions will influence AUC's inability to attract quality candidates for vocational linework. Lineworker jobs are physically demanding and require a high degree of technical competency. In addition, electrical lineworkers are often called upon to work in adverse weather conditions, at any time of the day or night, and frequently in hazardous situations when in the presence of energized power lines.

In our current context, the nature of work requires organizations to focus on their culture and how they care for their employees. A study completed by the MIT Sloan School of Management states that the strongest predictor of attrition relative to compensation amidst what some call the Great Resignation is a toxic corporate culture (Sull, Sull, and Zweig, 2022). According to the researchers, the major elements of a toxic corporate culture are failure to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion; workers feeling disrespected; and unethical behavior (Sull, Sull, & Zweig, 2022). As one current electrical lineworker stated, "I do not want my kid to work as hard as I do. Callouts, nights, weekends…my knees are shot, and I am tired. I have been doing this for 38 years, and my body is broken" (Anonymous, MWXIL1). For AUC to successfully recruit quality talent, they must be ready to improve perceptions of the employee experience and career development avenues, especially those related to strenuous and hazardous conditions that become harder as the employee ages.

An American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, John Dewey, argued that vocationally educated persons in societies controlled by money interests are often seen as no more than "industrial fodder" (Kincheloe, 2018). U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) indicates that between 2011 and 2015, lineworkers suffered approximately 40 fatal occupational injuries per year (BLS, 2020). Nonfatal occupational injuries in this line of work are considerably higher than rates for all occupations in aggregate (BLS, 2020). These statistics support the significant public perception that society does not care about lineworkers because "when the society views workers as clerical and industrial fodder, it loses respect for workers' bodies" (Kincheloe, 2019). The devaluation of vocational workers' bodies is a source of discrimination against vocational work and a reason for the existing stigma. Suppose community members feel that people in this job type are not taken care of or not appropriately protected by the organizations that hire them

for physically intensive work. In that case, the community will then begin to view the individuals

who hold these job types as "less than" or "less capable than" people who hold job types that

protect them more within their roles. To support AUC's efforts to recruit quality candidates, it

must be able to address this narrative and show job seekers that people in vocational jobs, such

as the company's lineworkers, are well cared for and protected.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Past Recruitment Practices at AUC Set a Foundation for Stigma Formation

AUC leaders believe stigma is deeply rooted in the history of traditional lineworker recruitment practices. Historically, entry into linework has not required formal education. Traditional work narratives view non-credit-bearing vocational training as less than esteemed work, requiring more physical effort than mental effort. According to one of the company's program managers, lineworkers predominantly transferred from farm work 50 years ago. Twenty-five years ago, utility companies frequently recruited many people into lineworker careers from those holding roofer or mechanic jobs (Anonymous, WMXIL1). During these periods, the utility company targeted "country engineers" for linework, looking for people with experience working with their hands, who enjoyed working outdoors and displayed a knack for fixing things. Thus, the ideal candidate for a lineworker vocational job was an individual who loved outside work, accepted the potential work hazards, and wanted to increase their earning potential. Guided by this history, managers at AUC report it is not uncommon to hear comments from community members within the utility industry and local communities such as, "If you don't have a four-year degree in life, you're pretty much a loser." Other comments include, "To enter vocational schooling as an academic is a waste of talent, a step back." (Anonymous, WMXIL1). These comments sum up a negative perception that vocational work is not esteemed work and that recognition as a successful person requires one to earn a four-year degree. This viewpoint supports the marginalization of workers, vocational education, and vocational students (Kincheloe, 2018).

Past Practices Supported a White Male-Dominated Vocational Workforce

Access to vocational work was historically very limited in AUC's home state. Study participants explain that historically, incumbents were white males, attrition was low, and when there were open positions, people were often recruited through referrals. One workforce development manager recounted that the organizational chart once looked like a family tree. These descriptions of AUC's legacy hiring practices support arguments that hiring systems at that time systematically disenfranchised women and people of color in AUC's home state, thereby creating additional barriers to potential vocational workforce candidates.

Cross-Sector Partnerships Created to Recruit Vocational Workers Face Challenges

Recognizing the challenges of recruiting quality candidates in its organizational context, AUC entered into several innovative cross-sector partnerships with regional community colleges. These partnerships resulted in workforce development programs designed to train for specific skilled trades, including electrical linework. Using the Lineworker Workforce Development Program as an example, this program recruits quality candidates into the field of electrical linework before developing their skills as pre-apprentice electrical lineworkers using AUC's industry-standard training curriculum. Community College partners constructed dedicated training centers at four of AUC's home-state community colleges. These training centers contain classrooms, learning laboratories, and specialized outdoor hands-on training fields where the future lineworkers can sharpen their newly learned skills before entering the job market. Unfortunately, while these workforce development programs successfully generate qualified applicants, cohort sizes are limited by the ability to recruit prospective candidates, provide adequate instructor staffing, and obtain financial resources.

Current Recruitment Processes at AUC May be too Complicated for Job Seekers

Specifically designed to attract and train candidates for utility company jobs, the process of applying for the lineworker development program can become a vocational workforce barrier. For example, when the first cohort of the lineworker workforce development program was established between AUC and the first community college, unemployment in AUC's home state was at an all-time low. Despite these low employment figures, the program still received nearly 400 applications for 10 openings. The average time spent completing the application was roughly 2.5 min. Later, a competitive entry process was adopted to recruit a higher-quality class of candidates, resulting in a 75% reduction in applications for later cohorts. Program administrators quickly realized they had inadvertently created additional barriers to vocational work through their efforts to improve the program's quality. Examining the community college's process changes indicated that some candidates felt the application process had become too burdensome.

The application process continues to be burdensome when viewed from the perspective of potential applicants, potentially hindering the program's ability to recruit quality vocational workers. As of 2020, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the typical level of education to enter linework is a high school diploma or equivalent (BLS, 2020). The minimum requirements to enter linework at AUC include a high school diploma and screening processes to measure technical skills, mechanical skills, and intellectual aptitude (Anonymous, WMXIL1). Additional requirements and screening measures create applicant barriers at a time when the industry is incorporating technological advances into daily operations. For example, traditional powerline and telecommunications work is beginning to merge into one distinct lineworker occupation across the industry. The BLS categorizes the lineworker occupation as electrical powerline installers/repairers and telecommunications line installers/repairers (BLS, 2020). AUC

recognizes the benefits of aligning the two roles by allowing lineworkers to visualize expanded

career paths and growth opportunities to increase earnings over time. However, they also realize

the additional requirements will continue to reduce the number of applicants motivated to

complete the program.

The current competitive process for entry into the lineworker development program

requires an applicant to pass multiple stages before acceptance into the program. The first

requirement is passing the Technical Adult Basic Education (TABE) test.[1] Drug screening is also

necessary for any utility company hiring program for regulatory and safety reasons. However,

drug screening can be a bottleneck within the recruitment practice, with some candidates

refusing to proceed with the application process or failing altogether. There are also mandatory

physical tests, including a demonstrated ability to climb a utility pole. Some candidates drop out

at this stage because they cannot physically perform the activity or discover a latent fear of

heights.

Upon satisfactory completion of the TABE exam, drug screening, and physical tests, the

remaining candidates participate in a panel interview made up of utility company and community

college leaders who make final decisions regarding a candidate's acceptance into the program.

Progression through multiple steps will attract motivated individuals, as completing each step

brings them a sense of fulfillment. However, it often discourages those looking for a quick route

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[1] Technical Adult Basic Education (TABE) tests assess the skills and knowledge of adult learners in the areas of literacy, reading, language, and mathematics. (www.tabetest.com).

to begin earning a paycheck or those who are not confident in their ability to progress through

the multiple program acceptance steps.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

The contexts and attributes that create and perpetuate vocational work's stigma are complex. AUC's vocational workforce development programs, such as its lineworker program, do not have an effective strategy to address the stigma and perceptions of vocational work within its community. Over time, stigmatic narratives surrounding vocational work, like the perception of the value of seeking an undergraduate degree or college education, negatively impact the recruitment of quality applicants into specific vocational jobs. Compounded by increasingly complex job descriptions and qualification requirements, an individual's motivation to seek work and optimal on-the-job experiences face more challenges.

This quality improvement project explored stigmas and perceptions of vocational schooling and vocational work within AUC's target market while addressing barriers to entering vocational workforce development programs. The project also examined how cross-sector partnerships between the utility industry and community colleges, such as those created by AUC and its partners, could increase the recruitment of quality entry-level lineworkers in alignment with benchmarks set by the utility industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While leaders in the utility industry acknowledge the ability of vocational work stigma to influence job choice, the interaction between this stigma and job choice in the industry is not well studied. Limited research in this domain is not uncommon as, across sectors, examinations of organizational stigma are often considered taboo (Devers et al., 2009; Hudson and Okhuysen, 2014). Our learnings from the context and the problem of practice suggest job choice and identity are inextricably linked, and the problem of why stigma exists surrounding vocational work is with our society. Research from (Stuart, 2004; CEcD, 2019) also explored the links between job choice, identity, stigma, vocational work, and societal norms. Thus, given our learnings from the initial research, the context, and the problem of practice, the following literature review explores the intersection of ideas about identity, stigma, career metanarratives, and life courses to clarify their influence on job choice. We also explore the power of habitus on the socialization and perpetuation of vocational work stigma. **Figure 1** summarizes our understanding of their interaction. Finally, this literature review explores common recruitment strategies leveraged to address stigma.

Identity, Environment, and Job Choice

This quality improvement project's problem of practice aims to understand why a person chooses one job over another. Research suggests that some people make more confident choices than others because of their understanding of their identity or answer to the question "Who am I?" (Märtsin, 2019). Developmental approaches to understanding occupational choice inform us that vocational aspirations first crystalize in childhood and continue into adult years (Ginzberg et al., 1951, Falk and Cosby, 1975). A vital aspect of this crystallization is the process by which

"teenagers integrate information about themselves with their knowledge of available opportunities" (Hellenga, Aber, and Rhodes, 200, p. 2002; Super 1953).

Figure 1: *Summary of Literature Review Concepts*
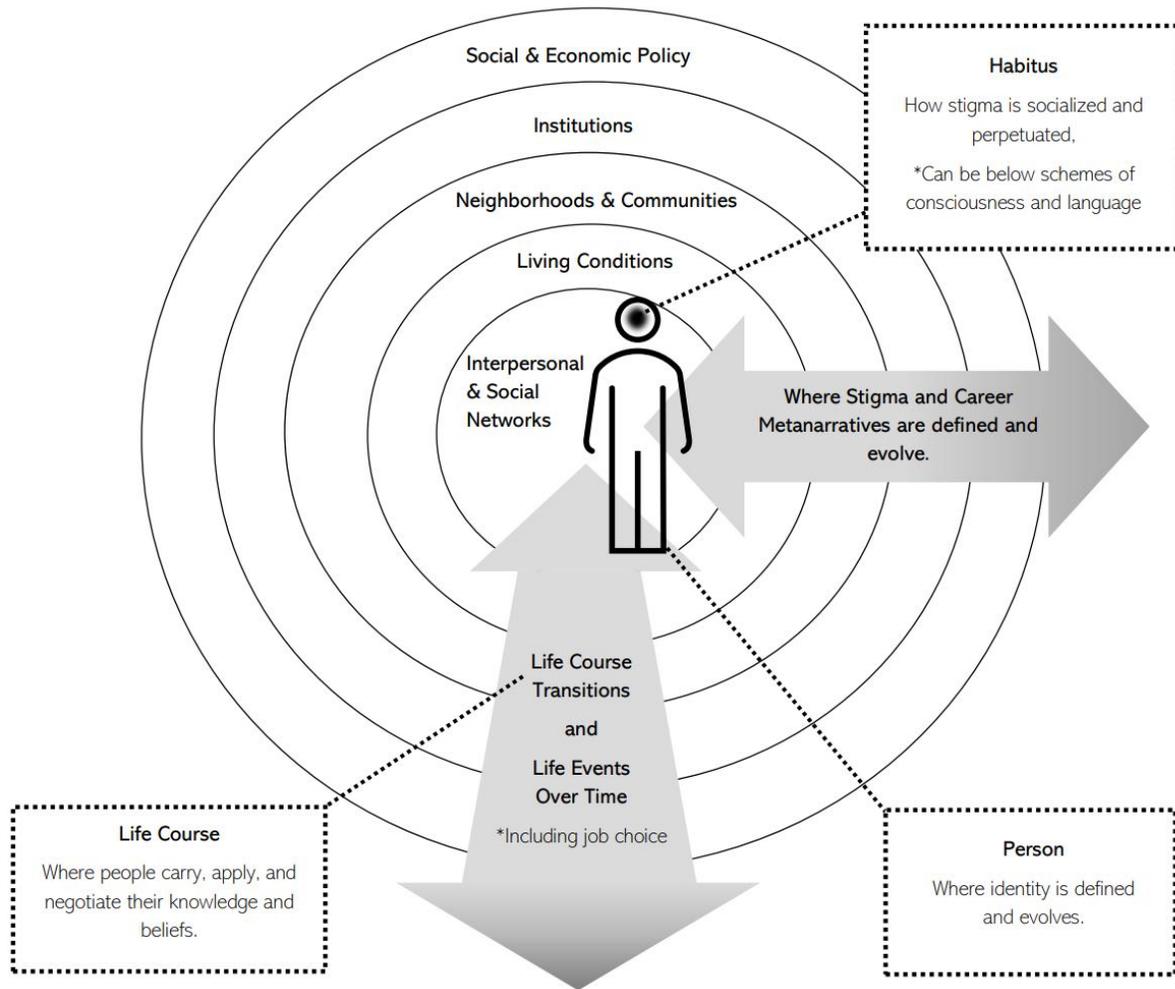
The literature explains that one can have an "occupational identity" that informs their conscious awareness of themselves as a worker and how they judge the nature of work (Skorikov and Vondracek, 2011; Phelan and Kinsella, 2009; Ashcraft, 2019). Adding complexity to the understanding of how identity influences job choice is research showing the conception of one's

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identity does not dissipate as one leaves an environment; it is carried from one context to another, layers, and transforms over time (Märtsin, 2019). Contributors to occupational success include whether a person can establish a "strong, self-chosen, positive, and flexible occupational identity" (Skorikov and Vondracek, 2011, p. 693).

We believe that to understand how vocational work stigma affects job choice and what AUC can do about it, we must understand how individuals' environment influences their organizational identity. Additionally, we must understand how interaction with distinct ideas—in this case, vocational work stigma—changes individuals' views of themselves and how they fit in their environment to inform their behavior. Life course sociology provides a foundation for understanding this sense of ever becoming (Elder and Johnson, 2003; Zittoun, 2012). It helps us examine identity processes as a part of ongoing meaning-making about oneself and the world as influenced by social and historical contexts (Martsin, 2019; Salvatore, 2018, Zittoun, 2012). We believe that if AUC can successfully map how this meaning-making occurs, the company can more likely influence it.

Stigma and Job Choice Barriers

Stigma is mental and material. It is a negative thought and an attitude that leads to behavior—in this case, discrimination against vocational job types. According to sociologist Goffman (1963) and psychologist Allport's (1958) definition of stigma, stigma requires exposure to negative attitudes and structural and interpersonal experiences of discrimination or unfair treatment (Stuber, Mayer, and Link, 2009). Given our understanding of stigma as a class system, we can treat our yearning to understand its working mechanism as a form of class analysis. Therefore, Bourdieu (1966) emphasizes that when performing class analyses, we cannot reduce

the analysis to economic relations (material qualities); instead, we must simultaneously analyze

symbolic relations (mental qualities).

Job choice is also mental and material. Research in stratification and social mobility states

that occupational choice involves increasing rationality and "the acquisition and casting off of

specific statuses" (Howell, Frese, and Sollie, 1977, p. 332). More specifically, as an individual

makes a series of compromises between their occupational wishes and realistic possibilities,

occupational choice attitudes act as a mediator of socio-cultural and environmental origin to

influence subsequent occupational goal attainment (Falk and Cosby, 1975; Howell, Freese, and

Sollie, 1977; Sewell, Haller. & Portes, 1969; Osipow, 1973).

Stigma can influence job choice. Three concepts that perpetuate stigmatizing attitudes

within one's environment include visibility, controllability, and impact; "The more *visible* the

stigmatizing mark or condition, the more the public perceives it to be under the *control* of the

bearer, and the more possibilities that it will have an *impact* on others" (Arboleda-Florez, 2002.

p. 25). The type of work one pursues is a noticeable mark. Within western societies, asking

someone what they do for work is expected in introductory conversations. Moreover, within

smaller communities, the clothes and dress for vocational work further set people apart as

outsiders in these job types. Because job choice is generally under the job seeker's control, AUC

must consider the impact of attempting to conceal stigma on cognitive load and an individual's

ability to participate in their community effortlessly in relation to how that influences job choice.

Stigma can influence job seekers' willingness to join the vocational workforce as the burden of

trying to keep information about themselves hidden, and anticipation of judgment from their

community members interferes with normative behavior (O'Rand, 2003). Life course sociology's

fundamental principle of linked lives supports this phenomenon. It states we must consider the

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consequences of social relationships on behavior because lives are linked interdependently

(Settersten, 2015 & Zittoun, 2012).

Career Decision Metanarratives

Metanarratives of optimal career stories are shifting. Developmental frameworks of

occupational choice emphasize that job choices become more realistic over time (Howell, Frese,

and Sollie, 1977). What is "realistic" is known to be influenced by the skills, tendencies, and

capacities that the job seeker believes they possess; however, we believe realistic job choices are

also grounded in the pervasive metanarratives in a job seeker's community (Meir, Esformes, and

Friedland, 1994). This phenomenon has been observed in research by Karah (2021), showing

metanarratives, as an assortment of unwritten rules and practical decisions, can "command

assumed authority" over populations, "deeply influence career choice," and "shape life course

across knowledge domains" (p. 30).

In his work on career counseling, Savickas (2019) recounts how 20th-century

metanarratives "clearly outlined trajectories with stable commitments around which individuals

planned their lives" (p. 5-6). Contrastingly, "The 21st century narrative about career is ambiguous

and discontinuous, so individuals cannot make life plans around institutional commitments"

(Savickas, 2019, p. 6). For AUC to develop a recruitment strategy that addresses stigma, it must

understand the series of decisions and choices faced by applicants in the 21st century and create

an appealing messaging plan that points to a wide range of job possibilities, including vocational

job types.

As corporations changed shape at the dawn of the 21st century, the loss of stable work

structures and predictable trajectories led to "individualization of the life course" (Savikas, 2019;

Mills, 2007; Angela, 2019). This phenomenon is broadly applied to understand macro-level

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societal changes, self-actualization, and identity formation (Savikas, 2019; Mills, 2007; Angela, 2019). In this literature review, we include individualization because we believe jobs and industries tasking job seekers to manage their careers rather than develop a career within a stable organization can also influence job choice. More specifically, individualization of the life course calls for significant identity work in which individuals construct narratives and revise those narratives continuously to "cope with the uncertainties provoked by life tasks, transitions, and traumas" (Savickas, 2019, p. 6). Because job seekers are more likely to manage their careers in this context, this quality improvement project must explore how stigma influences individual perceptions and actions.

Habitus and the Socialization of Vocational Work Stigma

The concept of habitus and stigma intersect. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical conception of habitus helps us understand why and how people understand and negotiate their understanding of the social world they participate in (Costa and Murphy, 2014). Habitus includes the material or physical conditions (structures) that define one's environment and the sensemaking activities (structuring structures) that "can be orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). Thus, habitus can include how stigma becomes a part of a person's understanding of the world and influences their behaviors. For example, in his social critique of the judgment of taste, Bourdieu (1984) defines taste as a form of opposition between the dominant and dominated. He states that taste represents a "practical mastery of distributions which makes it possible to sense or intuit what is likely (or unlikely to befall—and therefore to befit—an individual occupying a given position in social space" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 466). As "taste" for vocational work is negatively impacted by stigma

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narratives, according to Bourdieu (1984), occupants of a given social space will adjust and move to practices or goods that they more practically believe will benefit their position.

Habitus informs how an individual and groups of people with shared experiences and capital internalize behaviors, perceptions, and beliefs and negotiate social reality over time (Choing, 2014; Costa and Murphy, 2014). Patterns within habitus can explain how metanarratives are recreated as patterns over time and perpetuate stigma. For example, Bordieu (1977) puts forward the idea of a "class habitus," where the collective histories of a population are a structural variant of the individual disposition (p. 86). Class habitus is of consequence because research shows social origins like socioeconomic status affect awareness of available job types, perceptions of blockages to achieving job goals, and job aspirations (Howell, Frese, and Sollie, 1977).

The theoretical construct of habitus is an essential foundation for this quality improvement project. We believe the formation of negative perceptions of vocational schooling versus academic postsecondary pathways in job seekers' habitus can challenge the ability of cross-sector partnerships, like those created by AUC to recruit quality candidates for vocational work. For example, habitus structures what is right and normal for workers (Griffin et al., 2012; Lupu, Spence, and Emerson, 2017). Dispositions embodied during one's upbringing "hold a powerful sway over individuals and continue to structure action even when professionals exhibit a desire to act differently" (Lupu, Spence, and Emerson, 2017, p. TBC). In alignment with this orientation, in this study, we consider how the atmosphere in which an individual is reared can determine whether they pursue vocational work. Furthermore, we ask readers to consider the implications of being in an environment that praises academia versus an environment that extols technical ability on individual interest in entering the vocational workforce.

Sociocultural dynamics within habitus perpetuate stigma. While some job choices are reflective of academic or financial resources, they can also be indicative of cultural capital, "e.g., cultural knowledge, values, behavioral practices, and mannerisms" existing within an individual's social context (Griffin et al., 2012, p. 97). Social information processing fundamental premises may explain this. These premises explain that people adapt their beliefs and behaviors to align with their social context as they learn from past experiences (Salanick and Pfeffer, 1978). When choosing between vocational training or college education, "cultural capital holds importance due to the values and attitudes transmitted by parents and family members focused on education and success. These values and attitudes often translate to family-mediated values and outlooks that can facilitate (or inhibit) access to higher education" (Griffin et al., 2012, p. 98). For example, research suggests that if parents are college-educated, they are more likely to push for college preparatory classes than parents with limited exposure to higher education or parents not educated in the United States (Griffin et al., 2012). In other words, one might go through life with a powerful tendency entirely undeveloped because of the lack of stimulus in one's surroundings. AUC's recruiting strategy must leverage cultural capital to shift trends that push marginalized populations toward vocational work and more privileged people toward a college education and professional spaces.

Habitus and Post-Secondary Options

The push for one form of education, in my view, really was the beginning

of a long list of stigmas and stereotypes and myths and misperceptions that

to this day dissuade millions of kids from pursuing a legitimate

opportunity to make six figures in the trades.

— Mike Rowe, Television Host, Narrator, *Dirty Jobs* (Solman, 2021)

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In many communities, a bachelor's degree signals cognitive skills, commitment, and learning capacity (Auguste, 2021). Therefore, young people frequently receive a "go to college or be nothing" message from parents, teachers, and community leaders. Additionally, many highly skilled people feel compelled to get a four-year degree due to the negative perceptions of vocational work (Noddings, 2012). An analysis of jobs from 2007 through 2016 indicated that in three-quarters of new jobs, employers often required bachelor's degrees; however, fewer than four in 10 workers have the credential (Auguste, 2021). So, the question arises, why is this not often considered? And how did this become the standard? Research suggests that "individual *habitus* or worldview shapes the predisposition, search, and institutional choice phases of college choice" (Griffin et al., 2012, p. 96).

AUC must consider the salient costs and benefits of choosing vocational work against stigma narratives to create an effective recruitment strategy. For example, salient benefits that drive decision-making to attend college versus alternative routes include enhancing one's social status and believing that attending college will lead to higher lifetime earnings and participation in more fulfilling work environments (Perna, 2000). Contrastingly, salient costs include the direct costs of attendance and opportunity costs of foregone revenues and leisure time (Perna, 2000).

Effective Recruitment Strategies

The Oxford Handbook of Human Resource Management, Orilizky (2007) defines *recruitment* as "those practices and activities carried out by the organization with the primary purpose of identifying and attracting potential employees" (Chapter 14). Further, Orilizky (2007) specifies that recruitment is the first stage in a strategic Human Resource Management value chain that precedes the core Human Resource function of selection.

To combat stigma narratives in their recruitment processes, many trade schools and apprenticeship programs message communities that "college does not make sense" (St-Esprit, 2019, p. 4). As supporting evidence, these technical schools cite statistics on growing student loan debt and data showing that earning potential does not always offset the cost of these loans (St-Espirit, 2019, p. 4). Therefore, a revised conceptual model of recruitment for vocational roles must "help individuals construct and use their life stories to order their careers and give meaning to their choices" (Savickas, 2019. p. 6).

In their work on career decision-making, Hui Xu (2021) discusses how those critical drivers of the ability to make career decisions involve decreasing confusion and ambiguity throughout the process. Xu (2021) states that while some aspects of confusion within the career decision-making process can be eliminated through enhanced exploration, information gathering, and calculation, addressing other elements is more challenging. Challenges are due to the complexity of decision information, conflicting options, and unpredictable future versions (Xu, 2021). In addition, job seekers' psychological capacity to calculate career choice options and their socioeconomic ability to adapt to contemporary technological standards and economic events compound this issue as it impacts their ability to navigate ambiguity throughout the process.

Career counselors use life-design models to help job seekers learn new attitudes, beliefs, and competencies that advance their careers. Life-design conceptual models "prompt clients to (a) construct careers through small stories, (b) deconstruct and reconstruct these stories into an identity narrative or life portrait, and (c) co-construct intentions that extend that portrait to the next action episode in the real world" (Savickas, 2019, p. 11). As scholar-practitioners, in this study, we take a similar approach. We look at specific populations' narratives and behaviors to

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identify how stigma influences the choice to consider vocational work as an occupational fit.

Moreover, we explored how AUC representatives can coach individuals within these populations

to consider vocational work as a career path.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We needed a conceptual model with two principal characteristics to address the complex dynamics across the life course and habitus that impact job choice and stigma formation. First, the model needed to acknowledge the sensemaking activity that supports a job seeker in making decisions across the multiple contexts in which they operate. Second, it had to consider the structures and individuals influencing an individual's decisions as they navigate a complex recruitment process. Moreover, combining the ideas of structure and sensemaking, the model needed to provide a framework for identifying the series of decisions or choices within the recruitment process whose culmination is job offer acceptance and shed light on the experiential interaction between stigma and applicants. To build this model, we adopted tenets from two theories/perspectives: Enactivist Theory and Job Choice Theory. We derive our Persuasive Communications Recruitment Framework (PCRF) from these theories. The PCRF is the conceptual model that informs our quality improvement project.

Enactivist Theory

The principles of life course sociology explored in our literature review help us understand that people live in patterns shaped by age, social structures, and historical change (Elder and Johnson, 2003). These patterns influence job choice. Moreover, this sociological framework gave us five principles of human development (life span development, agency, time and space, timing, and linked lives), to which we could compare principles of habitus and their effects on stigma formation. However, when placed side by side, we felt the theories' principles contained aspects that seemed contradictory.

Enactivist theories combine the salient points of life course sociological frameworks and principles of habitus and help bridge elements that may initially look conflicting. **Appendix A**

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provides a summarized view of the crosswalk. The enactivist approach builds on life course theory and habitus. It informs our project questions by clarifying the relationship between individuals, their social context, and its influence on job choice and stigma formation over the life span. The enactivist lens also applies specificity to understanding how conscious attention and other causal interventions in shared learning generate action (Baker et al., 2002).

As scholar-practitioners, we maintain that to recruit qualified candidates, AUC should fully understand the agents and processes that support applicants' meaning-making (learning) about vocational work and their ability to overturn stigma narratives. This understanding is necessary as recruiters, acting as agents on behalf of AUC, seek to influence job seekers' behaviors. As informed by our literature review, the habitus and learnings over one's life course influence whether an individual is willing to consider vocational work. Enactivist learning theory can help AUC understand how recruiters support job seekers in co-creating meaningful action. Furthermore, it can reinforce the importance of understanding the transformation of this agent's perspective over time as they encounter specific needs and constraints (Di Paolo, Rohde, Jaegher, 2010; De Jaegher, Peräkylä, & Stevanovic, 2016). Moreover, enactivist theory helps us understand intersubjectivity, how lived, situated, and bodily coordination between agents inform and transform the way they make sense of each other and act in the world (De Jaegher, Peräkylä, & Stevanovic, 2016; Di Paolo, Rohde, Jaegher, 2010).

Sensemaking. The enactivist lens focuses on the internal states of an individual as they navigate an environment with incomplete or inaccessible information (Proulx, 2004; Ward, Silverman, and Villalobos, 2017). This approach aims to understand the sensemaking activity that guides learners' decisions as they encounter new structures or information and perform a disciplined reflection on their lived experiences (Di Paolo, Rohde, De Jaegher, 2007; Ward,

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Silverman, and Villalobos, 2017). From the sensemaking principle, we draw the implication that job seekers can uniquely interpret their social contexts but not fully influence their effect on their behavior. Moreover, learning that defines behavior exists within oneself and one's environment.

Autonomy. As informed by our literature review, individuals willing to pursue vocational work typically do not follow a traditional educational trajectory. Therefore, adopting a theory that seeks to understand the internal states that help job seekers interpret their habitus across their life course and how these states influence job choice serves this quality improvement project.

Enactivist theory emphasizes people's autonomy as they navigate unique social contexts (Di Paolo, Rohde, De Jaegher, 2007). However, enactivist theory also embeds this autonomy in how an individual is shaped by their environment and how their environment is shaped by them (Di Paolo, Rohde, De Jaegher, 2007; Reid and Mgombelo, 2015). This phenomenon suggests that job seekers' identities are accepted, transformed, and enacted autonomously over time. Moreover, identity is formed based on awareness of social context. Therefore, we can learn just as much about the job seeker from looking at how recruitment strategies change over time as from specifically querying job seekers about their internal states.

Emergence and Embodiment. The enactive principles of emergence and embodiment describe how novel ideas and behaviors form and how they are embedded to inform short- and long-term decisions across one's life course (Di Paolo, Rohde, De Jaegher, 2007). The high-level implications for our problem of practice are twofold. First, we believe the effects of stigma narratives on job seeker behavior are context-dependent. Moreover, organizations can alter job seeker behavior by exposing job seekers to new information or events. Second, we believe job seekers rely on cognitive and physical experiences (of stigma or otherwise) to inform job choice.

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Experience. The enactive principle of experience emphasizes the "intertwining" of living and being (enacting) in significant social contexts (Di Paolo, Rohde, De Jaegher, 2007, p. 13). This process of intertwining involves interdependently occurring sensemaking and learning activities. More specifically, enactivist theory states that while the environment does not determine the ability to learn, it depends on it (Proulx, 2004, 117). The implications of this principle for our problem of practice are numerous. Principally, the described mechanism of experience implies that changes to job seekers' deeply rooted stigma narratives about vocational work require transformational experiences, where they are allowed to test their current classification schemes, not just the provision of new information. Moreover, we assert that internal dynamics drive decisional mechanisms, orient the effects experience can have, and drive knowledge acquisition by allowing the agent to see a potential trigger of change (Proulx, 2004, p. 116).

As we think about learning in the recruitment context, we ask that AUC's workforce development leaders rethink their concept of space as something job seekers walk through as passive bystanders. Instead, workforce development leaders must consider space, the job seekers' habitus, and environments as critical stimuli with consequences on their self-concepts, how they view others, and how they evolve and transform their identities over time. The key here, restated, is that it is not only information presented by AUC in the recruitment process that influences job seekers' behavior (i.e., whether they choose to pursue vocational work). Instead, the individual agent's perception of all the information they receive about vocational work and its meaning in their community across their life course guides that transformation, learning, and behavior.

Theory of Recruitment and Job Choice

Job choice research is concerned with the processes that ultimately influence job choice decisions and is traditionally concerned with the recruitment context (Harold, Uggerslev, & Kraichy, 2013). Job choice theory makes factors such as organization attraction and behavioral intentions secondary to applicant decisions. This process is essential as while attraction and intentions may be antecedent processes to job choice, they are not proxies for it. Moreover, this theory emphasizes that job choice should not be synonymous with job acceptance or rejection.

Harold, Uggerslev, & Kraichy's (2013) theory of recruitment and job choice theory, previously referred to as "job choice theory," is included in our conceptual framework because it shows job seekers face a series of decisions or choices in the recruitment process. The culmination of these decisions' experiential interaction with stigma and applicants is job offer acceptance. Inspired by Marco Caracciolo's (2014) work on *The Experientiality of Narrative*, we examined the situated, embodied qualities of applicant engagement with the stigma associated with vocational work to derive how meaning emerges from the experiential interaction between stigma and applicants (p. 4). Furthermore, we argue that the stigmas that exist surrounding vocational work "offer themselves as imaginative experiences because of the way they draw on and restructure [key stakeholders'] familiarity with the experience itself" (p. 4). A diagram describing this mechanism is shown below in **Figure 2.**

As scholar-practitioners, we maintain that AUC should fully understand the antecedent attributes and processes, including the stigmas influencing community members' entrance into vocational work or choice to pursue vocational schooling. Understanding the antecedent attributes and processes that predict applicants' decisions to apply and remain actively engaged in the recruitment process is critical.

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Figure 2: *Experientiality of Narrative*

Human
Experience

Human Experience

provides basic
cognitive schemata

Narrative
(including stigma)

shapes cultural
templates

Narrative
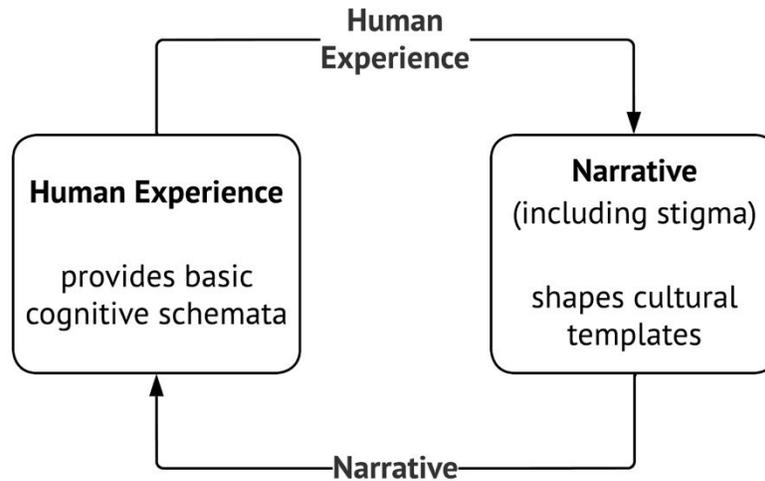
Characteristics of Job Choice. Job choice consists of three distinct behavioral decisions: the decision to apply, the decision to remain active or withdraw from candidacy, and the decision to accept or reject the job offer (Harold, Uggerslev, Kraichy, 2013). These decisions complement the three stages of recruitment developed by Barber (1998) from an organization's perspective. Barber's (1998) stages included applicant generation, maintaining applicants, and influencing applicant status. This study takes an integrated approach, looking at all three factors from the individual's and the organization's perspectives to determine their effects on entering vocational work at AUC. **Appendix B** includes a figure describing the mechanism.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) helps workforce development leaders understand job choice as a longitudinal persuasion process. Researchers have used the ELM to understand how information about jobs and the organization, learned from recruiters and through the recruitment process, predicts applicant attraction across stages of the recruitment process. **Appendix C** includes a figure describing the mechanism.

The ELM theorizes that scrutiny increases as applicants determine whether to maintain their applicant status. The more information the applicants receive about the job and organization, and the closer they get to making a job offer acceptance decision, the simple associations and heuristics (including stigmas) that may have informed applicants' early job choice decisions may become almost nonexistent at later stages when applicants systematically process message quality. Thus, as the recruitment process unfolds, job and organizational information and characteristics of the recruitment process (particularly those related to procedural justice) may become more important, and recruiters may become less important.

Persuasive Communication Recruitment Framework

Integrating the enactivist and job choice theories allows us to create a new framework focused on persuasive communications, as seen in **Figure 3**. Our Persuasive Communications Recruitment Framework (PCRF) draws fundamental ideas of autonomy, sensemaking, emergence, embodiment, and experience from enactivist theory. From *autonomy*, the model acknowledges that job seekers are unique agents and can change their minds over time as they interact with a series of job choices. From the concept of *sensemaking*, the framework considers that job seeker casts a "web of significance on their world" (Di Paolo, Rohde, and De Jaegher, 2007, p.9). *Embodied* through their actions, job seekers share stigma narratives, interact with this dialogue, and define the significance of ideas that *emerge*. Finally, the PCRF derives from the enactivist lens that for AUC to successfully recruit qualified candidates for vocational work, it must create an *experience* for job seekers. This experience management process involves crafting a journey for job seekers to challenge and transform stigma narratives around vocational work.

In alignment with job choice theory, each stage of the PCRF examines job seekers' perceptions, motivations, and intentions to continue progression. The PCRF begins with recruitment, which we designate as Phase 1. In this phase, the job seekers gain awareness of the vocational work opportunities available at AUC. In this initial conversation, recruiters begin to provide positive vocational recruitment messaging. This messaging includes statistics that make pursuing vocational work options favorable compared to other job types or deciding to attend a four-year college. As the recruiter shares these messages, they should also assess the applicant's motivation for seeking work. Because these conversations are broad-based and seek to generate job seekers' intent to pursue any role within AUC, we categorize these steps as "non-job choice decisions." Beneath the "non-job choice decisions" are "reactions." At this stage, within the PCRF, the recruiter begins to assess the job seekers' held stigma narratives around vocational work. Using the ELM, they can start to share new information regarding vocational work that directly addresses applicant concerns and unfavorable narratives. Finally, the recruitment phase includes choice decisions, where the job seeker decides whether or not they will pursue an application.

While our quality improvement project focuses on the recruitment and application phases, we included the training and closeout phases in the PCRF because of their importance in creating a feedback loop for long-term success. Our literature review explored how stigma narratives were reinforced and sustained through the stretches of one's life course. Recruiters should not underestimate these narratives' ability to reappear across job choice phases, and this underestimation should not occur even if recruiters successfully address stigma narratives within the recruitment phase. The job seeker's autonomy and distinct evaluation process must be respected and acknowledged across the experience.

Figure 3: *Persuasive Communication Recruitment Framework*
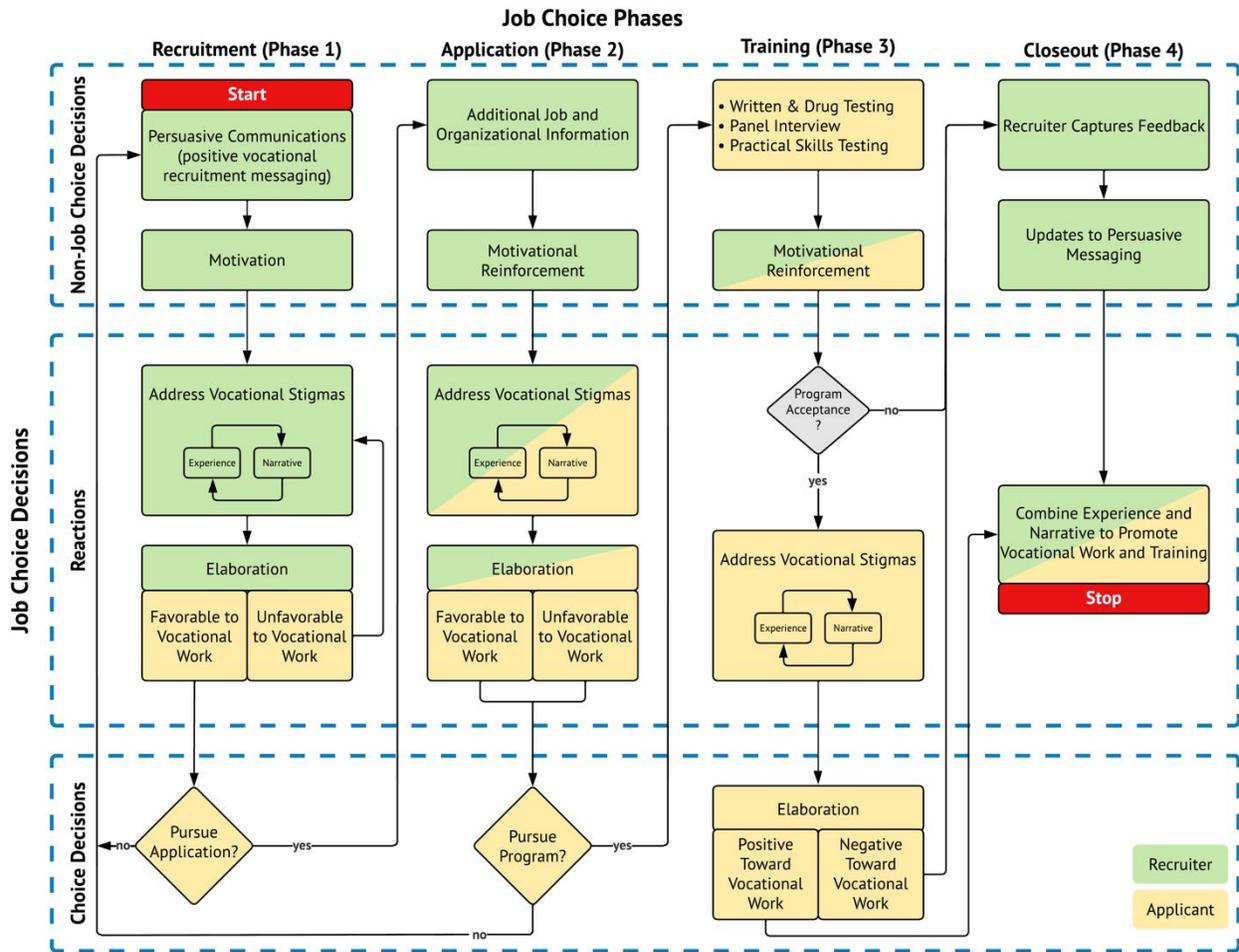
PROJECT QUESTIONS

When we first began conversations with AUC's workforce development leaders to understand their sociocultural and organizational context, their sense of frustration quickly became evident. AUC representatives expressed dissatisfaction with a system they felt presented several barriers and hindered community members from seeking vocational work. The implication was that some community members in their home state believed they were powerless or didn't possess the necessary skillsets to obtain jobs they defined as "good." Moreover, while AUC initiated several pushes to create solutions for community members, those solutions were neither sufficient nor optimized.

AUC management identified stigma as the primary driver acting to perpetuate barriers that impacted recruitment efforts into vocational jobs. Instead of combating stigma issues head-on, their experience was that influential external organizations bypassed the issue of stigma and did not give it the importance it deserved. Adding to their frustration, the perpetuated stigmatic storylines about vocational work they heard in their communities did not line up with their perspective of the work. These storylines conflicted with the opportunities for an improved quality of life and professional development they saw coming to fruition for many of the vocational workers, especially those in marginalized communities.

Our literature review explored how social contexts led to stigma development and the persistence of stigma. Our conceptual framework led us to understand that stigma operates within the recruitment process in a way that AUC and its workforce development partners can address. The detailed project questions below help us understand how AUC's recruitment process compares to the Persuasive Communication Recruitment Framework. AUC can also use

this understanding to modify its recruitment process and support the efficient onboarding of quality candidates.

What are barriers to vocational work at AUC?

- What decisions and choices do potential applicants experience within the recruitment process?

- How do decisions and choices in vocational work recruitment processes impact potential applicants' decision to enter vocational work at AUC?

How do stigma and perception impact decisions to enter vocational work at AUC?

- What is the impact of stigma on applicants' perceptions and experience of the recruitment process at AUC?

- How does this impact applicants' decision to enter vocational work at AUC?

What strategies can AUC implement to increase the number of quality applicants?

- How can AUC's recruitment strategy address negative stigma and perceptions to increase the number of quality applicants?

METHODS

This quality improvement study utilized qualitative methodologies to obtain insight from semi-structured in-depth interviews with the utility industry, community college, state government, secondary education, and other key stakeholders supporting the success of workforce development programs. Vocational workers employed by the electrical utility industry, including current electrical lineworkers and fiber-optics workers, were also interviewed. Data obtained from in-depth interviews with parties across multiple affinity groups provided insight for exploring perceptions of the stigma that impacts entrance into the field of vocational work. Given the study objectives, the study team and leaders from AUC helped choose appropriate candidates to interview. Finally, qualitative data from each subgroup were combined to inform recommendations to AUC that supported improved vocational recruitment processes. Before conducting stakeholder interviews, the study team created a four-phase approach to facilitate the qualitative coding and analysis process, see **Table 1**. This formalized approach defined actions to collect data, develop a codebook, analyze the coded information, and validate initial findings.

Interviews and Data Collection

Phase 1 of the qualitative analysis approach consisted of conducting interviews across a broad spectrum of stakeholders, capturing and correcting interview transcripts, and initial code development. Referencing Belotto (2018), we conducted in-depth and semi-structured interviews to ensure we received core information from each person interviewed. This process allowed for the flexibility to delve further into the life experiences of each participant, which enhanced the quality of the information received. This approach also provided us with some degree of flexibility to follow specific lines of thought and bring out additional descriptions of experiences

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related to the subject of stigma. Since no validated questionnaires were available for this study

subject, we created tailored interview queries to obtain the necessary data to address the study's

project questions and inform our findings and recommendations.

Table 1: *Qualitative Analysis Phased Approach*
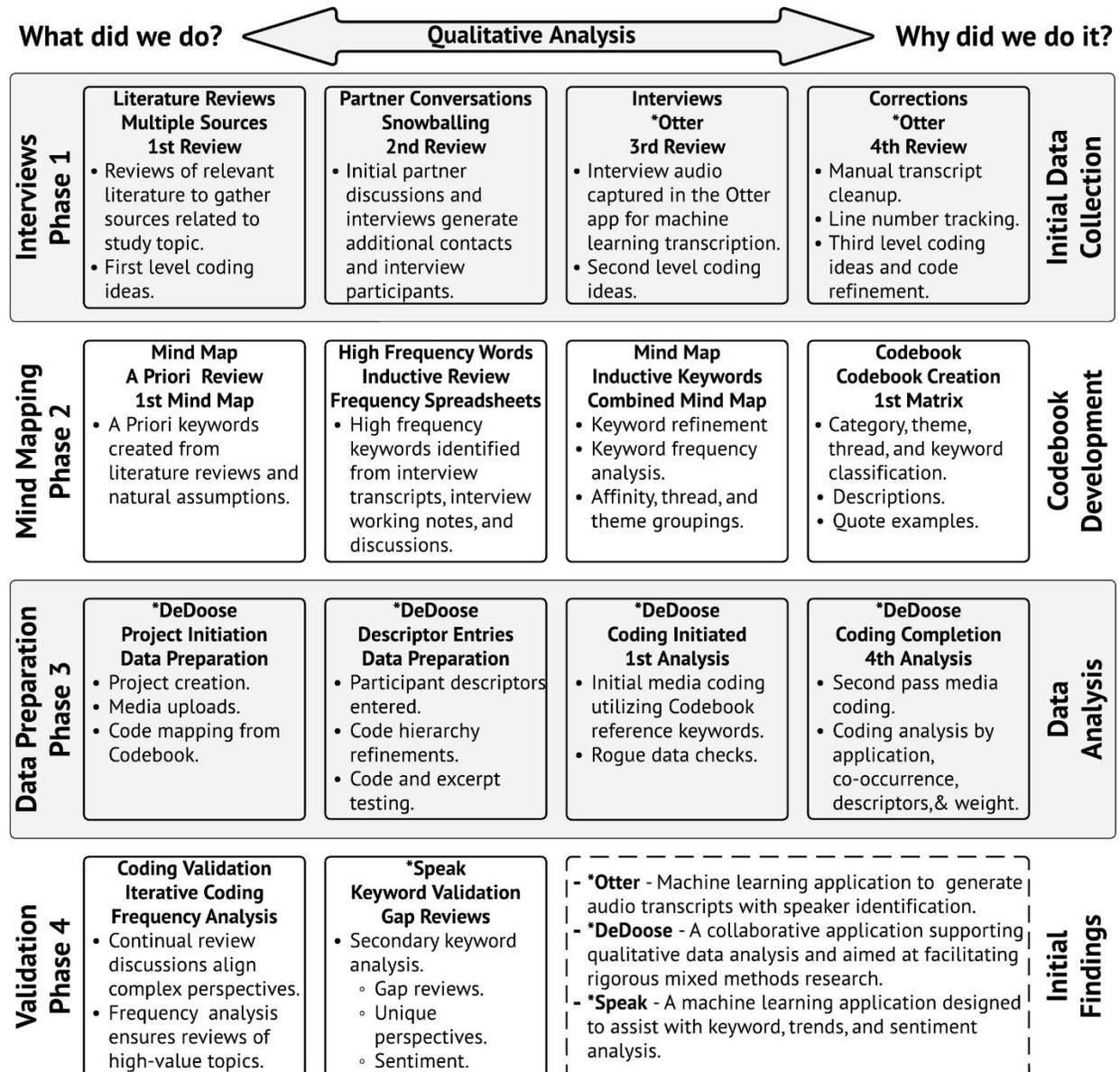
All in-depth and semi-structured stakeholder interviews were conducted via remote conferencing and in-person meetings over several months. Participants were encouraged to speak freely and at length about their lived experiences, perceptions, and current involvement with the topic. Study participants were also encouraged to recommend other potential interviewees with essential perspectives related to the study. This "snowballing" method helped ensure we collected multiple perspectives surrounding our subject. OTTER®, a machine learning transcription application, was utilized to capture participant interviews and produce initial interview transcripts. The study team's working notes from the interviews and discussions were also used to aid in the transcript cleanup process and later code development. The transcript cleanup process consisted of replaying recorded interviews, comparing the audio to the software transcribed text, and manually entering grammatical corrections, as needed.

Code and Thread Development

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, data analysis began directly following the first set of interviews. Phase 2 of the qualitative analysis phased approach consisted of mind mapping exercises to collect and refine initial a priori and inductive codes relevant to our data analysis. To begin the coding process, we referred to Cooper (2009) and focused our definition of a code as a word or phrase representing or capturing an attribute's symbolic meaning. We also referenced Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019) to recognize how we could use codes to understand a phenomenon and the participants' unique perspectives. This information was especially helpful in understanding and aligning with our study participants' respective viewpoints and perspectives during the dynamic process of code development.

Borrowing from Williams and Moser (2019), the study followed an open coding process that allowed patterns, affinity groups, threads, and themes to emerge naturally from the transcript

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reviews. This coding methodology allowed us to sift through a large number of transcript pages

and iteratively reduce the number of codes to a manageable number. Data refinement steps

proved critical to managing and organizing information before developing affinity groups,

threads, and themes. **Figure 4** provides a visual representation of the coding refinement process.

Figure 4: *Coding Overview: Open, Axial, and Selective*
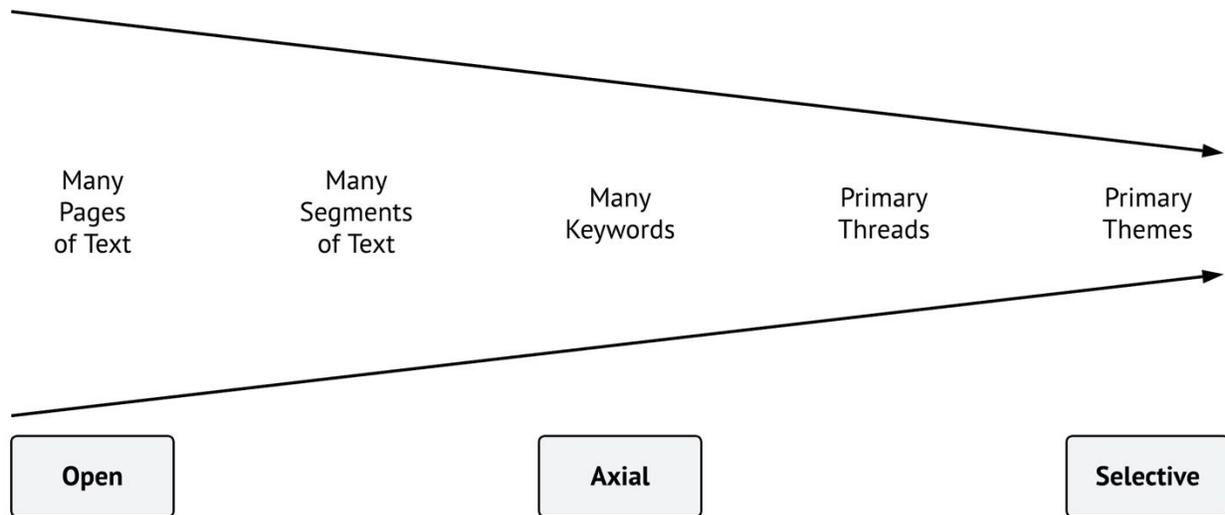
Formulation of keywords to begin initial coding relied on an a priori method to gather

information from relevant literature and common-sense assumptions. The study team

participated in mind-mapping exercises to document and refine initial codes for eventual

submission to the Qualitative Analysis Codebook. **Appendix D** provides an example of the a

priori mind map used by the study team. In addition to aiding the transcription cleanup process,

the use of working notes also proved helpful in providing additional data in our high-level

analysis as we moved into Phase 2 of the qualitative analysis process.

Since no predetermined code sets were available for this study, we generated inductive codes directly from the transcripts and working notes. According to Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019), this approach is relevant when no theoretical concepts are immediately available related to the study area. Utilizing this approach, we incorporated a nonlinear coding process referenced by Williams and Moser (2019). As shown in **Figure 5**, our inductive coding followed an axial coding process that allowed us to organize our codes through continual comparison.

Figure 5: *Nonlinear Coding Process*
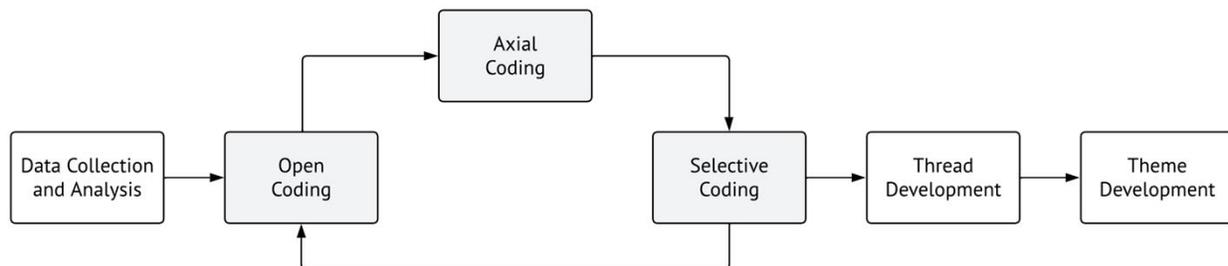
This coding strategy enabled us to compare new data to previously reviewed transcripts and continually refine and consolidate the keywords used to develop affinity groups, threads, and themes. Combining the earlier a priori mind map information, a new inductive mind mapping technique was used throughout the iterative development process to collect, refine, and document study keywords used to formulate affinity groups, leading to threads and themes. **Appendix E** provides an example of the combined mind map used by the study team.

Combining a priori and inductive codes into a combined mind map and subsequent coding reviews facilitated the development of threads, leading to themes. To aid in the thread and theme development process, we utilized spreadsheets to analyze relevant transcript keywords and keyword groupings by frequency of use. This process involved manually identifying

appropriate words and word groups from each interview transcript before transferring them to spreadsheets. We then scrutinized the keywords for like occurrences and combined any similar words or word groups into a single keyword when warranted. For example, the words "job" and "jobs" appeared as unique occurrences but were incorporated into the single word "job," carrying over all respective frequency counts.

The study team also analyzed single words and word groups to ensure separation, if needed. In this example, the term "community" was frequently used throughout the transcripts, sometimes referencing a location, a group of people or shared interests, or a community college. The study team used these processes to facilitate later coding operations and help make the volume of data more manageable.

Upon completion of keyword reviews, we developed customized spreadsheet formulas to sort and count all occurrences of each identified keyword within each participant transcript. This method created keyword frequency data and combined it into a unified spreadsheet, providing insight into the a priori and inductive mind mapping process. This phase of our qualitative analysis approach also included validation steps to ensure our results had no data conflicts or overlooked threads. After completing all data checks, we transposed the remaining keywords into a qualitative analysis codebook. The full Qualitative Analysis Codebook can be found in **Appendix F**, while an excerpted sample of the Qualitative Analysis Codebook is shown below in **Table 2**.

This process-driven approach to developing a codebook resulted in a code matrix broken down by categories, themes, threads, keywords, and sample quotes. In addition, our use of a phased approach generated results very similar to those described by Stuckey (2015) and

provided a high degree of confidence that basing our qualitative analysis approach on structured

and iterative refinements would generate accurate results.

Table 2: *Qualitative Analysis Codebook (Excerpted)*

Categories	Themes	Threads	Thread Stats	Keywords	Sample Quote
Barriers: Composed of behavioral and structural characteristics contributing to vocational stigma. 28% of the keywords are attributed to this category and reflect "What we think know."	**Behavioral Characteristics:** Reference to behavioral characteristics from the interviewee's viewpoint. 62% of the keywords attributed to the Barriers category fell into the Behavioral Barrier theme.	• Community • Home Structure • Support Systems	Words: 436 Percent: 34% Weight: 3	Included references: • Community • Home (home structure) • Family • Relationships • Support (support structure, systems)	• When you think about referrals, when those awareness pieces reach the moms and the dads and the aunts and uncles and the grandmoms, they're the ones that are referring other people in the family that are looking for opportunities to help guide them to the next step in the process. (MWBIA1) • Let's say there are parents or guardians that don't come from an educational background, and I'm speaking from a generational perspective. We still have kids that may be the first in their family to have the opportunity to go to college. And if that student has shown some type of acumen to go to college, whether or not they want to go, they really push that. (MBYIL1)
		• Education • Skills • Learning Environment	Words: 429 Percent: 33% Weight: 3	Included references: • Education • Skills • Environment • Learning • Exposure	• This cultural shift for education went from workers that were very esteemed, hardworking, and all these apprenticeship programs that were time based so that you can kind of grow into an occupation. That's a thing of the past. (FWXGL1)

Theme Development and Data Analysis

After developing the Qualitative Analysis Codebook, we began data preparation and

analysis as part of Phase 3 of our qualitative analysis plan. During this phase, we leveraged

DeDoose®, a qualitative analysis software tool, to house interview audio media and transcripts

for further processing. We chose DeDoose® to help with our qualitative analysis primarily due to

its new-user learning curve and remote collaboration capabilities. In this phase, we first transcribed the data and hierarchical format of our Qualitative Analysis Codebook into the application. Next steps involved highlighting identified codes within the transcripts and iterative passes that tested our data and further refined the hierarchical formatting. We also used the DeDoose® tools to aid the search for high-frequency keywords and key quotes to standardize the study team's perceptions of the definition, use, and perspective of certain words. These quotes were added to the Qualitative Analysis Codebook and helped align keywords into threads and themes. The additional benefit of frequency counts and a customized weighting system was the ability to help identify rogue data and keywords that no longer appeared relevant. Other reviews validated keyword alignment to threads, themes, and study questions.

Validation and Gap Reviews

Phase 4 of our Qualitative Analysis Process used iterative coding steps to improve consistency and demonstrate agreement within the study team. Due to the complex sets of data derived from interviews and the potential for inconsistency with independent coding perspectives, we chose not to take the approach of designing a process that relied on calculating inter-rater reliability to validate our findings. Our approach to ensuring coding accuracy was to perform multiple iterative reviews and coding processes while frequently discussing the meaning and interpretation of selected transcript texts, potential codes, and participant perceptions. MacDonald et al. 2019 informed our decision, noting that inter-rater reliability could be confusing in that it attempts to merge quantitative and qualitative methods. We completed multiple keyword frequency analysis iterations in this study as a mechanism to classify certain words and phrases for alignments to affinity groups, threads, and themes.

The study team performed additional reliability and keyword frequency testing by utilizing a second machine learning application called SPEAK®. This tool provided capabilities that allowed us to perform a sentiment analysis of each participant's interview transcript. Through the generation of positive, negative, and neutral sentiment scores, we evaluated each participant. Comparisons of these scores provided additional validation steps to determine if any participant harbored a previously unidentified unique perspective. See **Figure 6** below for an example of a sentiment chart and score.

Figure 6: *Participant Sentiment Chart and Scoring Example*
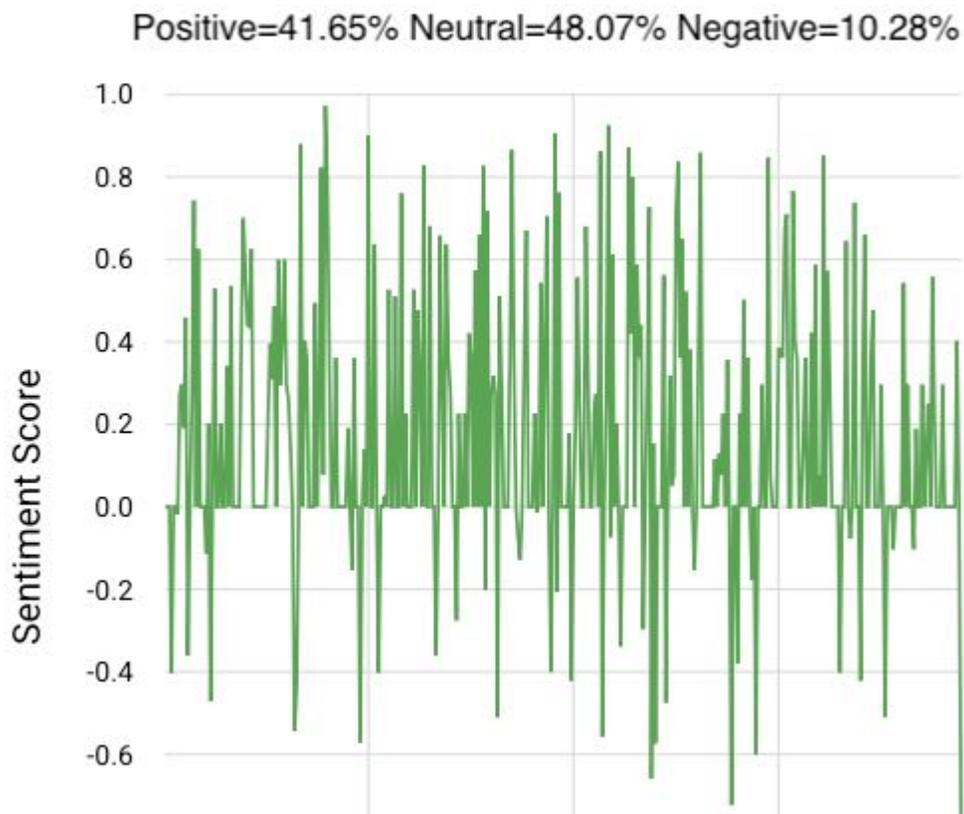
In general, the sentiment of all participants fell within similar ranges, with only a few percentage points separating the extremes. The use of sentiment scoring validated that the participants understood issues surrounding vocation stigma and had similar attitudes regarding challenges and opportunities.

Study Participants

We recruited sixteen people from diverse occupational groups to participate in the study. In addition to industry leaders directly involved with AUC's workforce development activities, other participants came from leadership positions in state government, community colleges, and high schools. Industry advocates and skilled workers also made up the participant pool. A breakdown of the participant demographics and roles is shown below in **Table 3**.

The participants were recruited in partnership with workforce development program leads at AUC. Interviews were conducted in two phases to allow for interim analysis and refinement of the interview guides in an iterative process. We relied on word-of-mouth referrals from highly networked community members, all of whom were required to be over 18 years old. The study team conducted interviews through teleconference or limited one-on-one meetings. We purposively sought persons with experience in vocational work, vocational skills training, or a combination of both. This search also included representatives from state government organizations, secondary education, community colleges, and industry advocates. All participants were aware of AUC's workforce development programs for vocational roles. All interviews were conducted in English, and we provided no compensation to any participant.

Table 3: *Participant Roles and Demographics*

	Category	Gender	Race	Generation
Participant Demographics	Industry Leaders	F = 1 M = 3	B = 3 W = 1	Boomer = 0 Gen X = 3 Gen Y = 1 Gen Z = 0
	Government Leaders	F = 1 M = 1	B = 0 W = 2	Boomer = 1 Gen X = 1 Gen Y = 0 Gen Z = 0
	Industry Advocates	F = 0 M = 1	B = 0 W = 1	Boomer = 1 Gen X = 0 Gen Y = 0 Gen Z = 0
	Collegiate Leaders	F = 1 M = 2	B = 1 W = 2	Boomer = 2 Gen X = 1 Gen Y = 0 Gen Z = 0
	Secondary Education Leaders	F = 2 M = 1	B = 0 W = 3	Boomer = 0 Gen X = 3 Gen Y = 0 Gen Z = 0
	Skilled Workers	F = 1 M = 2	B = 0 W = 3	Boomer = 2 Gen X = 0 Gen Y = 1 Gen Z = 0

FINDINGS

Early in our analysis, we identified themes offered by participants that highlighted the central role of how their identity, life experiences, and upbringing enabled their ability to perceive stigma. Moreover, their role or where they stood within the current system impacted their ability to identify stigma associated with vocational work in contemporary contexts. Based on their descriptions, we began to focus more on stigma not only as an adjective or a descriptive label used to describe an individual or group of individuals but also as a verb. We began to view stigma as a living and transforming concept influencing how people see themselves within the world and how they participate in the world. Within AUC's region of the country, stigma moves or influences people to view current vocational workers in a certain way. Stigma also defines how incumbents make long-term job choices based on how they want to be seen and their feelings about their job experience. Participants recounted how experiences of stigma changed over time and how demographic groupings and lifestyle factors had essential consequences on one's willingness to pursue vocational work despite the potential stigma. Using narrative analysis allowed us to interpret participants' accounts to unite underlying themes in the data.

The following framework for organizing the stories offered by participants was used: decisions and choices faced before entering vocational work, experiential interaction between stigma and applicants' decision-making processes, strategic narratives, and processes to address stigma. Below, we present the stories around the four primary drivers identified with the decision to enter vocational work. We then present accounts of internalized stigma and how that affected behaviors within the system. Finally, we present strategies offered by participants for AUC to resist and dismantle stigmatizing stories barring the recruitment of vocational workers.

Finding #1 relates to the first project question:

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- What are barriers to vocational work at AUC?

Finding #1

Expectations that do not meet reality at key touchpoints for applicants or cross-sector partners cause barriers that hamper efficient recruitment.

Relation to our conceptual framework: This finding most clearly relates to the enactivist principle of sensemaking. This finding indicates that when a job choice influencer or recruiter's conception of the social context does not align with the job seeker's interpretation unless interventions are sufficient to close the gap, qualified candidates will not progress to the closeout phase in the PCRF.

Across conversations with our key stakeholders, we recognized several themes regarding barriers that job seekers face during the recruitment process. More specifically, we identified several consistent topics job seekers address with recruiters, key influencers, and decision-makers within their communities that can house stigma and modulate a job seeker's willingness to consider or pursue vocational work options. We separated the identified barriers into two main themes, behavioral characteristics and structural characteristics. The behavioral characteristics theme references barriers ascribed to observable human behavior, and it has attributes describing things *people do or think about* when making job choices. Examples include: (1) Leveraging relationships within one's home and greater community or formal education environment to obtain information influencing job choice. (2) Self-reflection activities, categorized by a discussion on lived experience, sensemaking activities, compelling historical narratives, and one's personal lived experience. In contrast, structural characteristics describe things *people interact with* to make a job choice. Some broad themes in this characteristic are geographic location, lack of feedback mechanisms, cost of education, and low wages.

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The most referenced category (thread) was the impact of community, home structures, and support systems on stigma. Primary disconnects between the industry and quality candidates were related to the salary job seekers felt was required to achieve their aspired quality of life and the narratives in their communities about taking vocational work to meet those salary requirements. Other disconnects include the ability of AUC leaders to address and debunk stigma narratives sufficiently. For example, to describe the appropriate salary requirement, one participant remarks, "If you can't feed your family or yourself, you're in trouble" (Anonymous, FWXGL1). Unfortunately, another participant states, "There are still people that are literally clueless about what to do, and they're just looking for the next job that will pay them 50 cents more. Versus, going back and getting a short-term credential, or something at a community college that can literally change the direction and trajectory and the trajectory of them and their future family" (Anonymous, MWXIL1). These are clear examples of behavioral characteristics of the population AUC recruits from that prove the existence and perpetuation of stigma.

Structurally, participants often referenced how the educational system's pedagogy and curricula influence stigma formation and perpetuation. Regarding perspectives on salary, one participant remarks, "If somebody went to vocational school, that meant they didn't have an academic mind. So, they had to go do something with their hands. And those are probably going to be the low-paying, unprofessional jobs" (Anonymous, FBBCL1). These ideas contradict utility industry leaders' perspectives. For example, referencing vocational work, one leader stated, "We're not talking about low paying jobs, we're talking about good paying jobs, where it improves the quality of life" (Anonymous, FBXIL1).

In addition to the topic of pay, other categories in which we found this disconnect between applicant expectations for job choices and industry leaders' beliefs were people,

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partnership, and purpose. Under the category of people were narratives surrounding the type of

worker who was "supposed to" have a vocational job versus how qualified job seekers want to

see themselves. As one participant remarks, "We want to get away from the idea that

[vocational] work is just dirty jobs. There's one contractor that said it was the 3Ds: dirty, dumb,

and don't pay well" (Anonymous, MWBIA1). In contrast to this perspective, workforce

development leaders at AUC state they are very particular about the people they hire. For

example, one leader states, "The beauty of [AUC] is that we focus on people." They believe

AUC's talent acquisition team "is leading the effort working with [their] internal customers [to

better understand] how [they] can be proactive in developing a new workforce" (Anonymous,

FBBCL1). This includes leveraging data to forecast attrition and, in turn, ramp up workforce

training and recruitment activities.

Therefore, it is essential for workforce development leaders at AUC to ask themselves

whether, despite being innovative, the tactics they have in place are sufficient to address the

impact of stigma on recruiting qualified candidates. Moreover, they must consider whether

current tactics sufficiently address the stigma narrative describing the type of people who should

be vocational workers.

The second category, partnership, stemmed from the idea that stigma narratives were so

pervasive that it would take cross-sector teams to achieve impact. As one participant states, "a

million people love to complain, but they don't want to come and help or lift a finger

…Oftentimes, this is because they are just trying to keep from drowning" (Anonymous,

MWXIL1). However, to address vocational stigma and recruit a qualified workforce, "it's going

to require everybody to be at the table. Legislative activities and funding grants are needed to

raise those people up who have been left out in the past to give them a line-of-sight path to

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successful careers" (Anonymous, MWXIL1). Unfortunately, certificate programs or two-year

associate programs are the most common route to accessing vocational work in those industries.

From the point of view of leaders of AUC's workforce development programs, two of the

most appealing aspects of this route are the time savings to making a salary that is significantly

over the median and the decreased level of effort needed to meet that goal. However, one

significant barrier they note to entry into these programs is that "many of them are on the non-

credit side, which means there is no eligibility for financial aid" (Anonymous, FBBCL1).

The last category commonly discussed amongst participants was the idea of purpose.

Qualified candidates, it was reinforced, want a job that allows them to realize the best version of

themselves. For example, a common stigma narrative is, "If you're smart, you're supposed to

attend a four-year school" (Anonymous, FBBCL1). Therefore, "Even a person that really doesn't

like school, still finds that they are pushed to go to a four-year school" (Anonymous, MBZIL1).

Unfortunately, this participant emphasized that this narrative is "one reason why we see so few

minorities and black people in skilled trades and vocational jobs. It's because of years of

segregation and telling them that they were less than, and this is all they could do" (Anonymous,

MBXIL1).

Finding #2 relates to the second project question:

- How do stigma and perception impact decisions to enter vocational work at AUC?

Finding #2

When individuals are not exposed to the breadth of vocational work options or given the opportunity to personally "try on" or watch others "try on" these options, they are less likely to show interest in vocational job types.

This finding relates to our conceptual framework: This finding most clearly relates to the enactivist principle of autonomy. This finding indicates that while job seekers are autonomous as they navigate their social environment, the ideas and people they interact with within their environment impact them. This negative impact is primarily related to traditional lack of esteem and convenience views of vocational work within the job seeker's environment. In that case, unless interventions are sufficient to close the gap, qualified candidates will not progress to the closeout phase in the PCRF.

Demographic Perceptions

In our qualitative analysis, we found several themes that describe how participants categorize perceptions and sentiments toward vocational careers. The first and most referenced perception is one regarding the ability of one's demographic to impact their perception of vocational work. This category particularly references the power dynamics between decision-makers, such as parents' and guardians' ability to influence student perceptions. For example, one participant states that in AUC's home state, "when a high school student graduates from high school, 42% of those graduates have no post-secondary plan. And that doesn't mean they don't have a plan to go to college. It means they don't have a plan at all. They don't know which jobs to go into" (Anonymous, FWXGL8). Therefore, industry leaders emphasize that to influence

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students, they "start with the students, but really try to bring the parents in and communicate with the parents because at that age, they're [students] not going to make those decisions without their influencer around. So, whoever is an influencer in their life, we [AUC] got to talk to them." (Anonymous, MBXIL1).

Other categories discussed included the more specific impacts of generation, gender, race, and ethnicity on job seeker perceptions. While industry leaders emphasize, "Diversity, equity and inclusion make for a better work environment where you can have diverse ideas," they also understand that achieving diversity goals in vocational roles is challenging for many reasons (Anonymous, MWXIK1). For example, one participant notes that there is stigma around an individual seeking vocational work at an older age (Anonymous, MBYIL1). They emphasize, "Sometimes it's like, oh, this is their second or third chance." In these cases, it is incumbent upon the hiring manager to emphasize that "we [AUC] are an equal opportunity employer," and "although this [vocational jobs] may be perceived as an entry-level job, it doesn't mean they have to be at a younger age" (Anonymous, MBYIL1).

In contrast, one participant notes, "[Their] father's generation, were very dedicated to one company most of their lives, and that's not true now. We live in a nation of instant; everything is instant. And young people don't stay in the same job" (Anonymous, FWXGL8).

In the category of gender, study participants described one challenge of getting more women applicants into vocational work. In these cases, most women they speak with haven't had the experience of seeing female vocational workers in the home context (Anonymous, MWBIA1). Moreover, it becomes even more difficult for women to see themselves in these roles "because most of all [vocational jobs] end with man, lineman, troubleman…They all have the word "man" in it" (Anonymous, MBYIL1). In these cases, participants state, it is important to

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support women with "hands-on activities, and for them to be able to pick up a drill or sit in a mini excavator. That opens the door of opportunity" (Anonymous, MQBIA1).

Lastly, in the race and ethnicity categories, study participants emphasized historical recruitment activities that gave white men more access to vocational roles. Contemporary stigma narratives assign vocational work to people with less academic ability. These narratives still play a role today in the perceptions of racial minority communities with respect to vocational jobs. Industry leaders note, "Half the battle is trying to get them [white men] to understand that we [AUC] can't hire everyone's cousin, brother, or son because we're [AUC] not going to have [a] diverse workforce" (Anonymous, MBXIL1).

All such categories emphasize how job seekers view and categorize themselves compared to others. Moreover, whether a job seeker can gain exposure to new job types and compare them to previous conceptions also matters. As one participant states, it is not uncommon for children in AUC's home state to have a parent that is "multi-generationally removed from work." In this case, the child may have "never seen anyone in [their] life, home, or environment that [they] live in work. And so, overcoming that is a big hurdle" (Anonymous, FWXGL8). These generational disconnects are due to vocational workers experiencing a job or a social category and imbued with a culturally conditioned or constructed sense of self. Our interviews shed light on how individual identity, how one perceives themselves, and one's status within their community influence the jobs they choose for themselves and the jobs they recommend to their loved ones.

In light of this finding, throughout our semi-structured interview protocol, we asked questions like: Does understanding stigma in vocational work rely on a notion of what it is fundamentally or distinctively to be a "vocational worker"? What are the developmental moments in which job and identity intersect? These questions become crucial when we try to

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answer what characterizes a vocational worker's marginalized, distorted, or negated world within various elitist practices.

Vocational Work Sentiment

The narrative analysis identified observable strategies in participants' stories that provided insight into how participants could allow both their experiences of stigma and their experiences of workforce development activities concerning vocational work to coexist in an integrative story. This analysis illuminated how stigma becomes meaningful in their pursuits and experiences of vocational work. Specifically, these participants' stories pointed to three drivers of vocational sentiment.

First addressed were schemas of specific vocational job types described as unprofessional. As one participant states, "It is very much a class system. I'm a white collar [worker]. I have a four-year degree … and then [the] blue collar is, hey, you know, I didn't go to college" (Anonymous, MBXIL1). One study participant emphasizes that a lack of occupational outcome tracking [from post-secondary institutions] reinforces a class system. And so, if you're not required to do that, your focus is on the learner and how you can make them more worldly or give them knowledge in many different areas. And then skills to be an expert in a particular field they might enjoy; but, in the workforce sector, many people have an immediate need for employment. [In that case,] it doesn't matter how worldly you become. If you can't feed your family or yourself, you're in trouble" (Anonymous, FWXGL8).

Next addressed were specific negative sentiments of vocational work compared to work historically termed white-collar or professional. Participants remarked that the baseline of comparison is that "Society says you should go to a four-year college. That's where the cream of the crop goes, and that's what you do if you want to be successful" (Anonymous, MBXIL1). For

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this reason, referring to the existence of stigma around vocational work, participants often made comments such as choosing a vocational career path "was very much looked down upon in a lot of circles, even like a lot of friends, peers, stuff like that," however, when one pursued that path despite those narratives, "years later people [are] like oh, you've made a great decision, and you're pretty much set up for life" (Anonymous, MBXIL1). Therefore, another participant states, "the biggest challenge is just really breaking the stigma of what people may feel like is a blue-collar job, or even a job that is somewhat unsafe to work" (Anonymous, MBYIL1).

Identity impacts perception and sentiment—A Summary

Social identity theory clearly distinguishes a person's behavior toward in-groups and out-groups. Investigating social identity and its impact on the perpetuation of stigma is essential because feelings of stigma can result from a person's sense of attachment to the in-group without making specific ex-ante assumptions about the out-group. Therefore, disentangling job seekers' tendencies to accept stigma regarding vocational work from their sense of social identity is essential, especially concerning the treatment of in-groups versus out-groups.

Studies show that throughout a person's life, they can become aware of an infinite number of social categories in their external environment (Reed and Forehand, 2019). The social categories that exist arise from culture, society, peer groups, and even marketers and are chosen based on relevance to the individual (Reed and Forehand, 2019). In our study, many participants noted that job seekers are often attracted to job types linked to their social identity. This linkage can come about because job types align or symbolize the job seeker's view of themselves, personality traits, or lifestyle. Alternatively, a linkage may arise due to a job seeker's view of their ideal self. In situations where a job seeker is motivated by a view of their ideal self, social

identity can motivate them to form, hold, and express social identity-oriented beliefs (Reed and Forehand, 2019).

Within our research, many participants treated social identity as a variable predicting job seekers' intentions to pursue vocational work. However, many also remarked that in communities where the stigma does not have a stronghold, comfort with variety seeking and diversity appreciation impacts an individual's job choice. Summarizing these perspectives, we find the relation of one's identity to vocational work can either be a *complement* to a skillset they have or aspire to have, a *coincidental* alignment with their lifestyle or work in *coordination* with the job seekers' ideas of what is normal work. More specifically: for individuals who choose vocational work to complement their identity, stigma is less apparent because the job seeker feels entering vocational work enhances or emphasizes qualities or skills they are proud of or tasks they are good at performing. Underscoring this aspect is that vocational work is more likely to be viewed as a positive job type if peers praise it.

For individuals who choose vocational work because of coincidental lifestyle factors, such as transitioning careers and wanting a shorter time to entry, stigma is less influential because of its utility in helping job seekers achieve their ideal version of themselves. Under the branch of coordinated ideas of normality, the data indicates that stigma is less apparent if the job seeker feels participation in vocational job types is typical, is motivated to try something different, or is comfortable being viewed as the other or an outcast.

Finding #3 relates to the third project question:

- What strategies can AUC implement to increase the number of quality applicants?

Finding #3

Community perceptions and reinforced stigma narratives significantly influence potential applicant/job seeker interest in vocational job types. Influencers and people seen as experts are embedded within communities and can reinforce or deconstruct stigmatic narratives regarding vocational work.

This finding relates to our conceptual framework: This finding most clearly relates to the enactivist principle of experience. This finding indicates that when a job seeker's experience of the recruitment process intertwines with their physical and virtual social contexts, it can cause transformational experiences. Job seekers are likelier to test their current classification schemes when couching transformational experiences in understandable and cool terminology instead of only processing new information across the PCRF.

Participants emphasize that strategies leveraging technology are useful for attracting qualified candidates to vocational work. Particularly, over half of the keywords captured in this area included references to social media platforms, new technology, or new ways to use technology to mitigate the effects of vocational work stigma in recruiting quality candidates. For example, one participant states, "I didn't grow up with social media like some of the younger generations did, but even I know that's the way they communicate. Then, that's what you have to use to get through to them" (Anonymous, MWBSW2). Communicating in a modern world includes using paid advertisements to meet the qualified job seeker where they are and deliver the right messaging at the right time to influence their interest in vocational work (Anonymous, MWBIA1),

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Secondly, many participants in this study discussed a need for a rebranding of language used to describe vocational roles and the experiences associated with introduction to vocational roles. For example, "The school systems, especially the secondary and post-secondary, have sort of shifted away from the term vocational and replaced it with career technical" (Anonymous, MWBIA1). This terminology implies the need to set this job type apart from other categories.

Unique community perceptions and reinforced stigmatic narratives within these communities significantly influence potential applicants' and job seekers' interest in vocational job types. Communities contain influencers or people seen as experts who can reinforce or deconstruct stigmatic narratives regarding vocational work. The key stakeholders interviewed agreed on three tactics AUC might use.

- First, they believe that to attract quality applicants, AUC must be specific in their approach and understand what demographic groups carry what perceptions about vocational work.

- Secondly, many agree that to attract quality applicants, AUC must be intentional about the words they use to describe vocational work and the imagery they use to support their message.

- Lastly, many agree that to attract quality applicants, AUC must understand the importance of social status in driving job choice and engage with job seekers in a way they prefer to relate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1

Invert the recruiting funnel to increase the candidate pool's access to personalized roles. Discuss opportunities for advancement early in the recruitment process. Create feedback loops to ensure continuous improvement through timely response to concerns.

Generally, AUC's current recruiting model works as follows:

Step (1)

- Job boards house open requisitions and associated job descriptions.

- Job seekers demonstrate an interest in open positions and apply for vacancies or workforce development training classes.

- Screening mechanisms are employed to reject applicants who do not meet the minimum requirements.

- Written tests, practical exams, and applicant interviews prioritize the top candidates.

- Hiring managers make final decisions regarding which candidate to hire.

- Hiring managers reject the remaining applicants.

- The hiring process ends and only restarts when additional vacancies occur, or managers act to refresh the talent pool.

- The standard process creates a barrier to new hires until new vacancies occur through staffing growth or attrition.

In general, the process repeats until one of the following occurs:

Step (n)

- Rejected job seeker decides not to pursue other vacancies.

- Rejected job seeker applies to their next choice.

- Rejected job seeker reapplies to future openings of previously rejected

  applications.

As seen in **Figure 7**, this model primarily uses recruiting efforts to create a larger candidate pool.

Figure 7: *Standard Recruiting Model*

Potential Employees

Funnel Stages	Descriptions
Talent Search Filling open vacancies or populating talent pools for future job openings.	Demand or contingency staffing requirements drive talent search activities
Applicant Demonstrates Interest and Applies for a Job Vacancy or a Workforce Development Training Class	Candidates seek jobs in which they have an interest
Screening Mechanisms Automatically Reject Applicants not Meeting Minimum Requirements	Processes designed to reject candidates not meeting defined criteria
Written Tests, Practical Exams, and Panel Interviews Prioritize Selection Decisions	Selection processes are used to pick top candidates
Hiring Managers Select the Top Candidate for the Open Position	Candidate hired and others rejected until the vacancy is filled
Process Ends	Process Ends Until New Vacancies Open or the Talent Pool Needs to be Replenished

The algorithm terminates when there are no new job openings, anticipated openings, or until all rejected applicants have exhausted their preference lists. Applicants are influenced by biased employee referrals and organization key performance indicators, including but not limited to diversity goals.

Our first aim in this study was to address a practical question: How can AUC efficiently address barriers to entry to ensure it recruits quality candidates for vocational jobs? We propose that selecting and allocating job seekers is advantageous based on how much their current skillset can support business performance outcomes. Selective recruitment activities involve using market segmentation data to determine appropriate target groups and the content design to attract members of this target group.

In the prescreening parts of the selection process, predictive markers such as surveys identifying job seeker sentiment on the five Ps indicate what job types are preferable to quality candidates. Using a survey to support a filtering approach can decrease the effort required by recruiters and the time to entry of quality candidates.

In addition to fieldwork, we recognize an opportunity for AUC to leverage available technology to identify specific classes of job seekers and meet them where they are in time and space with targeted messages that address the stigmatic narratives barring them from considering vocational work. Marketing techniques using innovative technology will support workforce development leaders and recruiters in identifying a subset of 'sensitive' job seekers who are more likely to respond to pre-defined marketing messages. For example, utilizing search engine optimization tools, AUC can send targeted advertisements to potential candidates, or those working on a potential candidate's behalf, who are searching on common internet websites for terms such as "high paying jobs" or "make money fast" and recommend vocational work by

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citing figures showing an average salary well above the median in an abridged timeframe. Moreover, leveraging randomized discontinuation design, individuals who fail to respond to messages in the first marketing phase could be dropped from the second part, thereby isolating a responsive subset of quality job seekers more likely to enter vocational roles. In a parallel approach, AUC can also enrich a recruited cohort with job seekers more likely to have positive orientations toward vocational work. For example, job seekers who live in communities with a substantial percentage of vocational workers. As our research shows, people from communities with many vocational workers are more likely to be able to envision themselves in those roles.

The recommended recruitment model will follow the steps outlined below, as seen in **Figure 8.**

Step (1)

- Internal organizations, such as the company's workforce development and talent management recruiting teams, continually review the need to populate talent pools. Additionally, external organizations such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), regional community colleges, and economic development agencies, to name a few, work to source candidates.

- Talent recruitment evolves from the standard model to a more proactive and targeted strategy that leverages innovative technology along with advertisement and social media campaigns targeted toward potential applicants and the influencers or decision makers in their social communities.

- Company talent recruiters and workforce development managers continually engage candidates interested in open positions or talent pools. Directed communications and frequent feedback are in the form of media aligning with the

candidate's time and space, e.g., specific social media platforms, influencers, decision-makers, third-party community representatives, etc. Special workshops, simulations, and hands-on real-world activities help candidates better understand the knowledge and skills mastery required for the job while encouraging their hidden capabilities.

- Any candidates who move into the applicant phase continue to receive engaging communications and frequent feedback while undergoing required evaluations to identify potential instead of demonstrated experience. Addressing the approach to experience will acknowledge a common complaint from job seekers about high experience level requirements for entry-level positions.

- Applicant interview processes are modified to help candidates open up and express their potential instead of simply being tools to grade candidates for rejection.

- Applicants selected for open positions are encouraged to participate in individual development plans for career growth in future roles.

- The recommended recruiting model increases the organization's throughput capacity and encourages employees to develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities for entry into future roles.

- This process inverts the standard recruiting funnel. Instead of searching for potential employees, the organization shifts to hiring employees with potential.

In general, the process repeats until one of the following occurs:

Step (n)

- Rejected job seeker decides not to pursue other vacancies.

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- Rejected job seeker applies to their next choice.

- Rejected job seeker reapplies to future openings of previously rejected

  applications.

Filling a vacancy or populating a staffing pool is not the end of the process. A continuous

engagement process provides a pre-qualified candidate pool for future openings.

Figure 8: *Recommended Recruiting Model*
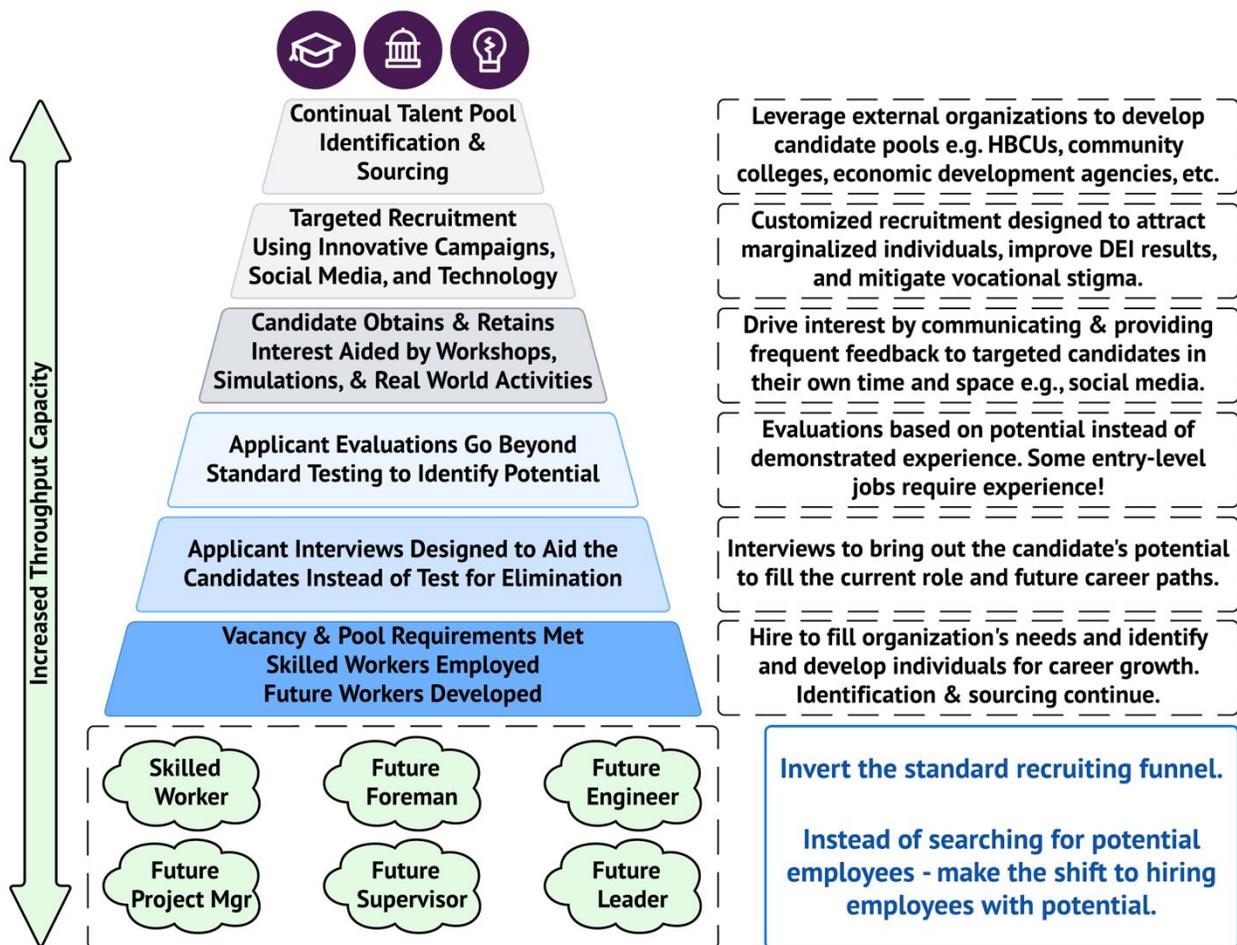
Recommendation #2

Create opportunities for potential applicants/job seekers to participate in self-directed learning regarding vocational roles. These opportunities should involve the ability to "try on" vocational roles in private and progressively in front of others.

Recruitment is a process; as job seekers experience that process, they learn about the organization and the job. Restated, learning in the recruitment process is defined by a series of actions that translates a person's thoughts, knowledge, and senses into an intended behavior—entering a particular job. What a person learns about the value of work and the job types considered valuable within their community is not defined and retained over one short conversation. Instead, a deeply ingrained value system based on long-term retained knowledge makes up a person's value system.

Our second aim in this study is to address a pragmatic question: How can AUC efficiently manage the ideas and perceptions that limit the recruitment of quality candidates for vocational work? We propose that to influence and recruit an individual to a job type that they are unfamiliar with or have negative ideas about, organizations like AUC must design content that gets through an individual's short-term working memory and into the core of knowledge modulating their behavior. For this reason, our recommendation for AUC is to design activities into its recruitment processes with key personalized activities that address the lived experience of learners as they seek a particular workplace and job type.

AUC must recognize that various media platforms constantly pull people's attention in this information age. Recruiting quality candidates requires a messaging strategy that can cut through the clutter. AUC must be able to present the vacant role and its organization as the wisest choice to a job seeker when compared to available alternatives. AUC will be able to

deconstruct stigma by giving job seekers, who hold stigmatic beliefs regarding vocational work, opportunities to try on vocational roles in private or progressively in front of others. Examples include leveraging innovative simulation or metaverse technologies that allow job seekers to interact with and learn from vocational workers outside their community. Simulation platforms will provide the ability for job seekers to shield their identities by using pseudonyms and avatars as they learn more from community members until they are ready to identify themselves and move forward in the recruitment process. This approach has several advantages as it allows AUC to gather feedback systematically regarding what job seekers expect from the workplace. It also provides AUC with more timely data that it can use to adapt its policies and processes.

Additionally, a tactic the team should revisit to engage quality candidates is reviewing their actions to prepare job seekers to transfer newly acquired knowledge into motivation. The recruiting team actively continues this feedback and motivation process until the hiring process is complete. Each event or touchpoint should be seen as a potential catalyst to motivate the job seeker to learn more and align their identity to the organization's values and day-to-day activities. Moreover, as key events occur, the workforce development and recruiting teams should seek to define key performance indicators which show how the process and each touchpoint influence the job seeker's behavior. Updated key performance indicators will support the ability to create more effective forecasting models for recruitment activities as the need to fill distinct roles shifts over time.

Recommendation #3

Create opportunities for potential applicants/job seekers to challenge embedded stigmatic narratives. By crafting experiences with cognitive and emotional charges, potential applicants/job seekers can understand how their perceptions are shaped by socio-cultural forces and begin deconstructing their perspectives' subjectivity.

One of the defining works in career counseling is Frank Parson's (1909) work entitled *Choosing a Vocation*. In this work's introductory note, Parson discusses the primary and secondary "simple truths" of giving expert vocational counsel. These are: "(1) It is better to choose a vocation than merely to 'hunt a job'" and "(2) No one should choose a vocation without careful self-analysis, thorough, honest, and under guidance" (p. vii). These truths are embedded in entrenched sociocultural beliefs that the work someone does has a significant impact on how they experience life and their sense of fulfillment over their lifetime. Moreover, Parson (1909) reinforces that this choice must provide "due regard to each person's aptitudes, abilities, ambitions, resources, and limitations, and the relations of these elements to the conditions of success in different industries" (p. 2). Therefore, the entrenched belief is that your work describes intrinsic qualities and a way for society to categorize your extrinsic value heuristically.

Our third aim in this study was to answer a practical question: What do members of AUC's community believe to be a feasible solution to address stigma and support the recruitment of quality candidates? Our findings support our conclusion that AUC does not fully understate the ability of widespread social sentiments to impact social and economic decisions, such as the job choices of quality candidates. This finding caused us to take another look at our Persuasive Communication Recruitment Framework. Our initial version focused on recruiters as the primary medium by which job seekers learned about AUC and its vocational positions. However, we did

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not consider how other influencers and decision-makers within the job seekers' physical and virtual communities influence a job seeker's attitude. Thus, we believe for the successful recruitment of quality candidates, AUC must create opportunities for potential applicants and job seekers to challenge embedded stigmatic narratives in conversation with people they trust or, if they do not have access to or a bond with vocational workers, with characters whose narratives they can watch develop. Examples are hosting roundtable discussions with influencers and decision-makers, conducting workshops, leveraging technology to provide simulations of possible work environments, and providing "day in the life" videos and ride-alongs. We designed these efforts to invite job seekers and recruiters to lean into career conversations and for job searchers to explore their perceptions of vocational work deeply.

Earlier, as part of our conceptual framework, we described a Persuasive Communication Recruitment Framework we designed based on an integration of the Experientiality of Narrative and Job Choice Models. After careful analysis, we propose an updated or Customized Persuasive Communication Recruitment Framework, see **Figure 9.** This framework is tailored to AUC's current recruitment processes and vocational staffing needs while addressing several barriers to hiring quality workers for vocational jobs.

The customized model differs from the original model, primarily in its proactive and targeted approach to recruiting, customized messaging, methods addressing stigma, frequent feedback, and motivational reinforcement. In Phase 1, the Recruitment Phase, recruiters attract attention to vocational jobs through image enhancement. The recruiters then monitor and measure reactions while addressing questions and concerns about vocational stigma through frequent feedback and discussions with applicants and decision makers (parents, social structures, school counselors, etc.). Applicants that choose not to pursue vacancies with AUC are

once again available to the job market. Recruiters provide those applicants choosing to proceed with organization and industry information and frequent motivational messaging through social media platforms. Targeted messaging encourages applicants to push through remaining vocational stigma concerns with help from recruiters. At this point, recruiters address the applicant's fears and uncertainties about their ability to perform the tasks necessary for the position. Workshops to enhance practical skills, simulations, videos, and interaction with current or retired skilled workers can be used to mitigate those concerns.

Figure 9: *Customized Persuasive Communication Recruitment Framework*
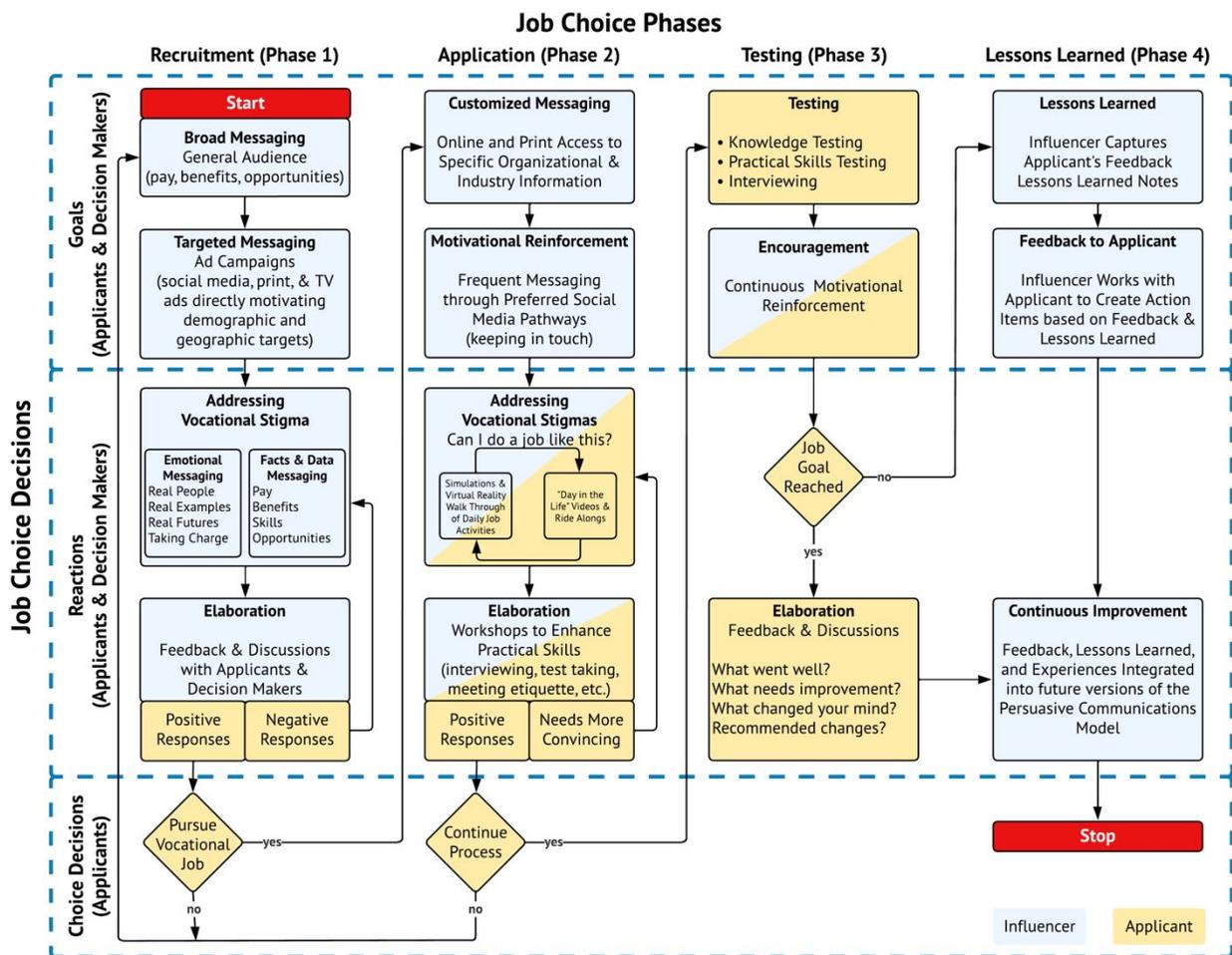
Additional phases encourage recruiters to help applicants become comfortable with knowledge exams, practical skills testing, and interviewing practices. That last phase of the Customized Persuasive Recruitment Framework captures lessons learned for continuous process improvement.

As we recommend using narratives, we define narratives as stories that "contain a plot, characters, and setting" (Bullock, Shulman, and Huskey, 2021). They make information easier to process and facilitate short-term and long-term persuasion (Bullock, Shulman, and Huskey, 2021). We can also compare narratives to non-narrative examples, which "present fact-based information outside of a story format," e.g., fact sheets or news articles.

We believe crafting experiences for job seekers with cognitive and emotional charges can further their understanding of how sociocultural forces shape their stigmatic perceptions. Research informs narratives and shows that "through narratives, an organization can transfer information in a way that makes the content more structured and imaginable," which Bullock, Shulman, and Huskey (2021) state makes narratives "useful devices; for organizing events, illustrating relationships and providing examples." Furthermore, using trusted guides or narratives, AUC can help quality candidates begin to deconstruct the subjectivity of their perspectives.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As AUC considers the recommendations of implementing the targeted and personalized messaging techniques, it must also consider how some populations feel about the organization leveraging their data or search histories to recommend jobs. Additionally, the organization must consider that many applicants who are prime to receive messages regarding the value of vocational work may be minors. In this case, the organization must expand its partnership activities to provide parent- or guardian-approved, age-appropriate, and culturally relevant content. Finally, when recruiting people of color, the organization should consider learnings from the diversity management program section of the literature review. It must be cautious not to embed narratives in its recruitment process that make job seekers feel they are just numbers acquired to meet the organization's benchmarked diversity goals.

Stigma operates within diversity and inclusion frameworks. Brewis (2019) states that diversity is a "discourse about difference; a set of arguments and ideas about what the world is like, who people are, how they relate to one another." Furthermore, as previously discussed, stigma or stigmatization requires this categorization and "othering" to occur. Inclusion, moreover, is about how each "other" works together. Brewis (2019) emphasizes that inclusion "is positioned as the verb of a set of discourses that we might usually refer to be about organizing difference." Therefore, if inclusion is organized as a hierarchy, stigmatized groups exist at the lowest rung and are ascribed the most negligible value. It would be prudent of AUC to understand the potentially far-reaching effects of how stigma influences qualified candidates it wants to recruit and how this discourse affects incumbents.

For example, analyzing how AUC's message to recruit quality workers, promote a more diverse workforce, and help socioeconomically disadvantaged populations can be warranted to

support recruiting efforts for quality applicants for vocational jobs. AUC has a terminal value

goal to create a diverse workforce that reflects the demographic composition of the community.

However, some minorities may fear the stigma of preferential treatment through diversity

management terminal programs such as affirmative action (Gilbert and Stead, 1999; Olson,

2012; Major and Croc, 1994).

CONCLUSION

The communities we grow up in and the people we interact with and learn from significantly impact our views of our ideal selves. Our job choices and career paths are one route we use to create this ideal self, and AUC must build its recruitment process with this in mind. Stigma is not just a mental model where job types are stack-ranked; stigma is a behavior that AUC can track over time. AUC can better understand how qualified candidates' perceptions shift by creating feedback loops among itself, job seekers, stakeholders, and other vital entities.

Moreover, AUC can use this knowledge to position itself relative to these perceptions in a way that supports applicants for more efficient entry. This data can be aggregated and segmented to present job seekers with a personalized view of vocational work they may have never imagined on their own. Consequently, over time we believe that the community members who receive these personalized stories will tell these positive stories to their community members and decrease the overall perception and experience of stigma in vocational work.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Crosswalk of Literature Review Core Principles to Conceptual Framework

Our Crosswalk: Literature Review Core Principles to Conceptual Framework			
Literature Review		Conceptual Framework	
Principles of Life Course Sociology (Zittoun, 2012)	Principles of Habitus (Bordieu, 1984)	Principles of Enactivist Theory (Di Paolo, Rohde, De Jaegher, 2007)	
Life-span Development "Human development and aging are lifelong processes" (p. 2) **Implication:** Job choice preferences continuously evolve.	• The cognitive structures which social agents implement are internalized, 'embodied' social structures. • The practical 'choices' of the sense of social orientation imply no acts of choosing. **Implication:** Job seekers cannot escape the effects of perpetuated stigma narratives on their behavior.	• "Organisms cast a web of significance on their world" (p. 9) • "Being able to influence one's limitations does not imply being able to fully remove them; on the contrary, it means being able to set up new ways of constraining one's actions" (p. 8). • "Cognitive systems are autonomous in terms of their engagement with their environment as agents and not simply as systems coupled to other systems" (p. 8). • "[People] directly participate in the generation of "meaning by their action; they enact a world" (p. 9) • Meaning is not to be found in elements belonging to the environment or in the internal dynamics of the agent but belongs to the relational domain established between the two" (p. 10). **Implication:** Job seekers can uniquely interpret their social contexts but not fully influence their effect on their behavior. Meaning that defines behavior is found within oneself and one's environment.	**Sensemaking**
Agency "Individuals construct their own life courses and the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance" (p. 2). **Implication:** Job choices are impacted by one's perception of available and realistic opportunities.	• Agents are the subjects of acts of construction of the social world • Agents classify themselves in the eyes of other classifying (but also classifiable) subjects, endowed with classificatory schemes analogous to those which enable them to anticipate their classification adequately. **Implication:** Job seekers categorize themselves against others using knowledge of their place in the environment given to them by others.	• "Living organisms are autonomous – they follow laws set up by their activity. Fundamentally, they can only be autonomous by virtue of their self-generated identity as distinct entities." (p. 7-8) • "Autonomy is not a property of a collection of components, but the consequence of a new identity that arises out of dynamical processes in operational closure" (p. 10). **Implication:** Job seekers' identities are accepted, transformed, and enacted autonomously over time. Moreover, identity is formed based on awareness of social context.	**Autonomy**

Our Crosswalk: Literature Review Core Principles to Conceptual Framework			
Literature Review		**Conceptual Framework**	
Principles of Life Course Sociology (Zittoun, 2012)	**Principles of Habitus** (Bordieu, 1984)	**Principles of Enactivist Theory** (Di Paolo, Rohde, De Jaegher, 2007)	
Time and Space "The life courses of individuals are embedded and shaped by historical times and places they experience over their lifetimes" (p. 2). **Implication:** Job choices are influenced by non-personal and personal experience over time.	• Class membership defines social identity at any given time • Historical schemes of perception and appreciation are the product of the objective division into classes (age groups, genders, social classes) and which function below the level of consciousness and discourse. **Implication:** Job seekers' place within society (and their perception of their place) influence their adoption of stigma narratives, despite their awareness.	• "Emergence is used to describe the formation of a novel property or process out of the interaction of different existing processes or events" (p. 10). • "Emergent phenomena, as indicated in the last examples, can be fleeting. Single acts can bear a relation of emergence with respect to their sensorimotor component phases" (p. 11). **Implication:** Effects of stigma narratives on job seeker behavior are context-dependent. Moreover, job seeker behavior can be altered by exposing job seekers to new information or events.	**Emergence**
Timing "The developmental antecedents and consequences of life transitions, events, and behavioral patterns vary according to their timing in a person's life" (p. 2) **Implication:** Job seekers' willingness to consider vocational work depends on their unique short and long-term experiences.	• One's relationship to the social world and to one's proper place in it is expressed in the space and time one feels entitled to take from others and, • The space one claims with one's body in physical space, and, • With one's speech in time, through the interaction time one appropriates and the self-assured or aggressive, careless, or unconscious way one appropriates it. **Implication:** The impact to stigma narratives on stigma narratives on job seekers can be judged by their willingness to show up to discuss the phenomenon and how they discuss the phenomenon.	• "Embodied action is temporally and spatially embedded" (p. 11). • "Embodiment means that mind is inherent in the active, worldful body, that the body is not a puppet controlled by the brain but a whole animate system with many autonomous layers of self-coordination and self-organization and various degrees of openness to the world that create its sense-making activity" (p. 12). **Implication:** Job seekers rely on cognitive and physical experiences (of stigma or otherwise) to inform job choices.	**Embodiment**

Our Crosswalk: Literature Review Core Principles to Conceptual Framework		
Literature Review		Conceptual Framework
Principles of Life Course Sociology (Zittoun, 2012)	Principles of Habitus (Bordieu, 1984)	Principles of Enactivist Theory (Di Paolo, Rohde, De Jaegher, 2007)
Linked Lives — "Lives are lived interdependently, and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared experiences" (p. 2). **Implication:** Job seekers' willingness to consider vocational work is influenced by how vocational workers are treated and talked about.	• All agents in a social formation share a set of basic perceptual schemes, which receive the beginnings of objectification in the pairs of antagonistic adjectives • What individuals and groups invest in the meaning they give to common classificatory systems is done with their whole social being, everything which defines their own idea of themselves, the primordial, tacit contract whereby they define 'us' as opposed to 'them', 'other people', and which is the basis of the exclusions ('not for the likes of us') and inclusions they perform. **Implication:** Job seekers' social context influences how they classify job types and themselves within those job types. This classification scheme includes stigma's current relevance to their current and aspired identity.	• "Experience in the enactive approach is intertwined with being alive and enacting a world of significance" (p. 13). • "Experience is altered as expertise is not obtained through gaining the right kind of *information* but through the right kind of *transformation* – one that can only be brought about by appropriate time-extended training (experimenting, making mistakes)" (p. 13). **Implication:** Changes to job seekers' deeply rooted stigma narratives about vocational work require transformational experiences, where they are allowed to test their current classification schemes, not just provision of new information. — **Experience**

Appendix B: Applicant Goals, Reactions, and Job Choice Decisions

		JOB CHOICE STAGES		
		Job Application	**Maintaining Application Status**	**Job Offer Acceptance**
JOB CHOICE DECISIONS	**Goals Decisions**	• Gather job, organization, and industry information about target company • Decide to pursue one or multiple employment opportunities	• Gather additional information concerning the job in question • Gather additional information about the organization in general	• Clarify terms of employment and total compensation offers • Decide to accept offer • Decide to negotiate terms of the offer
	Applicant Reactions	• Engage with recruiters • Understand and engage with the recruitment process • Search out "non-recruiting" organizational information	• Maintain contact with recruiters • Remain engaged with the recruitment process • Understand the characteristics of the selection process	• Maintain contact with recruiters • Remain engaged with the position acceptance process • Offer acceptance process • Offer negotiation process
	Job Choice Decision	• Decide to apply for a position • Decide to not continue with the application process	• Decide to remain in the applicant pool • Decide to withdraw from the applicant pool	• Decide to accept the agreed upon offer • Decide to decline any job offers

Appendix C: The Elaboration Likelihood Model and Stages of the Job Choice Process
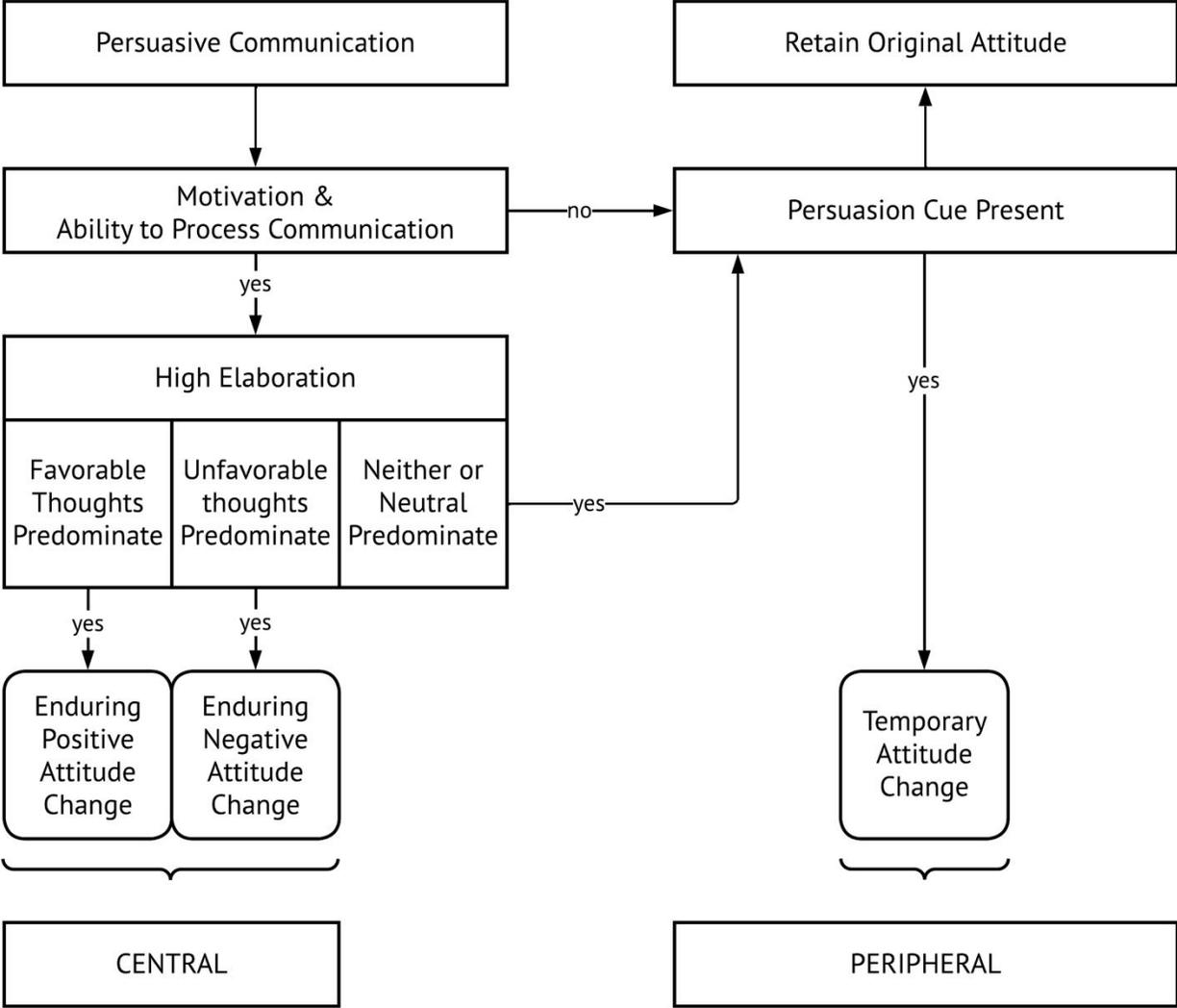
Appendix D: A Priori Qualitative Analysis Mind Map
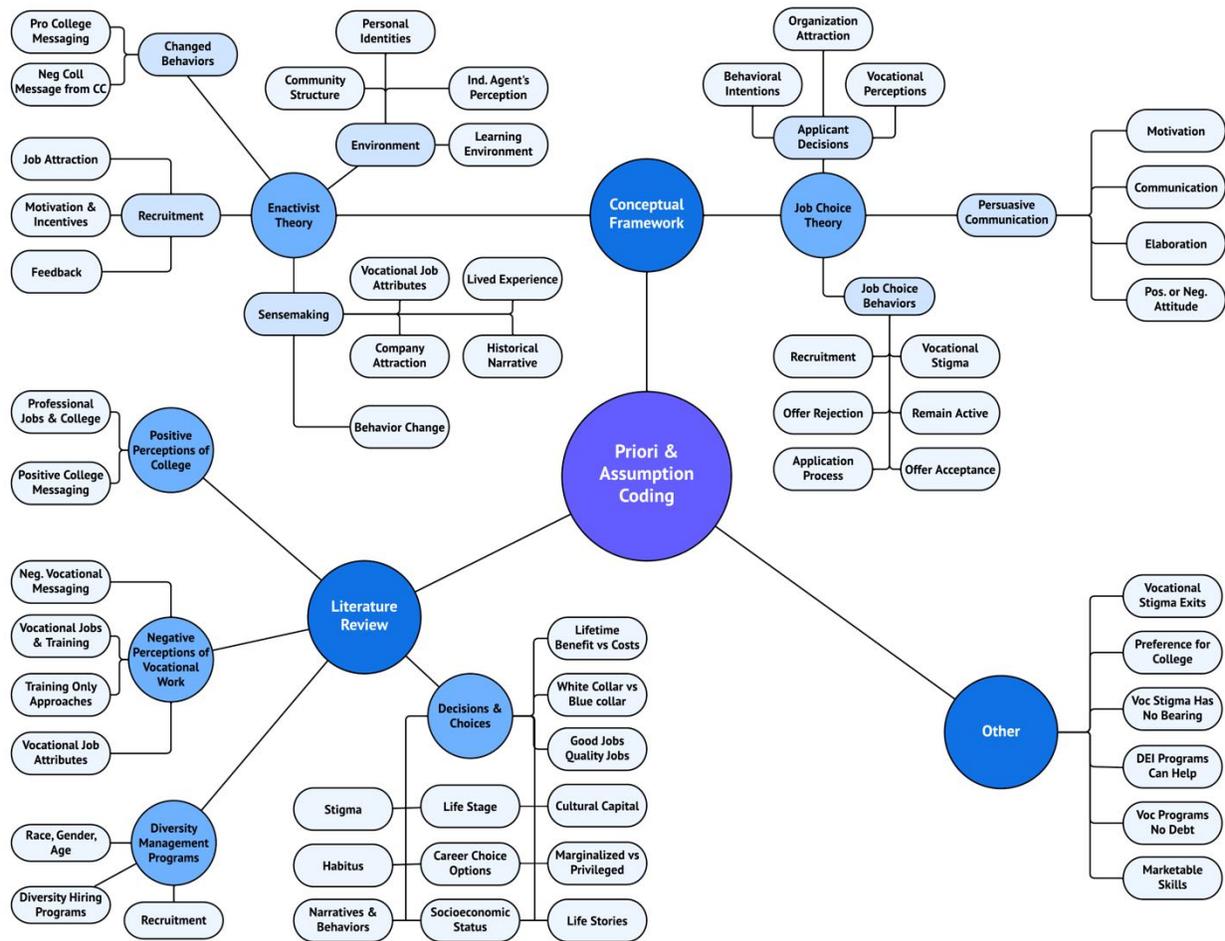
Appendix E: Combined Qualitative Analysis Mind Map
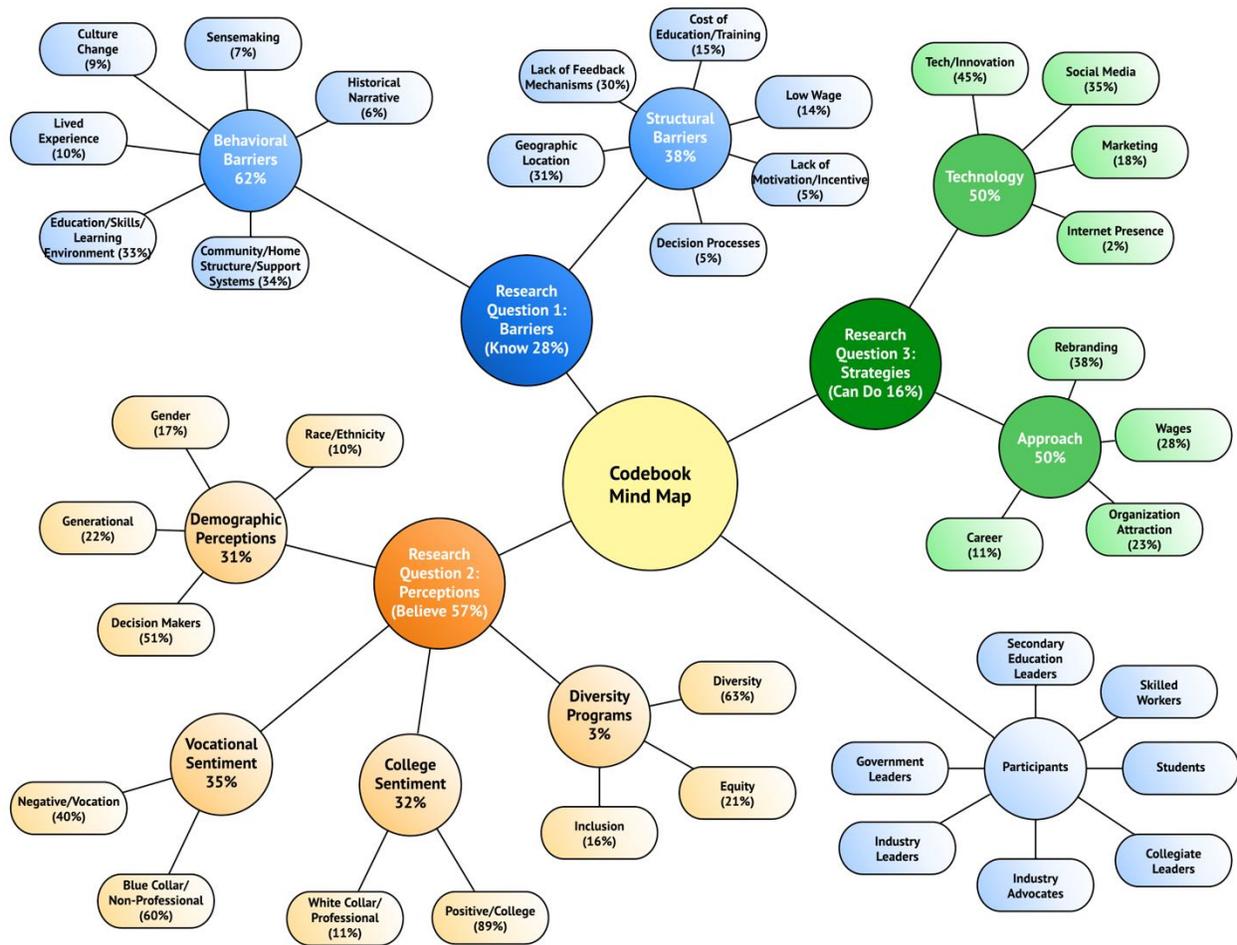
Appendix F: Qualitative Analysis Codebook

Categories	Themes	Threads	Thread Stats	Keywords	Sample Quote
Barriers: Composed of behavioral and structural characteristics contributing to vocational stigma. 28% of the keywords are attributed to this category and reflect "What we think know."	**Behavioral Characteristics:** Reference to behavioral characteristics from the interviewee's viewpoint. 62% of the keywords attributed to the Barriers category fell into the Behavioral Barrier theme.	• Community • Home Structure • Support Systems	Words: 436 Percent: 34% Weight: 3	Included references: • Community • Home (home structure) • Family • Relationships • Support (support structure, systems)	• If you can't feed your family or yourself then you're in trouble. (FWXGL1) • When you think about referrals, when those awareness pieces reach the moms and the dads and the aunts and uncles and the grandmoms, they're the ones that are referring other people in the family that are looking for opportunities to help guide them to the next step in the process. (MWBIA1) • Let's say there are parents or guardians that don't come from an educational background, and I'm speaking from a generational perspective. We still have kids that may be the first in their family to have the opportunity to go to college. And if that student has shown some type of acumen to go to college, whether or not they want to go, they really push that. (MBYIL1) • But there's many different ways to success for everyone. You don't have the resources or the support system, to go into what was your first generation college student? You know, you don't have a family member or someone that can tell you how to do what you need to do to prepare to go to Vanderbilt or Georgia Tech or Emory. So that may not have been possible, but you can do it, even if you don't have the support system in place. So, you have to find

| | | | | | another way until you can figure out how to get there. And that's what we're starting to see now. It's a supply and demand thing where the demand is not so much what it was for your degrees anymore. (MBXIL1)
• Regardless of gender roles, women tend to be the ones that they may have full time jobs, but they're taking care of the home. They're the ones with the kids, and all that. And so, what has happened [pandemic] is that is that daycares are shutting down because they can't find workers, inconsistent school policies, and they're [women] are the ones who are hurting and they come out of the workforce, because they can take care of their family. And so, you're seeing a disproportionate amount of women, who are choosing their family. (FBXIL1) |
| | | • Education
• Skills
• Learning Environment | Words: 429
Percent: 33%
Weight: 3 | Included references:
• Education
• Skills
• Environment
• Learning
• Exposure | • This cultural shift for education went from workers that were very esteemed, hardworking, and all these apprenticeship programs that were time based so that you can kind of grow into an occupation. That's a thing of the past. (FWXGL1)
• If you're a child who could be multi-generationally removed from work, you've never seen anyone in your life in your home or in your environment work. |

| | | | | | And so, overcoming that is a big hurdle. (FBBCL1)
• The stigma around an individual that's at a later age, sometimes it's like, oh, this is their second or third chance. The hardest part from a recruiting standpoint and from a hiring manager perspective, is getting them to realize that we are really, truly, indeed, we are an equal opportunity employer. So, although this may be what we perceive as an entry level job, it doesn't mean they have to be at a at a younger age. (MBYIL1)
• In today's society with digital technology, you have to have more education than was provided in high school. (MBXIL1) |
| | | • Lived Experience | Words: 130
Percent: 10%
Weight: 2 | Included references:
• Lived (lived experience)
• Life (life experiences) | • I don't want my boy to work as hard as I had to. (MWXIL1)
• I've seen historically, parents or guardians that have an educational background. They typically want their children to follow suit. (MBYIL1)
• Those that have experience, awareness and relationships are typically the ones that come into this specific particularly in life. We realized that we had to create awareness. Most minority males and females can't rely on granddad or dad working for the company. (MBYIL1)
• There are still people that are literally clueless on what to do and they're just looking for the next job that's going to |

				pay them 50 cents more, versus going back and getting a short term credential or something at a community college that can literally change the direction and the trajectory of them and their future family and generations. But yet, they just don't know. (MWXIL1)
	• Culture Change	Words: 115 Percent: 9% Weight: 1	Included references: • Culture (cultural change) • Change	• I think industry is trying to catch up, but you know, any change that you are wanting to see, it can't happen faster than how long it took to build that stigma. (MBYIL1) • It's very hard to make sure that we find a very supportive and welcoming culture for them (women) to not feel you know, ostracized and on an island by yourself and you have no other women that work with you and you know, you eventually kind of get pushed away. (MBXIL1)
	• Sensemaking	Words: 96 Percent: 7% Weight: 1	Included references: • Sense (sensemaking) • Peer (peer pressure)	• Some of it [who wants to go to college] might be peer pressure, they [high school students] have no idea what they want to do. But, if you asked that question in that setting, you know, my buddies all raise their hands. So, I'm going to raise my hand as well. (MWBIA1)
	• Historical Narrative	Words: 83 Percent: 6% Weight: 1	Included references: • Narrative (historical narrative, key narrative)	• Typically, with young people, let's say, the high school age students, it's still that American Dream of going to a four-year institution. Most parents, guardians, and grandparents look for their children, regardless of the background, to follow

			• Racial • Race • History • Bias	that model of success, going to a four-year institution. (MBYIL1
Structural Characteristics: Reference to structural characteristics from the interviewee's viewpoint. 38% of the keywords attributed to the Barriers category fell into the Structural Barriers theme.	• Geographic Location	Words: 245 Percent: 31% Weight: 3	Included references: • Area • County • Rural • Town • City • Country • Location • Metro • Geographic • Transportation	• Individuals coming from a rural area, or children of industry, don't see going into the trades on the front end, it's usually a backup plan. (MBYIL1) • If you're in a rural area, transportation tends to be the biggest workforce barrier. (MWBIA1)
	• Lack of Feedback Mechanisms	Words: 238 Percent: 30% Weight: 3	Included references: • Recruit (recruit, recruiting, recruiting strategy, recruitment) • Process • Message (messaging) • Feedback • Outreach • Mentor (mentoring)	• I've had employers say to me, you know, I don't want to hire anybody right out of high school, because they can't do this kind of work. It's not that they can't do the kind of work but it's those other factors that go along with the job that they're not really prepared for. Maybe there needs to be a mentoring type of program that would help them come into that work environment and understand that system. (MWBIA1) • We're mentoring female minority businesses, because someone may go, I want to get there. I'm small. I don't know how to scale up. I don't know how to get there. Well, now we have a mentoring

					program in supplier diversity. You can't just sit back and throw something on a piece of paper and go well, you know, I hope they come to us, and it all works out. No, you got to get up and you got to go engage people and you got to look them in the eye. And you got to help them get there. (MWXIL1)
		• Cost of Education • Cost of Training	Words: 117 Percent: 15% Weight: 2	Included references: • Debt (student loan debt) • Funding • Financial • Cost • Loan (student loan, student loan debt) • Expensive	• The more we've talked to parents…with the rising costs of higher education…parents are much more likely to talk about, their sons and daughters going into an apprenticeship or going into a Career Tech program. (MWBIA1)
		• Low Wage	Words: 113 Percent: 14% Weight: 2	Included references: • Pay (low paying) • Wage (livable wage, minimum wage) • Income • Poor • Poverty • Socioeconomic	• We are talking about students that are living in poverty, you know, like poor and they're hearing these numbers [skilled trade salaries], but they're not putting any type of context around, this could actually transform my family from poor to middle class. We can move into a better neighborhood, you can have access to better health care. (MBXIL1)

		• Lack of Motivation • Lack of Incentive	Words: 42 Percent: 5% Weight: 1	Included references: • Tradition (traditional) • Incentive • Motivation	• Two buckets of people: people who know for sure that they want to go to a 4-year institution after high school (whether or not they have taken the time to reflect on what their motivations are driven by) and people who "just don't know what to do or don't have a game plan". (MBYIL1)
		• Decision Processes	Words: 41 Percent: 5% Weight: 1	Included references: • Decision (decisions) • Choice (choices)	• So, it started off as a negative stigma [Navy career] but trust me, years later people are like oh, you've made a great decision and you're pretty much set up for life. (MBXIL1)
Perceptions & Sentiment: Composed of generational and demographic characteristics that have the potential to impact sentiment toward vocational training/careers, and sentiment toward college/professional careers.	**Demographic Perceptions:** Reference to the need to adjust to a multigenerational workforce. 31% of the keywords attributed to the Perceptions & Sentiment category fell into the Demographic Perceptions theme.	• Decision Makers	Words: 667 Percent: 51% Weight: 4	Included references: • Student (students) • Parent (parent, grandparent) • Mom • Adult • Guardian	• Let's say there are parents or guardians that don't come from an educational background, and I'm speaking from a generational perspective. We still have kids that may be the first in their family to have the opportunity to go to college. And if that student has shown some type of acumen to go to college, whether or not they want to go, they really push that. (MBYIL1) • We start with the students, but we really try to bring the parents in and communicate with the parents because at that age, they're [students] not going to make those decisions without their influences around. So, whoever's a key influencer in their life, we got to talk to them. (MBXIL1)

57% of the keywords are attributed to this category and reflect "What we think we believe."		• Generational	Words: 288 Percent: 22% Weight: 3	Included references: • Old • Children • Young (young, younger) • Gen (gen x, gen y, gen z, generational) • Age • Boomer (baby boomer) • Millennial	• The stigma around an individual that's at a later age, sometimes it's like, oh, this is their second or third chance. The hardest part from a recruiting standpoint and from a hiring manager perspective, is getting them to realize that we are really, truly, indeed, we are an equal opportunity employer. So, although this may be what we perceive as an entry level job, it doesn't mean they have to be at a at a younger age. (MBYIL1) • This new generation, Millennials, Gen Z generation, they just don't know that these careers [socio media technology related] even exist like this. We are in such a social media age and there's so many new jobs, technology wise, that these trades have kind of just really fallen by the wayside? (MBXIL1)
		• Gender	Words: 220 Percent: 17% Weight: 2	Included references: • Man • Women • Female • Gender • Lady • Men • Male • Girl • Boy	• Communicating that message to particularly young ladies that opens them up to seeing [occupations] when they haven't had those experiences at home. Some of these career fairs that we do. They get to do hands on activities, and for them to be able to pick up a drill or to be able to sit in a mini excavator, that opens up the door of opportunity. (MWBIA1) • We want to save we are inclusive, and we want to hire women, we need to change the name of these jobs because most of all in with "man", Lineman,

					Troubleman you know. They all have man on it. So, why you'll hear me refer to it as line worker. I don't call it lineman anymore. And I think those are just some just little things that we can do to kind of show women that we want to be more inclusive and bring them into the workforce. (MBXIL1)
		• Race • Ethnicity	Words: 134 Percent: 10% Weight: 2	Included references: • White • Minority (minorities) • Black • African American • BPOC	• Why would I hire "potential" when I could just hire right now. Minority males or females are quite often going to be behind. That doesn't mean that they cannot do it, but they don't have that experience, awareness, or relationships. (MBYIL1) • Stigma really makes it difficult to create awareness and get people in the craft. Minority males or females, or females in general, because their exposure is just going to be completely different to somebody that's just growing up around it [fathers working in industrial roles]. (MBYIL1)
	Vocational Sentiment: Sentiment toward the value of vocational training programs, vocational careers, or those working toward	• Blue Collar • Non-Professional	Words: 892 Percent: 60% Weight: 4	Included references: • Work (worker, workforce) • Trade (tradesman, tradesmen, trade based)	• The biggest challenge is breaking the stigma of what people may feel like as a blue-collar job. (MBYIL1) • It's still very much a class system. I'm a white collar. I have a four-year degree. It's a class level and then blue collar is hey, you know, I didn't go to college. It's just a different, a different class structure, but it's definitely still there. (MBXIL1)

				Included references	
learning a skilled trade. 35% of the keywords attributed to the Perceptions category fell into the Vocational Sentiment theme.				• Skill (skill set, skilled, skilled trades, skills) • Apprentice (apprentice, apprenticeship) • Craft • Collar (blue collar) • Journey (journeyman, journeymen) • Unprofessional	
		• Negative • Vocation	Words: 594 Percent: 40% Weight: 3	Included references: • Vocation (vocation, vocational, vocational high school, vocational training) • Stigma • Work • Shift • Negative • Hourly • Dirty • Stereotype • Union	• I think inherently there is a stigma, with me having a relationship with these folks. (MBYIL1) • The biggest challenge is just really breaking the stigma of what people may feel like as a blue-collar job, or even a job that's somewhat unsafe to work. (MBYIL1) • College would be the best route for you. So, it was very much looked down upon in a lot of circles, even like a lot of friends, peers, stuff like that. It definitely had a negative connotation to it. So, it started off as a negative stigma but trust me years later on people like oh, you've made a great decision and you're pretty much set up for life. (MBXIL1)

				Included references	
				• Outdoor • VoTech	
College Sentiment: Sentiment toward the value of a college degree or those working toward earning a degree. 32% of the keywords attributed to the Perceptions category fell into the College Sentiment theme.		• Positive • College	Words: 1211 Percent: 89% Weight: 5	Included references: • College (college, community college) • Degree (associate, bachelor, master) • Year (two-year, four-year) • Graduate (graduate, graduated, graduating, graduation) • Positive • University • Academic (academic, academically) • Enrollment (dual enrollment) • Scholarship • Experience (college experience)	• Typically, with young people, let's say, the high school age students, it's still that American Dream of going to a four-year institution. Most parents, guardians, and grandparents look for their children, regardless of the background, to follow that model of success, going to a four-year institution. (MWBGL1) • We're bringing in, you know, $15 to $20 million in scholarships every year for our students to continue on to college. (MWXSL1) • It comes specifically from the state in regards to an academic focus and academic push to be able to send everybody to college. We start talking about college as single path programs from elementary school. Middle school, college programs and preparedness in eighth grade. Academic pathways have been put into place in high schools so everyone can be college ready. (MWXSL1)

				• Junior • Freshman • Sophomore • Senior	
		• White Collar • Professional	Words: 148 Percent: 11% Weight: 2	Included references: • Successful • Collar (white collar) • Salar (salary, salaried, salaries) • Profession (profession, professional) • Educated • Esteemed • Prestige • Privilege (privilege, privileged)	• Society says that you should go to a four-year college. That's where the cream of the crop goes and that's what you do if you want to be successful. (MBXIL1)
	Diversity Programs: Sentiment toward the effectiveness of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and initiatives. (3%)	• Diversity	Words: 77 Percent: 63% Weight: 5	Included references: • Diversity • Diverse (diverse, diverse background, diverse demographic) • DEI	• [while providing an example] You're a black woman, you're military, you're in cyber security, and she makes all the checkmarks for somebody in the company that's trying to add some diversity to your organization. So, it's definitely beneficial to those students that are in those technical fields like that, to get us the most certification. And also, another thing we try to do is give them

	3% of the keywords attributed to the Perceptions category fell into the Diversity Programs theme.				what we call stackable credentials. (MBXIL1) • They want to hire every son, cousin, and brother. It's great money and a great opportunity. Half the battle is trying to get them understand that well, we can't hire everyone's cousin, brother, or son because we're not going to have diverse workforce. So, we had to be much more intentional to hire other people as well. (MBXIL1)
		• Equity	Words: 26 Percent: 21% Weight: 3	Included references: • Equal (equal, equal opportunity) • Equity	• The stigma around an individual that's at a later age, sometimes it's like, oh, this is their second or third chance. The hardest part from a recruiting standpoint and from a hiring manager perspective, is getting them to realize that we are really, truly, indeed, we are an equal opportunity employer. So, although this may be what we perceive as an entry level job, it doesn't mean they have to be at a at a younger age. (MBYIL1) • Diversity, equity, and inclusion makes for a better work environment where you can have diverse ideas. It's the diversity of ideas, of thinking, of gender. All that makes for a better company. (MWXIL1)
		• Inclusion	Words: 20 Percent: 16% Weight: 2	Included references: • Inclus (inclusion, inclusive)	• School systems have come to realize, slowly but surely, that they're being much more inclusive of the student that is pursuing technical education, encouraging it because it's the economic driver. (MBXIL1)

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					• We want to save we are inclusive, and we want to hire women, we need to change the name of these jobs because most of all in with "man", Lineman, Troubleman you know. They all have man on it. So, why you'll hear me refer to it as line worker. I don't call it lineman anymore. And I think those are just some just little things that we can do to kind of show women that we want to be more inclusive and bring them into the workforce. (MBXIL1)
Strategies: Composed of technology and approaches found to be useful for attracting highly qualified candidates to vocational training and vocational trades. 16% of the keywords are attributed to this category and reflect What we think we can do	Technology: References to social media platforms, new technology, or new ways to use technology to mitigate the effects of vocational stigma in recruiting and when trying to attract high-quality candidates into vocational programs and careers. (50%)	• Tech • Innovation	Words: 269 Percent: 45% Weight: 4	Included references: • Tech (technical, technology) • Innovation	• Many of the vocational jobs we see today have very technical aspects to them that the common person probably doesn't recognize. (MWBSW1)
		• Social Media	Words: 210 Percent: 35% Weight: 3	Included references: • Social (social media) • Media (social media)	• I didn't grow up with social media like some of the younger generation did, but even I know if that's the way they communicate, then that's what you have to use to get through to them. (MWBSW2)
		• Marketing	Words: 109 Percent: 18% Weight: 2	Included references: • Marketing • TV • Message • Campaign (ad campaigns) • Commercials • Sell	• We spend roughly a million dollars a year with our marketing contract and probably over half of that is paid media. Some of that is always going to have that student/parent focus. But we also have a focus on adults as well. We've always looked at the classification of individuals that were under employed. How do we connect with those
about the problem."	50% of the keywords attributed to the Strategies category fell into the Technology theme.			• Television	individuals? More and more digital ads because it allows us to really target those various audiences. (MWBIA1)
		• Internet Presence	Words: 14 Percent: 2% Weight: 1	Included references: • Internet • Web (web, website, websites)	• On the website we have all the information. When we go on site at a high school or a career fair, we do a presentation in the classroom, and we have a handout that breaks everything down. (MWBIA1)
	Approach: References to approaches found to be best practices. 50% of the keywords attributed to the Strategies category fell into the Approach theme.	• Rebranding	226-38% (3)	Included references: • Technical (career technical education, technical education) • Junior (Jr., junior college) • STEAM • Brand (brand, rebranded, rebranding) • Image (image enhancement) • Continuing (continuing education) • Upskill • STEM • Middle (middle skilled)	• The school systems, especially the secondary and post-secondary have sort of shifted away from the term vocational, and they replaced it with career technical. (MWBIA1) • We were created by the state legislature, our agency name is the XXXX Construction Recruitment Institute. Our marketing image enhancement campaign is Go Build XXXX. We want everybody to remember Go Build XXXX, so you don't see a lot of the ACRI or the agent. (MWBIA1) • These trades have kind of just really fell by the wayside. And they are what I consider, you know, old man jobs. Even the names of skilled trades and apprenticeships, like those are terms that we've been used for over 50 plus years. My big complaint, I say we need a rebranding right. We need to, you know, call these professionals. Don't call them skilled trades like these are actually

				• Technical (technical institute) • Skills (skills based)	professionals. They make great money. (MBXIL1) • When you look at the state of XXXX, where we have all these automotive manufacturer companies, many jobs don't require a four-year degree, or two-year degrees. I have a nephew who did not go to college period, and he makes more money than someone who just got a four-year degree. So, in XXXX, it really hadn't been stigma with it as much. And what we tried to do make it sound real, you know kind of cool, because think about an area of IT and robotics and all that jazz. You get robotics and IT in manufacturing, and robotics and IT in healthcare. And so, what is happening now is that the awareness and the education has gone on to making, not only our eighth through 12th graders aware, but even those adult learners who want to move into other jobs. (FBXIL1)
		• Wages	165-28% (3)	Included references: • Money • Pay (good pay, well paying) • Raise • Earnings • Wage (competitive	• With young people that really have no background in the trades, they get to see the overall value of it. Yes, it could be contingent upon the space that you're in the dirty job, long hours. But you know, at the end of the day, as we look at the pandemic, none of these people ever stopped working and they make very good livable wages and have job security. (MBYIL1)

				wage, competitive wages) • Income (income potential)	• So that's when we start talking about the career opportunities. You know what they can do in that career field, the potential to earn income potential, as they matriculate through the lineworker field because once you finish your apprenticeship and you're a journeyman, you're at $100,000 a year. So, you're just barely four years removed from college, the same as your peers. They went to a four-year college with $80,000 to $90,000 of debt, you have zero debt, you're making a six figure salary, right? (MBXIL1)
		• Organization Attraction	136-23% (3)	Included references: • Job (good job, great job) • Benefits (great benefits) • American Dream • Pay (good pay, great pay)	• There's more to a good job than just pay and benefits, with today's generation, the job has to provide a certain quality of life and lead somewhere. The days of just grinding through 40 years to retirement are a thing of the past. (MWXCL1)
		• Career	68-11% (2)	Included references: • Market (marketable, marketable skill)	• When you came out of the Navy, you've got a career, marketable skills, a retirement, and it led into another career. (MBXIL1) • Leading the effort working with our internal customers, looking at those opportunities and how we can be proactive in developing the workforce.

				• Ladder (career ladder, career lattice) • Career (career opportunity, career opportunities, career path) • Growth • Pipeline (pipeline development)	We focus on the people development internally, our people as well as trying to bring in new folks and looking at the holistic approach to diversity and inclusion and equity as a part of that as well too. (MWXIL1)
	Category	**Gender**	**Race**	**Generation**	
Participant Demographics	Industry Leaders	F = 1 M = 3	B = 3 W = 1	Boomer = 0 Gen X = 3 Gen Y = 1 Gen Z = 0	
	Government Leaders	F = 1 M = 1	B = 0 W = 2	Boomer = 1 Gen X = 1 Gen Y = 0 Gen Z = 0	
	Industry Advocates	F = 0 M = 1	B = 0 W = 1	Boomer = 1 Gen X = 0 Gen Y = 0 Gen Z = 0	
	Collegiate Leaders	F = 1 M = 2	B = 1 W = 2	Boomer = 2 Gen X = 1 Gen Y = 0 Gen Z = 0	
	Secondary Education Leaders	F = 2 M = 1	B = 0 W = 3	Boomer = 0 Gen X = 3 Gen Y = 0 Gen Z = 0	

	Skilled Workers	F = 1 M = 2	B = 0 W = 3	Boomer = 2 Gen X = 0 Gen Y = 1 Gen Z = 0	
Notes:	• All keywords are listed in order of frequency, high to low. • Listed keywords have been aggregated to accommodate variations found in the interview transcripts. • Keywords found in interviewer questions and comments have been excluded from the coding process.				

Appendix G: Interview Guide

Interview Introductions
Interviews include introductions, an overview of the study, a brief discussion regarding the value of the participant's information, and specific discussions related to:
- Interview length
- Voluntary, confidential, and anonymous participation
- Safe space for discussions
- Permissions to use recorded audio to capture transcript data for coding only

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Perspectives from Utility Management and Community College Leaders
In alignment with our study's first goal, interviews will shed light on the decisions and choices within the vocational recruitment process that potential applicants face before job offers are extended. In addition, discussions are initiated to obtain background information.

Study Alignment: Background Information / Project Question 1
Conceptual Framework Alignment: Job Choice Theory

- Tell me about your current role here at the company/college.
  - Have you been in this job for very long?
    - What do you think about the length of time you've been in this role? Is it too short, too long, or just about right?
  - What about your specific job responsibilities, are they clearly defined, or do you find you're often tasked with doing much more than what was listed in your job description?
    - Have these responsibilities changed before you had this job or while serving in this position?
  - Describe your career path and how it brought you to this point in your career.
    - Is this what you thought you would be doing at this point in your career?
    - What were the critical milestones along your journey?
- Let's shift the discussion to vocational jobs and vocational job recruitment. Tell me about your experiences participating in or even leading vocational recruitment processes.
  - If you were a participant earlier in your career, I would like to hear about your feelings on the process. Explain how you felt you were treated during those experiences.
  - As a leader, tell me how you manage a candidate's expectations or provide feedback when recruiting them into vocational roles or education programs.
  - What about any stories you remember from friends or colleagues who may have had vocational jobs, been involved in vocational recruiting processes, or even participated in vocational recruitment?

- Earlier, you talked about your professional journey.
  - Tell me more about how you've seen the recruitment process for vocational jobs or training programs transform over time.
  - Organizations always have some strengths; can you tell me more about what you think the company's/college's strengths are related to recruiting workers into vocational jobs or programs?
  - Since nothing is perfect, describe any limitations or challenges the company/college has faced as they tried to recruit workers into vocational jobs or programs.
- Some of the studies we've reviewed indicate it's becoming increasingly difficult to recruit people into vocational jobs or workforce development programs like electrical line work.
  - Think back to your career experience and tell me about any barriers you've seen or experienced related to recruiting a quality vocational workforce.

In alignment with our study's second goal, interviews will shed light on the experiential interaction between negative stigma and applicants. Our interview questions insist on the situated, embodied qualities of applicant engagement with the stigma associated with vocational work to derive how meaning emerges from the experiential interaction between stigma and applicants.

Study Alignment: Project Question 2
Conceptual Framework Alignment: Elaboration Likelihood Model

- Now let's focus more on stigma, especially concerning identifying individuals as blemished. For example, sometimes people who experience stigma often feel labeled, stereotyped, and experience status loss or even discrimination due to distinguishable or unique characteristics, e.g., you don't have a college education, do outside work, perform manual labor, or you're a Blue-Collar worker. This type of stigma can even apply to those in White-Collar jobs depending on how they approached their career path or when they received postsecondary education, e.g., someone who worked their way up the ladder to a corporate job or attended college later in life.
  - Thinking about this type of stigma, tell me about some examples of stigma you've seen or heard of as you've moved through your career.
  - Do you think any of these examples changed your way of thinking about your career or forced you or someone you know to seek a different career path?
- Think of any vocational-related roles or program slots you have now or recently filled.
  - Do you think there is any stigma associated with these positions?
    - How about from the candidate's perspective?
    - How about from the recruiter's viewpoint?
    - What about company management views?
    - What about a college leader's view?
    - Think of the perspectives of other roles in the business or college that

interact with these jobs or programs. What are your thoughts on how those roles may view vocational workers or vocational workforce development program students through the lens of stigma?

- We talked earlier about possible barriers.
  - o Can you describe your thoughts on breaking down those barriers over time through open discussion or changes in the workplace/college?
  - o Do you think some of the barriers are being reinforced instead or addressed?
- Do salary ranges ever come into the discussion when addressing stigma related to vocational work or education programs?
- Give me some specifics about groups where you think stigma seems more deeply entrenched.
- Tell me about some of the stories you hear from these groups about the stigma associated with vocational work impacts their way of thinking.

In alignment with our study's third goal, our final set of interview questions focuses on improvement opportunities.

Study Alignment: Project Question 3
Conceptual Framework Alignment: Persuasive Communication Framework

- In your opinion, how important is it for the company/college to address the stigma associated with vocational jobs?
  - Is it a critical must-do or a nice-to-do if there's ever time?
- Do you think the company/college has placed the same importance on stigma as it does on diversity, equity, and inclusion?
  - o If yes, please describe some examples.
  - o If not, please explain why you think the company/college sees the stigma associated with vocational work as less important than diversity, inclusion, or equity issues.
- Now, let's talk about some additional strategies the company/college could implement to address the stigma regarding vocational work or education.
  - Tell me how you have seen the company/college address stigma and barriers related to vocational work.
    - If the company/college isn't already using these strategies, why do you think that is?
- Tell me about your thoughts on the implications of not fully addressing stigma related to vocation jobs or education.
  - Tell me how this could impact the recruitment process for company jobs or workforce development programs.
  - Let's talk about retaining employees in vocational-related jobs.
    - Do you think the stigma impacts someone already in a vocational job who wants to stay in that career?
    - What about an employee who wants to change their career path through

a job change or a vocational workforce development program?
- Share with me how you think this will impact the creation and management of new workforce development programs.
- We've discussed some things that are working and some challenges the company/college has related to recruiting candidates into vocational-related jobs or education programs.
    o Is there anything we haven't touched on today?
    o Anything that we are forgetting or that you would like us to know?
- One final question (optional).
    o What was your approach to career discussions with your children?
        ▪ Did you steer them away from or towards vocational jobs?
        ▪ Did you want them to get a college degree and a White-Collar job?

Perspectives from Employed Vocational Workers

In alignment with our study's first goal, interviews will help shed light on the series of decisions and choices in the vocational recruitment process applicants face before accepting the job offer.

Study Alignment: Background Information / Project Question 1
Conceptual Framework Alignment: Job Choice Theory

- Tell me about your current role here at the company.
    o Have you been in this role for very long?
    o What do you think about the length of time you've been in this role? Is it too short, too long, or just about right?
    o Is this a position you think you'll stay if for the rest of your career with the company, or do you plan on changing jobs at some point in the future?
- Explain to me how you describe your job, in general, to other people.
- Tell me about some things people don't understand about your job and vocational work.
- Is this job one you decided to pursue at an earlier age, or did it just come about over time?
- Let's talk more about how you chose to enter the vocational workforce.
    o Was this type of work something you wanted to do at an early age?
    o Describe how input from your family, friends, teachers, and others impacted your decision to go into vocational work.
    o Were there other considerations that affected your decision, e.g., family history or considerations, personal preferences, geographic location, ability/inability to relocate, cost of education, etc.?
- Tell me about some of your career highlights or accomplishments that you've

experienced.
- o Any challenges?

In alignment with our study's second goal, interviews help shed light on the experiential interaction between stigma and applicants. Interview questions will insist on the situated, embodied qualities of applicant engagement with the stigma associated with vocational work to derive how meaning emerges from the experiential interaction between stigma and applicants.

Study Alignment: Project Question 2
Conceptual Framework Alignment: Elaboration Likelihood Model

- Thank you for sharing your experience. Now let's focus more on stigma, especially as it relates to identifying individuals as blemished. For example, sometimes people who experience stigma often feel labeled, stereotyped, and experience status loss or even discrimination due to distinguishable or unique characteristics, e.g., you don't have a college education, do outside work, perform manual labor, or you're a Blue-Collar worker.
- Our objective is to address the stigma that some workers may experience when entering the vocational workforce, and we were wondering if you have experienced any stigma yourself.
    - o Thinking of this type of stigma, tell me about some examples of stigma you've seen or heard of as you've moved through your career.
    - o Do you think any of these examples changed your way of thinking about your career or forced you or someone you know to seek a different career path?
- Describe to me what you wish you had known before entering this vocation.
- Let's talk more about some of your challenges in your role.
    - o Do you think some of these challenges came about because people have a particular perception of the type of work you do?
- Tell me how you describe your job when you talk to others about possible opportunities.
    - o Do you actively promote this type of work?
    - o Do you go out of your way to recommend this work to others?
    - o When discussing your work with others who may be making decisions about their career, do you talk about salary and benefits?
- Describe some of the discussions you've had with others over the years and the stigma associated with vocational work played into their career decisions.
    - o Do you think stigma impacts their willingness to enter the vocation?
    - o Are there any communities or groups of individuals where stigma has more substantial effects on their decision to enter the vocation?
- Let's talk more about your career.
    - o At this point in your career, do you think the stigma associated with vocational

work has any impact on your future career choices?
- o How about anyone you talk to? Tell me about cases in which the stigma associated with vocational work impacted their decisions.

In alignment with our study's third goal, our final set of interview questions focuses on improvement opportunities.

Study Alignment: Project Question 3
Conceptual Framework Alignment: Persuasive Communication Framework

- In your opinion, how important is it for the company to address the stigma associated with vocational jobs?
  - o For example, is it a critical must-do or just a nice-to-do if there's time?
  - o Do you think the company has placed the same importance on stigma as it does on diversity, equity, and inclusion?
    - If yes, please describe some examples.
    - If not, please explain why you think the company sees the stigma associated with vocational work as less important than diversity, inclusion, or equity issues.
- Now, let's talk about some additional strategies the company could implement to address stigma when it comes to vocational work.
  - o Tell me how you have seen the company address stigma and barriers related to vocational work.
- Why do you think that is if the company isn't already using these strategies?
  - o Tell me about your thoughts on the implications of not fully addressing stigma related to vocation jobs.
    - Share with me how you think this could impact the recruitment process for company jobs.
    - Let's talk about retaining employees in vocational-related jobs.
      - Do you think the stigma impacts someone already in a vocational job who wants to stay in that career?
      - What about an employee who wants to change their career path through a job change or through a vocational workforce development program?
      - Share with me how you think this will impact the creation and management of new workforce development or training programs.
- We've discussed some things that are working and some challenges the company has related to recruiting candidates for vocational-related jobs.
  - o Is there anything we haven't touched on today?
  - o Anything that we are forgetting or that you would like us to know?
- Have you ever been asked to give feedback on vocational work before?
- Describe to me how you think you could improve the experience for yourself or

someone else when dealing with the stigma of vocational work.
- One final question (optional).
    - What was your approach to career discussions with your children or family members?
        - Did you steer them away from or toward vocational jobs?
        - Did you want them to get a college degree and a White-Collar job?

Perspectives from Prospective Entrants

In alignment with our study's first goal, interviews will shed light on the series of decisions and choices within the recruitment process applicants face before job offers are extended.

Study Alignment: Background Information / Project Question 1
Conceptual Framework Alignment: Job Choice Theory

- Tell me about your career plans. Describe your near-term goals and your long-term goals.
- Do you plan to move into the workforce, or do you plan to pursue a technical or college education first?
- Describe any discussions you've had with friends, family, counselors, recruiters, or others possibly pursuing a vocational career.
    - Have any of these discussions changed your were previously thinking?
    - Do your interests drive your career plans?
    - Tell me about the pressure others are putting on you to get certain types of jobs.

In alignment with our study's second goal, interviews will shed light on the experiential interaction between stigma and applicants. Our interview questions insist on the situated, embodied qualities of applicant engagement with the stigma associated with vocational work to derive how meaning emerges from the experiential interaction between stigma and applicants.

Study Alignment: Project Question 2
Conceptual Framework Alignment: Elaboration Likelihood Model
- Thank you for sharing. Now let's focus more on stigma, especially as it relates to identifying individuals as blemished. For example, sometimes people who experience stigma often feel labeled, stereotyped, and experience status loss or even discrimination due to distinguishable or unique characteristics, e.g., you don't have a college education, do outside work, perform manual labor, or you're a Blue-Collar worker. This type of stigma can even apply to those in White-Collar jobs depending on how they approached their career path or when they received postsecondary education, e.g., someone who worked their way up the ladder to a corporate job or attended college later in life.

- Our objective is to address the stigma that some workers may experience when entering the vocational workforce, and we were wondering if you have experienced any stigma yourself.
  - Thinking of this type of stigma, tell me about some examples of stigma you've seen or heard of from others as you've thought of your career plans.
  - Do you think any of these examples changed your way of thinking about your career?
- Has anyone talked to you about the pay and benefits of vocational work compared to other types of jobs?
- Describe to me how important you think it is to have a marketable skillset as you deal with the unknowns in your chosen career.
- Think about your vision of success and describe to me what that success looks like.
  - How do you define it?
  - What drives this belief?

In alignment with our study's third goal, our final set of interview questions focuses on improvement opportunities.

Study Alignment: Project Question 3
Conceptual Framework Alignment: Persuasive Communication Framework

- Based on your experience, explain what you think could be done to make entering a vocational workforce development program or vocational work a more attractive option.
- Can you tell me about any attributes of vocational work the people around you don't understand?
- Explain how you've been approached by family, teachers, counselors, and others concerning having a Blue-Collar job versus a White-Collar job.
- What do you think could be done to help debunk or address the stigma surrounding vocational work in your community?

Closing Statements

We anticipate that our recommendation to APC will include marketing tactics that include narratives that resonate with their target population.

Study Alignment: Project Question 3
Conceptual Framework Alignment: The Experientiality of Narrative

- Inform the prospective entrant of the objective of our study (to understand the role of stigma in the recruitment of vocational workers).
- Explain that we are obtaining salient narratives from key perspective groups.
- Provide the prospective entrants with the derived narratives.

- For each narrative, ask the prospective entrant:
  - Whether the narrative resonates with them. Why or why not?
  - Whether the narrative impacts their motivation to enter vocational work? If so, how?
  - Whether the narrative is pervasive within their community? If so, where do they believe it stems from?
    - How would they describe their community?
  - What can be done to combat the stigmatic narrative? Motivate more entrants into vocational work?
- Ask the prospective entrant if there is anything we haven't touched on today they would like us to know.
- Thank the prospective entrant for their participation.