

# Invisible Value of Postsecondary Career and Technical Education: A Qualitative Perspective

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## **Abstract**

The recent calls for increased accountability in higher education, and the rising demand for workers with middle skills, have combined to raise public awareness of the critical role of community colleges in educating the workforce. The accountability measures used by the institutions in answering this call, completion and retention rates, may not be appropriate for community colleges, particularly for the career and technical education (CTE) programs that focus on workforce development (Hagedorn, 2012; Jenkins, 2011; Mullin, 2012; West, et al., 2012; Yorke & Longden, 2004). Compounding that inappropriateness is the belief, held by many postsecondary CTE faculty and leaders, that students in those programs leave, without earning the related certificate or degree, because they have become employed using the skills gained through participation in the program.

Those employment outcomes may be the very success being sought by the students. This divergence between the institutional and student definitions of success is described in the existing literature on student success: retention and completion are the measures implemented by institutions (Yorke & Longden, 2004); while persistence and achievement are the measures from the students' perspective (Mortenson, 2012; Tinto, 2012a).

Working in a constructivist framework, this study used guided narrative interviews with former CTE students, from one California community college, to gain understanding about their employment outcomes, program attributes that contributed to their success, and the relevance of the available certificates. The sample of students was drawn from the population responding to the CTE Employment Outcomes Pilot Study (The RP Group, 2012) survey administered at the

college. The findings from the study, in alignment with existing student success literature, revealed five program attributes that contributed to the students' construction of their own success – impassioned faculty, engaged classmates, applied learning, connections between the classroom and business world, and the relevance of coursework to the world of work.

Using these themes, this study proposes a theoretical model, *Student Success Construction Theory*, for framing the ways in which postsecondary CTE students construct success. The model includes three elements critical to the students' success: (a) career ignition, (b) self-efficacy, and (c) education networks.