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THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT:

A CASE STUDY EXAMINING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION PERCEPTIONS OF
ANYTOWN HIGH SCHOOL CONSTITUENTS

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THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT:
A CASE STUDY EXAMINING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION PERCEPTIONS OF
ANYTOWN HIGH SCHOOL CONSTITUENTS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examined how students at a rural Oklahoma high school make concurrent enrollment decisions between a local community college and a regional career technology center. The study explored how adult perspectives on higher education and career technical education shape the guidance students receive and influence their post-secondary choices. Interviews with students, parents, and educators revealed that adults and students often used similar language but seemed to operate from different assumptions. Adults described concurrent enrollment as a practical means to earn high school dual credit, save money and secure future employment. They worried about student readiness and potential burnout. Students echoed those ideas but approached the process as a way to move quickly toward independence and avoid economic insecurity. Their concerns were largely about saving their families money and navigating the systems to successfully complete concurrent courses. Few participants encountered perspectives that questioned shared beliefs institutional reputation and perceptions of value, suggesting cognitive bias and feedback loops may be useful to discuss the findings. Findings also showed that advising practices may be reinforcing long-standing bias in favor of academic pathways despite all adult participants expressing positive views of CTE. Limited professional development, strong community consensus, and centralized decision-making may have created feedback loops that reproduced familiar enrollment patterns. As Oklahoma expands concurrent enrollment and elevates career technical education as a workforce initiative, these findings highlight the need for advising practices that are both equitable, developmentally responsive, and intentional in the use of data to drive decision-making. The study provides a

framework for considering how rural advising cultures shape student decision-making and offers practical strategies for helping educators create environments that encourage analysis, autonomy, and informed choice.

Dedication

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” — William Butler Yeats

This work would never have happened if my parents hadn’t sparked the fire and fanned the flames of my curiosity. Thank you for being my safety when I thought I’d fail, and thank you for being my courage to try one more time.

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Contributors and Funding Sources

Contributors

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All other work conducted for the dissertation was completed by the student independently.

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Nomenclature

AHS	Anytown High School
SCSC	South Central State College
ATC	Astronaut Technology Center
CTE	Career and Technical Education
HE	Higher Education
OSRHE	Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education
ODCTE	Oklahoma Department of Career and Technical Education

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Chapter I Introduction

Late in 2023, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt signed an executive order effectively discouraging diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programming from state agencies, including higher education (HE) institutions (Ferguson, 2025). A representative for Governor Stitt's office criticized the University of Oklahoma (OU) for an education class focused on social justice curricula: "Our universities need to be preparing students for the workforce, not indoctrinating them with liberal ideology" (McDonald, 2024, para. 4). This prioritization of workforce education over HE is not unique to Oklahoma. Figure 1 illustrates one take on contemporary American phenomena like the student loan crisis and decreased critical thinking scores among college graduates. While it is unlikely that most Americans base their post-secondary education decisions on memes, the existence of such memes highlights the barriers to and the exorbitant cost of completing college degrees have seeped into the consciousness of the nation (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Figure 1 *Social Science Degree vs. Tech School*

Social Science Degree vs. Tech School



Note. From Social science degree versus tech school [Digital image], 2018, Imgflip.

In examining the student loan crisis, Goldrick-Rab (2016) discussed a study of 3,000 college students. The results were grim. Half the students left without a college degree, and fewer than 20% completed within five years. The financial toll of attending school and the resultant student loan debt crippled students' abilities to focus on education. Unfortunately, this reality of 21st-century American HE has led some to direct students toward workforce education degrees like healthcare (OSRHE, 2023a) and persuaded politicians, like Governor Stitt, to believe that colleges are directing students to "4-year degree[s] in something stupid," an attitude common enough to inspire memes (Social Science, 2018).

Governor Stitt is correct, however, that educational pathways are crucial to rural Oklahoma's economic mobility and workforce development. Oklahoma's State Chamber of Commerce cited business owners' concerns about struggling to fill 40,000 open positions with qualified applicants (Oklahoma Commerce, 2023). Generally, all postsecondary education in the United States (US) is considered workforce education (Carnevale et al., 2017). This creates a question of how perceptions of career technical education (CTE) as something separate, or in some cases superior, have come to pass. Thus, this qualitative case study explores how students, parents, and high school personnel at Anytown High School (AHS) in Anytown, OK, perceive the value of CTE and HE. This work will provide insight into how these views shape educational decisions.

Anytown High School is the largest public high school in South Central County, OK, with a student population of 421 in the 2023-24 academic year (Anytown HS¹, 2025). AHS is in the Astronaut Technology Center (ATC) and South-Central State College (SCSC) districts. According to the US Census American Community Survey (2022), about 37% of children in South Central County live in households experiencing poverty, and 326 students at AHS are eligible for free or reduced lunch (Anytown HS, 2025).

ATC has a student headcount of 879 (NCES, 2024) and 20 full-time (half-day) programs of study for high school learners. Its service district covers three counties in East Central Oklahoma ([ATC], 2024), and it has two campuses—one located in Anytown. Over 800 high school students attend ATC through concurrent enrollment ([ATC], 2024). SCSC, a public two-year college with a five-county service area, has a student headcount of 1,471 (NCES, 2024), 428 of whom are concurrently enrolled high school students.

Background

Americans' opinions of vocational education have evolved over the decades, reflecting changes in societal attitudes, economic demands, and educational policy (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). Historically, vocational education, also known as career and technical education (CTE), was often perceived as less prestigious than other academic pathways, largely due to its frequent association with manual labor and lower-paying jobs (Dare, 2006; Plank et al., 2008). This stigma, particularly in the mid-20th century, was driven by the idea that college preparation should be the ultimate educational goal, relegating vocational tracks to students deemed less

¹ Data were obtained from an internal report produced by Anytown High School. To maintain confidentiality, identifying details have been removed. However, my dissertation chair reviewed and approved the document to ensure its reliability and relevance to the study.

academically capable (Hanford, 2014; Malkus, 2019). However, with global economic shifts toward specialized skills and technical expertise, CTE has gained renewed attention as a viable and necessary pathway for preparing students for the workforce (Symonds et al., 2011).

Perceived Value of CTE and HE

A growing recognition of CTE's value is emerging, particularly as concerns about the skills gap in the US workforce have intensified (Carnevale et al., 2013). Industries such as manufacturing, healthcare, and technology increasingly require specialized skills that can be effectively taught in vocational programs, leading to a resurgence of interest in CTE (OSRHE, 2023a). Additionally, CTE provides alternative pathways for students who may be uninterested or ill-suited for HE, offering them the chance to enter high-demand fields without a four-year degree (Gordon & Schultz, 2020).

Despite this renaissance, negative perceptions of CTE exist, particularly concerning its association with socioeconomic status and race (Hanford, 2014). Historically, vocational tracks were disproportionately offered to students from low-income backgrounds or minoritized groups, reinforcing societal inequities (Oakes, 2005). This legacy influenced how CTE is perceived, with some parents and educators still viewing it as a “second-class” (p. 57) option, suitable only for those not academically inclined (Levesque et al., 2000)—a perception that, while dated, may still shape attitudes today in ways that remain underexamined.

Recent initiatives have focused on rebranding CTE as a high-quality alternative, offering pathways to well-paying, skilled professions (Dougherty & Lombardi, 2016). These efforts challenge stereotypes and promote the idea that CTE can lead to lucrative and fulfilling careers (Dougherty & Lombardi, 2016). Indeed, some of these initiatives have successfully created

logical fallacies against HE by proclaiming a higher earning potential for CTE graduates not reflected in comparative research (Stevens, et.al., 2019).

Parents' and students' perceptions of CTE are increasingly influenced by success stories of graduates who found stable, high-paying jobs without the burden of student loan debt (Barton et al., 2013). Kemple (2008) found students who completed vocational programs were more likely to be employed and earn higher wages than those who did not. Further, vocational programs offer students opportunities to gain hands-on experience through internships, apprenticeships, and other work-based learning opportunities, enhancing their employability and job satisfaction (Holzer & Lerman, 2009). As these success stories circulate, they contribute to shifting public perceptions, helping to position CTE as an attractive choice for students with clear career goals in skilled trades or technical fields.

School counselors are crucial in shaping perceptions of postsecondary education in their schools and communities (Belasco, 2013). Administrators who support and promote vocational programs often do so because they recognize their positive impact on student outcomes, particularly for students disinterested in traditional academic pathways (Bozick & Dalton, 2013). Administrators have often reported that vocational programs contributed to higher graduation rates and improved student engagement, as students are more motivated to learn when they see a direct connection between their education and future career opportunities (Brand et al., 2013). The National Assessment of Career and Technical Education bears this out, reporting that CTE students graduate high school at a rate of 10% higher than non-CTE students (US Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, 2014). Partnerships between schools and local industries have also proven mutually beneficial, providing students real-world training while fulfilling workforce needs (Jacobs & Worth, 2019).

Therefore, while CTE in America has historically been viewed through a stigmatized and inequitable lens, the perceived value of CTE has gradually increased with the growing demand for skilled labor and the success of CTE graduates becoming more widely recognized. Continued efforts by policymakers, educators, and industry leaders are necessary to ensure that CTE is seen as a high-quality, equitable, and accessible pathway to career success. These efforts, however, should be tempered with consideration for what is lost when CTE is prioritized over HE.

In the zeal to promote CTE in Oklahoma, some state leaders have constructed negative narratives of HE (Ferguson, 2025; McDonald, 2024). Some of these negative perceptions are no doubt fueled by the rising costs of attending HE. In the past twenty years, appropriations to HE in Oklahoma have decreased significantly; between 2008 and 2019, Oklahoma cut higher education allocations by 35.3% (Hamby, 2021). Hamby (2021) emphasized this disinvestment harms Black and Latinx students more than white students because tuition for Oklahoma's public HE institutions costs average Black households 41% of their incomes, average Latinx households 32% of their incomes, and average white households 26% of their incomes. The manufactured crisis of HE costs in Oklahoma provides elected officials an opportunity to tout the virtues of CTE without critically analyzing the specific populations most likely to opt out of HE due to economic hardship. The same minoritized population is also more likely to accept federal financial aid, including loans, which have contributed to a student debt crisis throughout the US (Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Looney & Yannelis, 2024).

The political weaponization of this debt crisis may benefit candidates' careers; however, with recent court decisions and Congress's failure to act, few options exist for relief (Looney & Yannelis, 2024). Some have criticized student debt relief initiatives as unfairly burdening taxpayers and exceeding executive authority (Kambli & Gaide, 2024), as evidenced by legal

challenges against debt relief measures, such as *Biden v. Nebraska* (2023), which invalidated the Biden administration's executive order establishing a forgiveness program because it overstepped executive authority (Glater, 2024; Howe, 2023; Kambli & Gaide, 2024). Despite these challenges and the economic burden of student debt, legislative action to address the crisis has been limited. The Supreme Court's ruling emphasized that significant debt cancellation requires explicit Congressional authorization, but partisan divisions have hindered substantial progress, leaving borrowers with few options for relief (Kambli & Gaide, 2024).

In this landscape, it is no wonder that many prioritize CTE. The time investment to become credentialed is shorter than required for an associate degree, and the cost is significantly lower (NCES, 2024). However, tying post-secondary education so irrevocably to workforce entry leaves a vacuum in certain types of academic engagement. With increasingly lower educational attainment by students in public secondary schools in Oklahoma, HE, especially community colleges, continually invest more resources in remediating skill deficits in reading, writing, and mathematics (Wallis, 2025). Student preparedness for college-level work has declined steadily over the last decade.

The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE) (2023a) revealed: "For Oklahoma's 2022 high school graduating class, only 10% of students tested met all four ACT college readiness benchmarks, and just 6% are ready to study in the STEM fields" (p. 5). Nationally, the cost of providing remedial education is substantial. The Community College Research Center (CCRC), an organization focused on sponsoring and publishing research about community colleges, highlights that remedial coursework is one of the largest interventions to improve outcomes for underprepared college students, with an annual cost of approximately \$7

billion (Scott-Clayton et al., 2014). This figure underscores the significant financial commitment required to support students unprepared for college-level work.

While specific cost data for Oklahoma is not readily available, the state has implemented initiatives like concurrent enrollment and early college to address college readiness and reduce the need for remediation (OSRHE, 2023a). The state claims these proactive measures enhance student preparedness, reducing remedial education's financial and academic burdens. These concurrent enrollment initiatives to reduce the necessity of remediation at the college level are an evident fallacy. The OSRHE (2023b) has established specific requirements for high school juniors and seniors seeking concurrent enrollment in college courses (p. 46):

- High School Seniors: ACT composite score of 20 or SAT score of 1030; and GPA of 3.0 or higher.
- High School Juniors: ACT composite score of 23 or SAT score of 1130; and GPA of 3.5 or higher, and ranked in the top 50% of their graduating class.

Students who meet these minimum criteria would not require remediation, even if they waited until after graduation to begin college coursework.

Thus, funneling students into concurrent enrollment courses does nothing to reduce the need for remediation, since this is not the population taking developmental courses. Similarly, students who participate in early college programs must also meet entrance criteria and have the added challenge of their relative youth as they engage with college-level coursework at ages 13 to 18. These students are also unlikely to be in the target population who enter college and need remediation (OSRHE, 2023b).

The logical fallacies at the state legislative and system levels culminate in students who struggle to think critically. The SCSC assessment procedure requires the annual evaluation of

general education outcomes, including critical thinking skills, by testing a representative group of students with 45 or more credit hours (IES, n.d.). SCSC implemented the Educational Testing Services Proficiency Profile (IES, n.d.). In the fall of 2020, 63 representative students who met the criteria took the SCSC-administered proficiency profile. SCSC students averaged 110.7 on the critical thinking test, 1.1 higher than the national mean (IES, n.d.). However, it is important to note the interpretation of scores:

- Proficient (110–120): Students demonstrate the ability to analyze complex arguments, recognize logical flaws, and assess evidence effectively.
- Developing (100–110): Students show foundational critical thinking skills but may struggle with nuanced reasoning or evaluating advanced arguments.
- Not Proficient (<100): Students have limited ability to evaluate and construct logical arguments or analyze evidence (IES, n.d.).

While SCSC students slightly exceeded the national mean, the overall score indicated that students throughout the nation have underdeveloped critical thinking skills. Additionally, it is worth noting that some students graduate from high school with up to 30 credit hours, and thus are considered sophomore students when they enter college for full-time academic work.

Statement of Problem

In this study, I seek to learn how students at AHS interpret the perceived value of CTE and HE as they decide between concurrently enrolling in either. This decision-making process is intriguing in the current educational climate in Oklahoma and across the nation, as HE learning outcomes are increasingly tied to workforce needs. If adults advising high school students perceive either CTE or HE as being more valuable, their attitudes may influence students' post-secondary choices. However, if this study reveals that data-driven criteria rather than personal

perceptions have been established at AHS to guide students' decisions between CTE and HE, the derivation of these criteria could be helpful to other high schools with similar demographics.

Statement of Purpose

This case study will explore potential confirmation bias in how AHS students are advised in their post-secondary concurrent enrollment choices. Specifically, the semi-structured interviews of the study will examine how AHS parents and educators perceive the value of CTE and HE, how these perceptions may shape students' opinions of CTE and HE, and how these perceptions may influence students' choices as they make decisions about concurrent enrollment at ATC, SCSC, or other institutions. This information may give insight into how students in rural Oklahoma are advised in their post-secondary choices based on the perceived value of CTE and HE imparted by educators and parents.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do AHS adults (parents and educators) perceive ease of access or barriers to students participating in CTE and HE?

RQ2: How do concurrently enrolled AHS students perceive ease of access or barriers to participating CTE and HE?

RQ3: How do AHS adults influence students' perception of accessibility and barriers to enrolling in CTE and/or HE as they advise students in concurrent enrollment decisions?

Significance of the Study

This study will allow educational leaders in Anytown, OK, to consider how they advise students to pursue postsecondary education concurrently with their high school credit requirements. Recently, OSRHE permitted SCSC to begin three early college programs within

the service area (Hutton, 2024). However, neither OSRHE nor SCSC has published a strategy demonstrating the alignment of this permission with an implementation plan. They have not made any cost-benefit analysis publicly available within the community or established universal criteria to assess the readiness of 14-year-old students for college (OSRHE, 2022). Therefore, understanding local students', parents', and AHS personnel's perceptions and experiences of HE may guide these early college programs.

The study may also benefit the partner institutions, ATC and SCSC, as they recruit and enroll concurrent high school students into programs. These institutions balance the needs of adult learners who are the traditional target audience for CTE and two-year HE; however, the rising population of high school students enrolling in their programs creates a tension in how education is explained and how courses are delivered. In essence, the andragogical approaches to adult learners have been challenged due to younger students participating in postsecondary education well before they have graduated from high school.

Definition of Terms

- Career and Technical Education (CTE): CTE focuses on developing specific occupational skills and credentials, preparing students for immediate entry into the workforce or applied career pathways. CareerTech manages CTE in Oklahoma.
 - Vocational Education: Dated term for CTE. I use it in sections discussing CTE's history and development.
- Cognitive Dissonance: The psychological discomfort experienced when an individual's existing belief on a topic is challenged by compelling conflicting information. In education, it can occur when a student's prior beliefs about a subject (e.g., college or career paths) are challenged by new information or experiences.

- **Concurrent Enrollment:** Refers to a program in which high school students simultaneously enroll in college-level courses and earn high school and college credit. These programs are often offered through partnerships between high schools and local colleges or universities and may be tuition-free or discounted.
 - **Dual Credit:** Dated term for concurrent enrollment, but they may be used interchangeably within this study. A more effective use of the term indicates that students earn high school credit by completing specific college courses.
- **Confirmation Bias:** The tendency to seek out, interpret, or remember information in ways that confirm a person's preexisting beliefs or opinions while ignoring or dismissing contradictory evidence. This can influence how students, parents, or educators evaluate post-secondary options or advising.
- **Higher Education (HE):** Institutions rooted in the liberal arts tradition, emphasizing broad intellectual development, critical thinking, and civic engagement rather than direct workforce preparation.
- **Perceived Value:** Refers to financial value, career value, social value, and prestige; may be used interchangeably with perceptions.
- **Post-Secondary Education:** Any formal education after high school graduation. It includes HE and CTE pathways in addition to some apprenticeship licensures.

Assumptions

Assumptions are a set of beliefs made by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). One assumption I make is that school personnel are the most significant influence on students' post-secondary education choices, even more so than the influence of their parents. However, I also

assume that peer advising occurs informally. In this age of *TikTok* trends, I would be remiss not to inquire about the messages students receive from their peers.

Chapter II Literature Review

Understanding how students decide to pursue post-secondary education requires a historical and philosophical discussion of the educational pathways available to them, particularly the divide between career and technical education (CTE) and higher education (HE). This literature review explores CTE's evolution in the United States (US), including debates between key educational thinkers and legislators and shifting societal perceptions shaping CTE and HE. By tracing this trajectory, I provide context to investigate how confirmation bias and intellectual development may influence the advising practices that guide students toward one pathway over the other.

The Beginning of Career and Technical Education

CTE provides a unique learning environment tailored to prepare students for various careers that require varying levels of education (Dougherty & Lombardi, 2016). As Stone (2014) highlighted, understanding CTE's role in contemporary American education requires examining its history. By the early 1800s, the demand for career-focused education in the US was driven by a diverse population and the rise of industrialization (Gordon & Schultz, 2020; Miller, 1993; Roberts & Ball, 2009; Ruffing, 2006; Scott & Sarkees-Wircenski, 2001). During this time, the US experienced significant demographic and economic transformations that heightened demands for career-focused education. An influx of immigrants seeking opportunities in the industrial landscape diversified the nation's population (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). This period marked the transition from an agrarian economy to an industrial powerhouse, necessitating a specialized workforce to operate complex machinery and manage industrial processes (Scott & Sarkees-Wircenski, 2001).

Educational paradigms shifted in response to these changes (Miller, 1993). Traditional liberal education, which emphasized subjects like Latin and Philosophy, no longer met the evolving economy's practical needs (Miller, 1993). Growing recognition of the importance of integrating practical skills into the curriculum to prepare students for specific trades and professions (Miller, 1993) led to the establishment of manual labor schools and early vocational institutions that combined academic instruction with hands-on training. These schools emphasized accessibility and relevance, particularly for students pursuing careers in agriculture, mechanics, and other industrial sectors (Roberts & Ball, 2009; Gordon & Schultz, 2020).

Factories redefined labor needs, prompting a reevaluation of educational content and delivery methods (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). The focus shifted towards producing a labor force that was literate and technically competent. This laid the groundwork for developing CTE programs to equip individuals with the practical skills required in an industrialized society (Ruffing, 2006). Thus, education in the early 19th century in the US was characterized by balancing demographic shifts and industrial growth, underscoring the need for career-focused education (Gordon & Schultz, 2014). This time frame set the stage for formalizing and expanding CTE, aligning educational outcomes with the nation's economic objectives (Gordon & Schultz, 2014; Scott & Sarkees-Wircenski, 2001).

By 1817, the need for a system of public education was recognized, but a paradigm to facilitate that need was yet to be organized (Barlow, 1976). During America's colonial period, the church typically taught reading, and children learned work skills through family apprenticeships (Scott & Sarkees-Wircenski, 2001). Debates over who was responsible for educating citizens and the best approach to schooling were common, often pitting HE against skills-based training for employment (Dougherty & Lombardi, 2016; Kroupa, 2014). The

Industrial Revolution created a pressing need for a skilled workforce, leading to the incorporation of vocational training into the educational system (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). Some communities established manual training schools in the 19th century that were the precursors of modern CTE. These institutions, or lyceums, aimed to provide students with practical skills that would enable them to secure employment in emerging industries. The first notable example was founded in 1826 by Josiah Holbrook in Middlebury, Massachusetts (McNamara, 2018).

Influence of Educational Thinkers (1900-2000)

Educational reformers have profoundly shaped CTE's trajectory. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, CTE discourse expanded to include people of color. The debates between Black leaders W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington highlighted differing perspectives on the best approach to education for Black Americans. Washington (1895), founder of the Tuskegee Institute, advocated for a vocational approach, emphasizing agricultural and industrial training. He believed that by acquiring practical skills, Black Americans could improve their socioeconomic status and gradually gain respect in a racially divided society.

In contrast, Du Bois (1903/1997) argued for a more comprehensive approach combining liberal education with vocational training. He believed that a "Talented Tenth" (p. 100) of the African American population should be liberally educated to develop leaders who could advocate for civil rights and social change. Du Bois criticized Washington's (1895) emphasis on vocational education to accommodate the status quo, arguing it limited Black Americans' potential to achieve full citizenship and equity.

Later philosophers such as Dewey, Snedden, and Prosser engaged in ideological clashes similar to those between Washington (1895) and Du Bois (1903/1997). Herrick (1996) examined Dewey's influence on modern education, highlighting concerns raised in 1905 by the

Association of Manufacturers over high school dropout rates, crime, poverty, and the shift from an agriculture- to an industry-based economy. Dewey believed education could be the solution to these challenges. Specifically, he believed

the emerging role of vocational education in American schools forced consideration of “learning by doing” for all students. He felt that students would experience a fuller education, and society would experience greater freedoms, if vocational and academic curriculum were unified rather than separated. (Herrick, 1996, p. 17)

At CTE’s inception, there were two opposing viewpoints (Hyslop-Margison, 1999; Meeder, 2016). Dewey advocated for vocational education, what we now call CTE, as part of a comprehensive curriculum for all students (Herrick, 1996), similar to DuBois. Alternatively, Snedden (and later Prosser) supported a dual-track system in which students engaged in either CTE or HE (DeFalco, 2016; Hyslop-Margison, 1999; Stipanovic, Lewis, & Stringfield, 2012), similar to Washington.

The social efficiency movement, shaped by early 20th-century educational thinkers such as Dutton and Snedden (1908), Dewey (1916/1997), and Prosser and Allen (1925), played a pivotal role in the development of vocational education in the US (Stone, 2016). It emphasized the need for education to serve societal goals, primarily by preparing students to contribute productively to the economy (Stone, 2016). While Dewey was already recognized internationally as a leading educational theorist when he published *Democracy and Education* in 1916 (Mintz, 2016), Snedden gained national influence as a teacher, administrator, and state superintendent (Kroupa, 2014; Labaree, 2010). While both were considered educational progressives, their views differed fundamentally (Labaree, 2010).

Dewey believed separating vocational training from academic pursuits limited students' career options and deepened social class divides (Herrick, 1996; Hyslop-Margison, 1999; Kroupa, 2014). Business and industry leaders also expressed concerns about separating academic and vocational tracks (Hayward & Benson, 1993). However, the dual-track system for which Snedden advocated captured the attention of legislators and his doctoral student, Prosser. Prosser (1914) emphasized the need for vocational training to prepare students for gainful employment rather than solely for academic pursuits (Robinette, 2016). Prosser's work resulted in federal funding for vocational education through the 1917 Smith-Hughes Act.

Federal Legislation

The Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890 were legislative milestones that facilitated the establishment of land-grant colleges. These institutions laid the groundwork for what would eventually become a comprehensive vocational education system (Dewey, 1916/1997). The act emphasized practical education and aimed to create a workforce capable of supporting the nation's growing industries. The acts expanded access to post-secondary education by allocating federal lands to states to establish colleges focused on practical education for the industrial classes, particularly in agriculture and the mechanical arts. This initiative democratized education and fostered the development of institutions dedicated to applied sciences (Scott & Sarkees-Wircenski, 2001).

The establishment of the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education (NSPIE) in 1906 marked the beginning of organized vocational education, with widespread societal support for vocational legislation (Moore, 2017). In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson appointed a commission to assess the need for vocational education, concluding federal support was necessary (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). The commission recommended federal grants for

teacher training, salaries, and vocational program development (Barlow, 1976). Influenced by Prosser (1914), Senator Hoke Smith and Representative Dudley Hughes introduced legislation leading to the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, marking the beginning of federal involvement by providing funding for vocational education (Gordon & Schultz, 2020).

Federal policies have continued to reshape CTE, further refining and expanding support for CTE programs and emphasizing the alignment of vocational training with labor market needs and technological advancements (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). The George Acts expanded funding for vocational education, beginning with the George-Reed Act (1929), which increased support for agriculture and home economics education (Fritschle, 1963). The George-Ellzey Act (1934) temporarily increased funding by \$3 million annually for three years in response to the Great Depression and the need for vocational education to stabilize the economy. The George-Deen Act (1936) allocated \$12 million annually, while the George-Barden Act (1946) provided greater flexibility in funding, including support for apprenticeships and vocational guidance.

Following the Soviet Union's Sputnik launch, the National Defense Education Act (1958) increased federal investment in education, particularly math, science, and technical training (Friedemann, 2001). Under President Kennedy, the Panel of Consultants on Vocational Education (1961) recommended expanding vocational training to serve underserved populations (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). The Vocational Education Act of 1963 broadened vocational training access, shifting focus from occupational training to broader educational services (Scott & Sarkees-Wircenski, 2001). The 1968 amendments integrated vocational education with postsecondary training, while the 1976 amendments expanded funding for disadvantaged and disabled students (Gordon & Schultz, 2020).

The *Nation at Risk* report (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) warned of declining US education standards, leading to increased academic accountability and school reform. The Carl D. Perkins Acts (1984-2006) modernized vocational education, rebranding it as CTE and emphasizing integration with academic curricula, workforce partnerships, and accountability measures (Scott & Sarkees-Wircenski, 2001). The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, commonly known as Perkins V, was enacted in 2018 and allocated about \$1.4 billion annually to enhance alignment between CTE, workforce programs, and academic standards, requiring states to develop comprehensive needs assessments and improve coordination between secondary and postsecondary institutions (Advance CTE, 2018). These reforms aimed to prepare students for high-wage, in-demand careers through modernized vocational education pathways.

Benefits of CTE

CTE connects students with HE by offering practical pathways from secondary education to community colleges and universities (Manno, 2024). CTE programs emphasize integrating academic and technical skills, preparing students for immediate employment and further education. CTE students often pursue postsecondary education at higher rates than their non-CTE peers, thanks to structured programs of study that align with college prerequisites (Stone & Lewis, 2012). This connection reduces the stigma traditionally associated with CTE and avoids pushing students away from college-bound paths, ensuring that career and college opportunities remain open (Holzer et al., 2013).

In addition to improving college enrollment rates, CTE programs often provide dual-enrollment options that simultaneously allow students to earn high school and college credits. This can significantly reduce the cost and time required to complete a postsecondary degree,

making HE more accessible, particularly for disadvantaged students (ACTE, NASDCTEc, & Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2010). These programs integrate academic curricula with vocational skills, ensuring students are well-prepared for the workforce and further academic pursuits (Dougherty, 2018). For many students, community colleges act as a bridge, offering CTE programs that align with industry needs while serving as scaffolding toward bachelor's degrees (Dougherty, 2018).

The increasing demand for workers with technical skills and HE further supports CTE's role in bridging education and career readiness. As globalization and technology reshape the job market, workers must be equipped with practical skills and the flexibility to adapt to new challenges (Manno, 2024). HE institutions have responded by working closely with CTE programs to ensure their curricula align with workforce demands, offering seamless transitions from technical certifications to degree programs (Meeder, 2016). This ongoing collaboration between CTE and HE is essential for creating a skilled and adaptable workforce in the face of rapid economic and technological changes.

Although the US Constitution does not directly address education, CTE has long been a national priority, receiving financial support through various laws over time (Gordon & Schultz, 2020; Hayward & Benson, 1993). Kliever (1965) argued that federal involvement in CTE is as significant as in other post-secondary education areas. Even though federal funding is provided, decision-making remains decentralized, with states having significant control over how funds are used locally (Hayward & Benson, 1993; Stewart, 1982). Barlow (1976) explained it well, noting that "education is considered to be a concern of the federal government, a function of the state, and a responsibility of the local community" (p. 24). While federal funding is critical, state and

local support still exceeds the required dollar-for-dollar match (Dougherty & Lombardi, 2016; Kliever, 1965).

Key historical events in 20th-century America prompted significant legislative advancements that further solidified CTE in the US. During the First World War, the Smith-Hughes Act (1917) was pivotal in providing federal high school vocational education funding. The act represented a shift toward recognizing CTE's importance in the national education system, reinforcing that practical skills were essential for a modern economy (Gordon & Schulz, 2020). As the country faced the challenges of the Great Depression, vocational education gained renewed importance. The National Industrial Recovery Act (1933) emphasized the need for a skilled workforce to stimulate economic recovery, further integrating vocational training into public education. During this period, vocational education was viewed as a solution to high unemployment rates, highlighting its role in preparing individuals for available jobs (Katz, 1998). Periods of war have historically accelerated advancements in CTE. During World War II, the demand for skilled labor in industries such as manufacturing and engineering surged. In response, educational institutions expanded vocational programs to rapidly train individuals, ensuring a workforce capable of meeting wartime production needs. This expansion addressed immediate demands and established long-term technical education frameworks in post-war America (Gordon & Schultz, 2020).

The initial debate about integrating academic and vocational education or maintaining separate tracks still echoes today (Hyslop-Margison, 1999; Meeder, 2016). Despite historical efforts, the US is one of the few developed nations without a national CTE structure, leaving states and local communities to take the lead, with federal policies providing some guidance

(Stone, 2017; Stone & Lewis, 2012). CTE continues to respond to the country's economic needs while striving to include all students in its mission (LaFollette, 2011).

Increasing technological advancements require CTE programs to adapt to new industries and skill requirements (Ghosh & Ravichandran, 2024). These new technologies have inspired a growing recognition of the wisdom behind DuBois's (1903/1997) and Dewey's (1916/1997) arguments for integrating vocational education with academic curricula, ensuring students acquire practical skills and critical thinking abilities (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004).

Oklahoma CTE

Oklahoma's CareerTech system stands out from similar programs in the US due to its independent governance (Advance CTE, 2023). Oklahoma operates 29 technology center districts and offers CareerTech programs in 474 public high school districts (Advance CTE, 2023). While most states' CTE programs fall under the Department of Education, Oklahoma's CareerTech operates separately and is overseen by a board appointed by the governor (Advance CTE, 2023). This allows for closer collaboration with businesses and other agencies, resulting in a strong network of partnerships that support local industries and provide customized training to over 7,000 companies annually (Advance CTE, 2023).

Oklahoma's CareerTech system provides secondary and postsecondary students with programs aligned to 15 national career clusters to ensure students gain skills relevant to various industries (Dortch, 2014). The system's roots trace back to before Oklahoma became a state, with education already present in Oklahoma and Indian territories (Gibson, 1984). When Oklahoma became a state in 1907, the newly ratified constitution required the election of a state superintendent of education, unifying the two educational systems (Gibson, 1984).

From its inception, Oklahoma mandated vocational training as part of its state constitution, with an early focus on teaching practical skills like agriculture and domestic science (Goble, 2004). Oklahoma was also among the few states offering vocational training before the Smith-Hughes Act (Goble, 2004; Stewart, 1982). Following the federal law's passage, Oklahoma created a State Board for Vocational Education to oversee the programs and align with federal standards (Goble, 2004; Stewart, 1982; Tyson, 1975). By 1929, the Division of Vocational Education was formally established under the Oklahoma Department of Education, with the state superintendent overseeing general and vocational education (Stewart, 1982; Tyson, 1975).

J.B. Perky, appointed in 1941 as the state's first Director of Vocational Education, played a crucial role in expanding vocational programs, especially during and after World War II, demonstrating their importance at the state and national levels (Goble, 2004; Stewart, 1982). Perky later served on President Kennedy's Panel of Consultants (1961), which helped shape the Vocational Education Act of 1963, marking a significant expansion of vocational education in the US and leading to the development of Oklahoma's area vocational-technical schools (Barlow, 1976; Gordon & Schultz, 2020; Tyson, 1975).

Oklahoma separated vocational education from the Department of Education in 1968, forming an independent agency with Dr. Francis Tuttle as director (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). The system expanded, serving secondary and adult students across multiple sectors, including agriculture, trade, and health occupations. Over the next decade, 21 of the state's 29 vocational schools, now known as technology centers, were established, further solidifying Oklahoma's leadership in vocational education (Friedemann, 2024; Goble, 2004). In 2000, the Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education (ODCTE) became the current name of Oklahoma's CTE system (Goble, 2004). This system now includes comprehensive schools,

technology center districts, and skills centers in correctional facilities, providing diverse educational opportunities across the state (Oklahoma CareerTech, 2025c).

By 2004, CareerTech surpassed half a million total enrollments and appointed Phil Berkenbile as the sixth state director of ODCTE (Oklahoma CareerTech, 2025b). The Oklahoma State Legislature passed SB1271 (70 O.S. §11-103.6), allowing technology centers to teach math and science to sophomore students with certified teachers to integrate those subjects in career education programs (Oklahoma CareerTech, 2025a). The same year, the OSRHE and ODCTE launched the Cooperative Alliance Program, enabling high school students to earn college credit toward associate degrees by completing courses at technology centers and colleges (“New Cooperative Alliance,” 2005). These steps provided the foundation for more current benchmarks illustrating the continued progress of CTE in Oklahoma.

In 2023, CareerTech’s programs achieved a 94% placement rate for graduates and employed more than 8,500 Oklahomans in the technology centers (“CareerTech Programs,” 2024). By 2024, CareerTech enrollment within the state increased to 520,733 (Raache, 2024a). In August 2024, the Oklahoma Summit (previously known as the Oklahoma CareerTech Summer Conference) convened, and Governor Kevin Stitt established the Human Potential for Future Industries Task Force through Executive Order 2024-24 in September (Raache, 2024b). This task force aims to drive innovation in education by empowering Oklahoma students to discover and develop their unique talents, aligning them with the evolving needs of a technologically driven workforce (Evans, 2024). Partners in the endeavor include industries, community groups, educators, and Oklahoma’s CareerTech. While the prior research details the structural and policy landscape shaping CTE and higher education pathways in Oklahoma, these

dynamics develop within specific rural communities whose histories, identities, and social norms influence how students and adults interpret educational choices.

Rural Students

Rural education research offers important context for understanding how students in rural communities navigate post-secondary pathways. Scholars in critical rural studies argue that rural places occupy a paradoxical position within U.S. education as essential community institutions that are marginal in national policy and research (Schafft, 2016). Rural schools serve as community hubs of social, economic, and civic life, but they also function as mechanisms of mobility that often encourage high-achieving youth to leave their communities in pursuit of educational and economic opportunities (Corbett, 2009; Schafft, 2016). This tension between community sustainability and individual advancement shapes how rural students interpret the purpose and value of CTE and HE.

Corbett's (2009) ethnographic work captures this paradox through the concept of "learning to leave" (p. 3). He illustrates how, as students progress through school, they increasingly encounter expectations that educational success correlates with mobility, often away from home. Corbett's longitudinal findings show that residents who remain in their rural communities typically possess less formal education than those who leave, producing a pattern in which leaving their place of origin becomes entwined with academic attainment. These dynamics align with Schafft's (2016) findings that rural youth aspirations are shaped by perceived economic opportunity; students who envision viable futures locally are more likely to plan to stay, while those who see limited options anticipate leaving, even when they feel deeply attached to place.

This tension is further complicated by rural communities' strongly held moral economies, which shape how individuals interpret work, responsibility, and "good choices." Sherman's (2009) ethnography demonstrates that in communities marked by long-term economic decline, residents increasingly rely on moral discourses to evaluate themselves and others. As traditional status markers such as stable employment become scarce, "morality has slowly become the force underlying these old divisions... giving residents new definitions of success and failure" (Sherman, 2009, p. 180). These moral frameworks influence how rural adults understand postsecondary pathways; educational decisions become symbolically associated not only with opportunity but also with responsibility, respectability, and alignment with community values. In this context, advising around HE and CTE is not merely informational but deeply embedded within local cultural logics.

Rural communities also maintain powerful normative expectations around family formation and life course trajectories. Sherman (2009) found that early childbearing, marriage, and family-centered living were widely viewed as traditional, morally grounded life paths; adults described their community as "a good place to raise kids," and those who were childless or delayed family formation were treated with pity or suspicion (p. 104). Such expectations shape how young people imagine adulthood. When the culturally preferred life course centers on stability, proximity, and family responsibility, CTE pathways often appear more compatible with local norms than the mobility traditionally associated with higher education. These community-level expectations deepen the ambivalence Corbett identifies around staying, leaving, and what counts as success.

Economic decline also functions as a significant structural force shaping the meaning and value of education. Sherman (2009) documents that residents "could not recall a time before

poverty was commonplace” and that long-standing instability in local labor markets produced entrenched divisions between those who worked and those who did not (p. 99). In such contexts, educational credentials are interpreted through the lens of scarcity and survival rather than abstract merit. This reinforces Schafft’s argument that rural schools operate within—rather than independently from—local economic opportunity structures. As a result, rural advising tends to emphasize pragmatism, affordability, job security, and alignment with community expectations.

Critical rural studies further highlight the need to recognize rural heterogeneity. Crockett, Carlo, and Temmen (2016) note that rural communities vary widely in demographic composition, economic stability, cultural practices, and geographic isolation. Rurality cannot be assumed to be monolithic; instead, “places designated as rural differ from each other in these and other characteristics,” making for substantial diversity across rural regions (p. 3). This reinforces the importance of rural case study research and supports situating rural advising patterns within specific community contexts rather than generalizing across all rural schools. Understanding how rural adults and youth interpret educational pathways requires attention to the unique characteristics of each rural ecology, including labor markets, cultural norms, population change, and racial/ethnic diversity.

Gruenewald’s (2003) concept of a critical pedagogy of place provides an educational lens that connects these social forces to classroom practice. He argues that educational systems must simultaneously account for local ecological, cultural, and economic contexts while helping students critically examine the power structures that shape those contexts. Through “decolonization” and “reinhabitation,” educators can help rural students interrogate dominant educational narratives while also affirming local knowledge and exploring possibilities for community sustainability. This perspective reframes rural education not solely as preparation for

individual mobility but as an opportunity to cultivate community stewardship and democratic engagement.

Together, these studies establish that rural students' postsecondary decisions emerge from multiple factors: attachment to place, perceptions of economic viability, community moral frameworks, normative expectations around adulthood, and the broader social and economic structure in which local schools operate (Corbett, 2009; Gruenewald, 2003; Schafft, 2016; Sherman, 2009). Considered holistically, these rural studies illuminate the cultural, economic, and social contexts in which advising occurs at AHS and highlight the local forces that shape how students interpret opportunity, risk, responsibility, and belonging. These insights provide the groundwork for the study's conceptual framework, which examines how adult beliefs, community narratives, and student sense-making interact during the advising process.

Conceptual Framework

This study draws on a conceptual framework comprising confirmation bias (Wason, 1960), cognitive dissonance (Wason, 1960; Ling 2020), institutional feedback loops (Birnbaum, 1988), and Perry's (1970) model of intellectual development. These concepts explain how educators' perceptions of CTE and HE may shape institutional culture. In turn, the perceived value of CTE and HE within the high school culture may shape educators' advising practices for high school students considering concurrent enrollment in CTE or HE, influencing how students perceive the value of these programs. This framework provides context for understanding how adults may influence students at particular stages of development in their lives.

Confirmation Bias & Cognitive Dissonance

English psychologist Wason (1960) introduced the concept of confirmation bias, referring to individuals' tendency to seek, interpret, and recall information in ways that confirm

their pre-existing beliefs. Wason's hypothesis testing experiments laid the groundwork for understanding how bias shapes everyday thinking and decision-making. Ling (2020) explained confirmation bias influences how people consume information, often drawing them toward sources, such as social media, that reinforce their attitudes while avoiding contradictory evidence that may produce cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is the psychological discomfort a person experiences when they hold two or more conflicting beliefs, values, or behaviors simultaneously (Festinger, 1957). Proposed by Leon Festinger (1957), the theory of cognitive dissonance hypothesizes:

1. The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance.
2. When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance.

Avoidance can reduce cognitive dissonance, but it also contributes to the spread of misinformation and the formation of ideological echo chambers. These implications extend into education, research, and policy, where unchecked bias can distort judgment and reinforce systemic assumptions (Wason, 1960; Ling, 2020).

Nickerson (1998) further elaborated confirmation bias as a cognitive fallacy manifesting through selective exposure to information, selective interpretation of evidence, and selective memory. It strengthens unsupported beliefs and inhibits critical thinking and openness to alternative perspectives. Group dynamics and social networks intensify these effects, creating environments where dissenting views are minimized or dismissed (Ling, 2020). These dynamics can shape organizational culture and decision-making within institutions, as seen in Birnbaum's

(1988) systems theory. His model described HE institutions as loosely coupled open systems where individual units influence one another while maintaining autonomy. Feedback loops within these systems can perpetuate institutional biases, making them resistant to change, even in the face of contradictory external pressures.

Feedback Loops

Contemplating Birnbaum's (1988) feedback loops through the lens of confirmation bias creates questions. In Birnbaum's (1988) framework, feedback loops are mechanisms that allow loosely coupled systems, such as colleges and universities, to maintain organizational stability while responding to change. These loops facilitate communication among decentralized units like departments, committees, or administration, which enables the institution to adapt when faced with internal pressures or external demands. Institutional actors who only hear from others within their institution may ignore external data that challenges internal consensus (Kaplan, 2017). Cognitive dissonance is difficult, and often, dissenters are brought to heel or eliminated from an institution in favor of maintaining a status quo, even when the status quo is built on faulty logic.

Healthy organizations sometimes employ the *Tenth Man Rule*² to counteract groupthink. The rule states that if nine team members in a group of 10 agree on a point, it is the 10th member's responsibility to adopt a contradictory view. When this rule is applied to Birnbaum's (1988) theories of organizations, it can create the cognitive dissonance necessary to disrupt confirmation bias. However, when no dissenting voices are prioritized, policymakers and

²A form of devil's advocacy derived from the intelligence failures of Israeli and United States leaders that led to the 1973 Yom Kippur War (Dudley, 2021; Schwenk, 1984)

institutional leaders may seek information that agrees with their established viewpoints on any given issue (Kaplan, 2017). This tendency could affect how educators influence students' perceptions of CTE and HE by imparting the educators' bias via advising models.

Intellectual Development

Understanding confirmation bias and feedback loops in educational developmental contexts requires discussing Perry's (1970) model of intellectual development. Perry's model presents how individuals develop cognitive and moral reasoning. The model progresses through three stages (i.e., duality, multiplicity, relativism) before arriving at the position of commitment. According to Perry, dualistic thinking is most common in students transitioning from high school to college. These individuals often see knowledge as absolute, believing authority figures such as teachers and parents provide clear right and wrong answers. Dualistic thinkers view the world in black-and-white terms and rely heavily on authority figures to lead them to the *right* answer (Patton et al., 2016). Even students moving out of the dualistic stage can be prone to confirmation bias because they still look to authority figures to help prioritize some views over others, even as they become aware that most choices are not binary (Patton et al., 2016). Patton et al. (2016) emphasized

If ideas are essentially "swallowed whole" from authorities such as parents, teachers, group advisors, or textbooks, if little or no questioning is part of the process of adopting these beliefs, then the process demonstrates a dualistic mode of thinking. By contrast, relativistic thinkers, when presented with ideas by an authority figure may adopt them as their own. (p. 317)

Authority figures such as educators substantially influence students' decision-making at this dualistic stage. Thus, in the context of this study, understanding whether educators challenge

their biases as they advise students pursuing HE or CTE is important. Educators help students assess multiple options and may encourage them to commit without a right or wrong answer. This is critical as students decide between multiple opportunities in post-secondary education. Unfortunately, when educators suffer from confirmation bias, they may dissuade dualistic students from fully exploring the best fit for their future.

Intellectual development involves moving beyond dualism toward more complex forms of thought, such as relativism, where individuals acknowledge that knowledge is contextual and that there may be multiple valid interpretations of the same set of facts (Perry, 1970). A key transitional stage in this process is multiplicity, in which students begin to recognize that not all questions have straightforward answers and that multiple perspectives may coexist, even if they make the mistake of believing that all opinions are created equal (Perry, 1970).

Multiplicitic students may be less likely to adopt authority figures' confirmation bias. However, in this stage, authority figures' confirmation bias can be a cognitive barrier, reinforcing dualistic thinking and hindering the student's progression through multiplicity toward relativism (Perry, 1970). While it is not necessary to assign students to these formal stages to discuss how their perceptions of CTE and HE have developed, Perry's model of intellectual development contextualizes these perceptions by comparing them to the perceived value educators and parents place on CTE and HE.

Love and Guthrie (1999) expanded on Perry's (1970) model by discussing the importance of cognitive development in student services. They emphasized that educational environments should foster experiences that challenge students' preconceived notions, helping them progress through intellectual stages. Similarly, Hofer and Pintrich (1997) highlighted the development of epistemological beliefs (e.g., beliefs about the nature of knowledge and knowing). They argued

that these beliefs shaped how students learn, process, and integrate information. Kuhn et al. (2000) describe the development of epistemological understanding as a gradual coordination of objective and subjective ways of knowing. They found that children treat knowledge as certain and external. In this absolutist stage, teachers, parents, or experts have the truth; the learner's job is to find it or repeat it. As children mature, they later recognize that opinions vary, and the truth becomes subjective depending on who they ask to weigh in. Kuhn et al.'s (2000) framework clarifies why confirmation bias and limited exposure to conflicting information reduce opportunities for students to experience the cognitive dissonance necessary for growth toward self-authorship.

Students who develop rigid beliefs without experiencing cognitive dissonance may make questionable decisions regarding post-secondary education (Mintz, 2022). Without encountering challenges to their preconceived notions, students may not engage in the necessary reflection to evaluate their choices effectively, potentially leading to decisions that are not well-informed or aligned with their best interests. Encouraging experiences that induce cognitive dissonance can promote deeper learning and more thoughtful decision-making among students (Mintz, 2022). Confirmation bias, therefore, stalls students' development by reinforcing dualistic thinking and preventing the experiences necessary to question the assumptions they may have adopted from authority figures (Evans et al., 2009).

Birnbaum's (1991) discussion of feedback loops can be directly linked to Perry's (1970) model, particularly in understanding how confirmation bias impacts intellectual and institutional development. In many educational settings, especially those with less cultural or experiential exposure, confirmation bias can prevent the intellectual diversity that fosters growth (Perry, 1970). This is evident in how some institutional leaders may lean toward particular intellectual

paradigms, filtering out conflicting theories or methodologies (Schalin, 2018). For example, in schools where a particular political or cultural model dominates, educators may prioritize CTE rather than encouraging students to pursue HE (Schalin, 2018).

Educators' confirmation bias may limit students' exposure to alternative theories in the dualistic stage (McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001). Institutional bias reinforces intellectual homogeneity, which can result in a feedback loop where students return to their communities of origin without experiencing the cognitive dissonance inherent to HE (McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001). Addressing confirmation bias in educational contexts requires intentionally creating environments that encourage intellectual diversity and critical engagement (Mintz, 2022). Perry's model suggests that intellectual growth occurs when individuals are challenged to engage with complexity and ambiguity, and overcoming confirmation bias is vital to that process (Perry, 1970; Knefelkamp, 1999).

Taken in unison, cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias, feedback loops, and intellectual development create a framework for interpreting how institutional and interpersonal advising practices may shape students' post-secondary decision-making. These components explain how adult advisors can either promote or inhibit critical thinking and exploration of diverse educational pathways for the students. The themes revealed by the qualitative data will demonstrate how students at AHS make decisions, and the framework will help me to construe these themes in context. I will be interested to discover whether cognitive dissonance created within the advising model for concurrent enrollment leads students to choose college even when their priority is joining the workforce or vice versa. Similarly, I am interested in whether students seek out information from adult advisors that confirm the choice they already have in mind. Finally, discovering whether AHS adults seek new information to update their views on CTE and

HE to ensure healthy feedback loops between adult advisors and the students in their charge is a priority within this case study, as is evaluating whether the stage of development for these concurrently enrolled students plays a role in their decision-making. Bringing these seemingly disparate concepts together as a lens to understand what the qualitative data reveals may increase my understanding of how adult perceptions of post-secondary education options influence students' decisions for their education.

Chapter III Method

This case study investigated how educators' and parents' potential bias may influence how AHS students decide between post-secondary education options while concurrently enrolled. By exploring the attitudes of students, parents, and school personnel toward concurrent enrollment pathways, I investigated how advising practices may shape or limit student decision-making, especially within the context of rural Oklahoma. I used semi-structured interviews to examine how AHS students make decisions regarding concurrent enrollment through SCSC and/or ATC programs. The following research questions guided this inquiry:

RQ1: How do AHS adults (parents and educators) perceive ease of access or barriers to students participating in CTE and HE?

RQ2: How do concurrently enrolled AHS students perceive ease of access or barriers to participating CTE and HE?"

RQ3: How do AHS adults influence students' perception of accessibility and barriers to enrolling in CTE and/or HE as they advise students in concurrent enrollment decisions?

Yin (2016) began with the "panorama of studies" (p. 3) that a researcher may explore through qualitative research methods. Ultimately, in his estimation, qualitative research is about making connections to deepen understanding of human interactions. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) added that qualitative research "turn[s] the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self [and] qualitative researchers...make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). Thus, qualitative research was appropriate for this study as I sought to obtain knowledge and make meaning of participants' lived experiences.

Qualitative studies share specific characteristics (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2016). In any qualitative research, researchers strive to understand how people make sense of their experiences. Thus, the researcher is an instrument for data collection and analysis. A primary difference between qualitative and quantitative research is that, typically, qualitative researchers undergo an inductive process to arrive at concepts or theories. Qualitative research does not always propose or assess theory through research; a qualitative researcher begins with a question and collects data to answer the question with rich descriptions using words or pictures.

Qualitative research methodologies in the social sciences have multiple histories (Merriam, 2002). They are neither a rebellion against quantitative methodologies nor a one-size-fits-all way of explaining or analyzing collected data. According to Merriam (2002), “The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (p. 3). This way of socially constructing meaning can take varied forms. Researchers can investigate a particular phenomenon to analyze a person’s or group’s lived experiences as they engage with and navigate the phenomenon. They can observe a person’s or group’s experiences to create a theory grounded within the data collected through interviews. They can also choose to observe aspects of society from the perspective of the group being observed and present the culture of the group based on these observations. For this dissertation, I adopted a case study design.

Research Design

Case study methodology is widely used for in-depth exploration of complex phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2014). According to Yin (2014), case studies are particularly valuable when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not evident, making them ideal for studying contemporary events where multiple variables interact. Yin (2014)

highlighted that case study research can be exploratory, explanatory, or descriptive, allowing researchers to comprehensively investigate how and why questions. This flexibility makes case study research highly adaptable to various fields, such as social sciences, business, and education.

Yin (2014) also emphasized the importance of case selection and design. He identified single-case and multiple-case designs, each serving distinct purposes. A single-case design allows for an in-depth examination of a unique or critical case. In contrast, multiple-case design provides comparative insights across different cases, enhancing the robustness of findings. Yin stressed the need for a straightforward research protocol to ensure consistency and reliability in data collection and analysis. Triangulation, where multiple sources of evidence are used, further strengthens the credibility of case study research by ensuring that various data types support findings.

Creswell (2013) took a slightly different approach, positioning case studies within the broader framework of qualitative research methodologies. He described case study research as a strategy focusing on developing a detailed understanding of a single instance, individual, organization, event, or process. Creswell underscored the importance of context, noting that understanding the subject requires examining its environment. He also suggested that case studies were well-suited for addressing the particular and the general, as they allow for rich, thick descriptions that illuminate broader themes and patterns while staying grounded in specific details.

Further, Creswell (2013) discussed the interpretive nature of case study research, where researchers actively interpret the data and construct meaning from their findings. This interpretive aspect aligns with the idea that case studies often seek to understand complex,

contextualized experiences rather than to test hypotheses. Like Yin (2014), Creswell emphasized the need for methodological rigor, including the careful selection of cases, thorough data collection, and systematic analysis. Both scholars agreed that the strengths of case study methodology lie in its ability to provide a holistic view of the research subject, offering deep insights into phenomena that other methods may miss.

Case study methodology was particularly appropriate for examining AHS students', parents', and administrators' perceptions of CTE and HE in Oklahoma because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the community's specific context and individual experiences. Local factors, such as school culture, community values, and economic conditions deeply influence CTE programs. Using a case study approach allowed me to closely examine how these factors shape perceptions, providing a detailed and nuanced understanding of stakeholders' varying viewpoints. Because the boundaries between concurrent enrollment decisions and the local context that shapes them were indistinguishable, and because those decisions emerged from the interaction of numerous social, institutional, and personal variables, a case study design was well-suited to this project. This approach permitted me to gather rich, qualitative data through interviews and observations, which were crucial for capturing the complex attitudes and beliefs surrounding CTE and HE.

Furthermore, case study research was ideal for exploring the how and why questions related to CTE and HE conversations at AHS. It enabled me to investigate how students, parents, and administrators perceive CTE and HE programs' value and impact, and why they hold these particular views. Given these perceptions may vary widely based on individual experiences and social contexts, case study allowed me to triangulate data from different sources, increasing the reliability and depth of my findings. By focusing on a single school, this method also enabled me

to understand how CTE and HE conversations function within the specific cultural and educational environment of Anytown, OK.

Participants

My target population for this study was community members affiliated with AHS in Anytown, OK. Young adult students at AHS or recent graduates of AHS who are or were concurrently enrolled in CTE and/or HE programs were relevant to interview because their perceptions of CTE and HE may be influenced by current AHS staff and/or their parents. I also interviewed AHS personnel, specifically the educators who advise students of their concurrent enrollment options. My interviews with AHS personnel and parents of concurrently enrolled students focused on participants' perceptions of the inherent value of HE and CTE and how they expressed those perceptions to the students. All participants in the target population were currently affiliated with AHS and were legal adults.

I relied on existing relationships within the AHS community to request participation through purposive sampling (Merriam, 2002). Specifically, I contacted AHS educators to request participation in interviews. I also asked this specific cohort to recommend any faculty who were involved in unofficially advising students. Additionally, I solicited parents and guardians to participate in interviews; however, this cohort was more elusive than I anticipated. Instead of separating educators and parents, I adjusted the participants into two groups: AHS students and AHS adults. I recruited four AHS adults to participate in interviews (see Table 1). Similarly, I used community contacts and local social media groups to recruit 13 concurrently enrolled young adult students and recent graduates of AHS to discuss their perceptions of CTE and HE and how they ultimately chose which institution to attend (see Table 2). This sample size was appropriate for a qualitative case study (Creswell, 2013; Guest et al., 2006; Merriam, 2002), as

the goal was to develop in-depth understanding of the specific case rather than to generalize findings.

Table 1

Anytown High School Adult Demographics

	Role	Education Level	Age	Years in Education	Race	Household Income
AHSA 1	Educator	Graduate degree	40-50	15-20	White	100-150K
AHSA 2	Educator	Graduate degree	50-60	20-25	White	100-150K
AHSA 3	Educator	Graduate degree	30-40	10-15	White	60-80K
AHSA 4	Parent	Graduate degree	40-50	15-20	White	60-70K

Table 2

Anytown High School Student Demographics

	Both Parents	Siblings	HE	CTE	Grad Year	Household Income	Race	K-12
AHSS1	Y	Y	Y	N	2025	50-70K	Native American	Y
AHSS2	N	Y	Y	Y	2025	60K	White	N
AHSS3	Y	Y	N	Y	2025	-	White	Y
AHSS4	N	Y	N	Y	2025	70-80K	Black	Y
AHSS5	Y	Y	Y	N	2025	75-80K	White	Y
AHSS6	Y	Y	Y	N	2025	~60K	Native American	Y
AHSS7	Y	Y	N	Y	2025	85+K	White	Y
AHSS8	Y	Y	Y	N	2025	85-95K	Native American	N
AHSS9	Y	N	Y	N	2026	55-65K	White	N
AHSS10	Y	Y	Y	N	2026	90-110K	White	N
AHSS11	Y	Y	Y	N	2026	65-70K	White	Y
AHSS12	Y	Y	Y	N	2026	80-90K	White	N
AHSS13	Y	N	Y	N	2026	60-65K	White	Y

According to Creswell (2013) and Merriam (2002), qualitative case studies often rely on purposive sampling of a relatively small number of participants to provide rich, contextualized insights into the research questions. This range is also supported by Guest et al. (2006), who found that data saturation, the point at which no new themes emerge, is often reached within the first six to 12 interviews, especially when participants belong to relatively homogenous groups.

Given the focused nature of my case and targeted participant categories (i.e., students, parents, AHS educators), a sample size of 13 students and four adults allowed for in-depth analysis of intersecting themes between groups while remaining feasible for the scope of the project. I used snowball sampling with participants by reaching out to existing connections as I “[built] on insights and connections from the early data collection” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 70). My existing relationships with people in these programs helped me identify and engage with other participants.

Protecting participants’ privacy was my foremost priority. All participants completed an oral script informed consent document illustrating their rights, including the right to stop the interview or withdraw their consent even after data collection. As per the instruction of the IRB officer, I collected the information contained within the oral consent document in a table to indicate that participants affirmed each question I posed. The informed consent form instructed the participant to understand there may be minimal risk for them by participating in this study. To my knowledge, the anonymity of all participants has been verified within all stored documents. Identifying information was entirely redacted to ensure participants’ privacy.

All participants were anonymized with assigned codes designating them as AHSA (adult) or AHSS (student) and the number designating the order in which I interviewed them (e.g., AHSA1, AHSS4, etc.) (see Tables 1 & 2). As AHS is located within a small, rural community, I paid particular attention to disguising identifying details within the data I collected. For example, I bundled educators and parents within a data subset and removed pronouns that could more easily allow community members to identify them. I also redacted references to other people and participant activities (jobs, extracurriculars) that might identify the community in which the

study originated or the participant. I used standard punctuation, brackets, and ellipses to indicate redacted or modified data.

I limited my recruitment to adult participants and was surprised by the number of students who contacted me due to snowball sampling. Students indicated eagerness to discuss their experiences with concurrent education, and I had to decline multiple interviews with participants under aged 18. Adult participants were more elusive. I was able to access educators with relative ease; however, despite several conversations with parents of concurrently enrolled students, a disconnect occurred when scheduling appointments for interviews.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom for consistency across participants. All but three student participants and all adult participants were willing to allow video and audio recording, and I used the transcription feature in the professional Zoom account to access transcripts of the recordings. I saved the emailed communication to a designated folder in my password-protected Outlook inbox. Once I concluded data collection, I anonymized the interview transcripts and my field notes and saved them in a designated folder in a password-protected computer.

Data Collection

I used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Upon receiving contact information for potential participants, I initiated contact via email or replied to their emailed inquiry. When two of my early participants requested a copy of the interview protocols in advance of our meeting, I determined to send the interview questions to all participants with a copy of the informed consent document. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and began with my reading the oral consent document and recording participant answers. All student participants verified their age prior to scheduling the interview and as part of the informed consent procedure.

My interview protocol guided this inquiry (see Appendix A). I created the protocols according to the information and context that I perceived necessary to answer the research questions, and for the adult participants, the protocols did not require revision. However, students were answering questions that I did not ask. After the first few students added details of their experiences participating in concurrent coursework, I adjusted the protocol to include questions about institutional support and challenges navigating within the postsecondary institution. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask follow-up questions to elicit detail from experiential accounts and created the flexibility to insert additional questions within the student protocols to increase the depth of data collected. To begin each interview, I asked participants demographic questions relating to education level, state of origin, amount of time they have lived in the AHS district, and employment data. This information allowed me to consider the intersections between participant identities and perceptions of CTE and HE and increased the depth of the discussion of findings.

Each interview lasted 30-60 minutes, with an average time of 48 minutes. I made notes while we talked and later used the notes and recorded audio to tidy up the transcripts generated by Zoom. My field notes largely just included my reactions to the content of the interviews and detailed when participants seemed hesitant or withholding.

Immediately following each interview, I reviewed my notes. For most interviews, I reviewed the audio and cleaned up the transcript within a week, and three weeks was the longest interval between interview and review. I emailed the transcribed interview to each participant individually for their review and clarification of any statements. Member-checking was an important part of ensuring that participants can review their statements and clarify any points they deem appropriate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). No participants elected to change or clarify any

of their statements. One participant replied to my member-checking email with a thumbs-up emoji. I did not share any of the data until I anonymized it, and I took care not to refer to participants by name or identifying information as I worked through my findings and discussion. I shared de-identified data only with my dissertation chair for advice and direction during data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study required theoretical analysis with constant comparison. Marshall and Rossman (2006) identified seven typical phases of qualitative analytic procedures: “(a) organizing the data; (b) immersion in the data; (c) generating categories and themes; (d) coding the data; (e) offering interpretations through analytic memos; (f) searching for alternative understandings; and (g) writing the report” (p. 156). I engaged in each phase iteratively; as I completed the cycle for one transcribed interview, I began anew with the next and referred to previous transcriptions as I progressed through the cycle repeatedly.

Creswell and Poth (2018) say, “The data analysis process in qualitative research is inductive, building from particular to general themes, and the researcher makes interpretations of the meaning of the data.” (p. 183). I did not have a deductive plan for analyzing the qualitative data; rather, I analyzed inductively; the patterns, themes, and categories emerged from the data rather than attempting to force the findings into pre-existing theories boxes. Percy et al. (2015) illustrated a twelve-step process for analysis that takes the researcher through a series of theming and coding exercises to ensure that every piece of data collaborates to create the themes. Following an inductive analysis process (Thomas, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I coded interview data to allow themes to emerge from participant narratives rather than imposing

predetermined categories. Once the qualitative data were coded and themes emerged, the conceptual framework presented in Chapter II was used to discuss the findings.

Hand-coding the data revealed patterns across the interviews that began building themes. In addition to line-by-line coding to discern themes within the data, I used chunking, color-coding, and a linguistic approach called ‘stylistics’ as tools to put the transcripts into conversation with one another (Sang & Sitko, 2015; Bloor & Bloor, 2004; Verdonk, 2002). This was critical to building patterns, identifying meaningful themes consistent across the data, and reducing the impact of my biases on the analysis. This synthesis provided a foundation that allowed me to review the overall themes through the lens of each conceptual framework to answer the research questions posed within the study.

Researcher Positionality

My understanding of qualitative research emphasizes that asking questions is as important to construct meaning as the answers are, and as a constructivist, I appreciated the collaborative opportunity inherent in qualitative case study research and was genuinely curious about other people’s perceptions of HE and CTE based on their experiences. Before I began this project, I had questionable preconceived notions of CTE. I believed students capable of attending college and earning academic degrees should do so. I understood CTE programs as useful and a way for some people to improve their economic situation, but I prioritized academic degrees as superior.

The study also allowed me the space to process my own experience of growing up within the community chosen for the case. As a “country kid” decades ago, I was entirely certain that I would leave home for college and not return to the farm except to visit my family at holidays. For about a decade, that held true as I pursued undergraduate and graduate degrees and entered

the workforce in academia, but when my own child was near school-age, I realized that I wanted her to know the safety of being cosseted in a community of friends and neighbors. Quite literally, I bought a farm, accepted a tenure-track position at the two-year college from which my mother, sister, and multiple cousins graduated, and moved home with my child. Not only do I have deep roots in this community, I have significant positive feelings toward SCSC.

As a professor of English at a rural two-year college, I am deeply concerned with the prioritization of workforce education over a traditional liberal arts focus on developing the self and critical thinking skills. As I see it, the pendulum has swung too far to the side of workforce development and even higher education is no longer seen as a means to acquiring self-knowledge and a community of thinkers. Rather HE has embraced the language of CTE, and students I teach regularly discuss their future as employees rather than discussing the big ideas required of an educated citizenry. While my research and reading have offset those negative perceptions, I will continue challenging my biases.

My understanding of traditional liberal arts models of HE as a transformative experience rather than a means to enter the workforce created a potential for bias in how I framed my research questions and planned the study. Additionally, my work as a community college faculty member who has developed attitudes toward concurrently enrolled AHS students continues to require examination. I question the wisdom and ethics of accelerating the timeline for young adults to join the workforce, and my colleagues and I regularly discuss the challenges of teaching students who do not have foundational knowledge to challenge their worldviews in a way that allows deeper learning. Plainly put, they are just so very young, and I struggle to support a system that is reducing childhood to premature engagement in late-stage capitalism. For the most part, my attitude toward concurrently enrolled students in HE is neutral or positive and, more

specifically, sympathetic; however, it was important to acknowledge those attitudes as I conducted interviews, analyzed data, and discussed findings.

This study began because I identified my own bias in favor of advising high school students to concurrently enroll in HE. As a parent, I was surprised when my daughter announced she would pursue a CTE certificate during her final year of high school. I was interested to learn how other people are advising this cohort and have compared that information to what students say influenced their decisions. To ensure that I am able to check my own bias, I continued to work closely with my dissertation advisor at each step of the research process, but more importantly, I grew invested in the conversations I was having within the community of students and educators. As someone who prioritizes data-driven decision-making, hearing the enthusiasm of students toward their concurrent enrollment study created sufficient cognitive dissonance to dispel many of my negative perceptions toward students being fast-tracked out of childhood and into the workforce regardless of which pathway the student chose.

Chapter IV Findings

Anytown High School (AHS) is in South Central County, Oklahoma, a rural community and is the largest public high school in the county, serving 451 students during the 2022-23 academic year (AHS, 2024). The school partners with two postsecondary institutions, South-Central State College (SCSC) and Astronaut Technology Center (ATC). This case is relevant for the study because AHS represents a common occurrence in rural Oklahoma where a single high school exists in the service districts of two-year college and a career technology center. It is also of interest because of the separation of funding and campuses between Oklahoma CareerTech, the governing body of CTE, and OSRHE, which governs HE in Oklahoma. This divide does not exist in other states in the U.S.

Anytown's demographics reflect multiple problems in the state—relatively high rates of child poverty, limited local employment options, and declining availability of qualified teachers. This last point challenges high schools to find solutions to ensure students can fulfill graduation requirements, especially in STEM courses. This creates pressure on students to make early postsecondary decisions to pursue CTE or HE that may determine their economic futures. The availability of both CTE and HE concurrent options within close geographic proximity allows for examination of how students and advisors navigate these choices when both pathways are theoretically accessible. Finally, as Oklahoma policymakers increasingly emphasize workforce education (Ferguson, 2025; McDonald, 2024) and authorize expansion of early college programs to younger students (Hutton, 2024), understanding how advising functions in existing concurrent enrollment contexts like AHS becomes particularly urgent to ensure successful outcomes for these students.

Within this context, I conducted a qualitative case study investigated how students at AHS, a rural high school in Oklahoma, make decisions regarding concurrent enrollment in higher education (HE) or career and technical education (CTE) pathways. Focusing on a single school and its partner institutions enabled me to understand how CTE and HE conversations function within the specific cultural and educational environment of Anytown, OK. Participants included four adults (coded AHSA) associated with AHS and thirteen students (coded AHSS) of AHS who had chosen to enroll in concurrent education programs at either SCSC, the local college, or ATC, the partner career technology center. Eight students were recent graduates of the high school and five were current seniors. All participants were aged 18 and above and engaged in semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom during the summer and early fall of 2025-2026 academic year. The study sought to answer three research questions:

RQ1: How do AHS adults (parents and educators) perceive ease of access or barriers to students participating in CTE and HE?

RQ2: How do concurrently enrolled AHS students perceive ease of access or barriers to participating CTE and HE?”

RQ3: How do AHS adults influence students’ perception of accessibility and barriers to enrolling in CTE and/or HE as they advise students in concurrent enrollment decisions?

Findings were organized by descriptive themes in alignment with interviews with AHS adults and AHS students.

Data revealed overlapping themes in which AHS students and adults agree on the value of CTE and HE. Notably, participants in the study described similar goals and values across both HE and CTE pathways. Adults emphasized their roles and relationships, guiding students to

navigate the systems, and their evolving beliefs in the value of CTE and HE, but they also shared concerns about concurrent paths of study, student readiness, and institutional disconnect.

Students framed their decisions in terms of future goals, community relationships, and navigating the system. They also discussed the resilience, or grit, they have developed in response to the stress created by their concurrent enrollment decisions. Both alignment and divergence between stakeholder groups revealed complex interplay between concurrently enrolled students and the institutional frameworks guiding and supporting their academic decisions.

AHSA Interview Findings

RQ1 was concerned with how educators' and parents' potential bias may influence how AHS students decide between post-secondary education options for concurrent enrollment.

Exploring the attitudes of parents and school personnel toward concurrent enrollment pathways may reveal how advising practices shape or limit student decision-making within the context of a high school in rural Oklahoma.

Roles & Relationships

Adults described their professional roles as evolving, multifaceted, and embedded in relationships with local institutions. Educators positioned themselves as facilitators, advocates, and guides navigating the tension between student advising and systems-level coordination. Their knowledge of concurrent enrollment often developed through informal networks and community connections rather than formal opportunities.

AHSA1 clearly stated, "I see my role as a facilitator, an advocate, and an advisor." AHSA2 revealed some conflict in the evolution of their engagement with individual students: "I do less direct student advising now, which is probably my biggest regret about the job" (AHSA2). AHSA3 similarly expressed, "My role has definitely evolved. When I was [in a

previous role], I was really hands-on with students. I saw them every day... Now [in my current role], I don't have that same daily contact with most students, which is, you know, it's probably the thing I miss most about [my former role]." Despite the desire to be more engaged, adult participants revealed the difficulties of advising students on their concurrent enrollment options. AHSA1 stated, "I'm managing all the logistics of concurrent enrollment for [juniors and seniors in] our school. That's a lot." They further clarified that "Right now it's just kind of tacked on to what counselors and administrators are already doing, and that's not sustainable."

AHS adults acknowledged their roles extended beyond their relationships with students. AHSA2 explained, "These days, my role is more about setting the vision and creating the systems that support students. I work with our... team to develop advising protocols and maintain relationships with our partner institutions." All of the adults revealed personal connections between themselves and personnel at ATC and SCSC. AHSA1 described learning about SCSC programs "from multiple angles... through [a close relationship] I got to see the college side of things, how they view these partnerships, what challenges they face with high school students on campus." AHSA4 named multiple friends and acquaintances from the college and laughingly said, "It's a small town." AHSA3 indicated developing a friendship with personnel at ATC through his work at AHS: "I've also built relationships with folks at the college and the tech center. Um, there's this guy...over at the tech center, and we've become pretty good friends...and I go to the games over at SCSC when I can just to say hi to [coaching staff]."

Navigating the Systems

Adults consistently described a fragmented system where high schools, colleges, and career tech centers operated with limited coordination, unclear credit transfer policies, and inadequate support infrastructure. They expressed frustration with placement requirements that

excluded capable students, insufficient advising, and the gaps that leave both students and families navigating complex systems without adequate guidance or resources.

All four adults described challenges with institutional coordination. AHSA1 explained, “As for reciprocal policies between institutions, that’s, um, that’s complicated. SCSC has transfer agreements, so credits move pretty smoothly between them.” They elaborated, “CTE credits are even more complex, some technical courses will count toward an associate’s degree at the community college, but they won’t transfer to a four-year school as academic credit.” AHSA2 similarly noted, “The community college and the technology center are separate entities with different accrediting bodies and different governance structures. They don’t have formal reciprocal agreements in most cases.” AHSA3 put it more simply: “They’re separate institutions, totally different systems.”

Due to these challenges, adults advocated for better collaboration. AHSA1 recommended, “I’d improve the collaboration between high schools and post-secondary institutions. We need regular meetings, shared data systems, so we know how our students are doing and what we can do to better prepare them.” AHSA2 expounded, “Better coordination between institutions is critical. I’d love to see a unified advising system where high school counselors, college advisors, and tech center advisors are all working from the same playbook and sharing information about student progress.”

Adults expressed frustration with placement requirements that prevented capable students from accessing concurrent enrollment opportunities. AHSA2 shared, “These requirements can be a barrier for some students, which is frustrating. I’ve seen bright, motivated students who just don’t test well get shut out of opportunities because they’re a point or two below the cutoff.” AHSA3 echoed this concern: “I’ve had kids who score a 17 on the ACT English and they’re just

one point away from being eligible. And you know they're capable of doing the work, but the system says no. We can use their GPA now. That helps." The gatekeeping extended beyond test scores. AHSA1 noted changing dynamics in CTE access: "We have the cut scores for the college, but honestly, before, [CTE] was always for our kids who aren't college-bound. It was a place for them to further education and keep them engaged instead of dropping out, then also have a trade when they graduated. That has changed a lot. It's now a very competitive program." This shift concerned adults who worried about students falling through the cracks, unable to meet HE requirements and now facing increased competition for CTE slots.

Adults acknowledged that students and families often navigate concurrent enrollment without fully understanding the systems. AHSA1 observed, "Most students do not fully understand the differences, and I think there are several reasons for that. First, the terminology is confusing." They continued, "We assume knowledge that students don't have. We'll say something like, 'This CTE course will give you an industry certification,' and the student nods, but they don't really know what an industry certification is or why it matters." AHSA3 confirmed, "We throw around terms like 'concurrent enrollment' and 'dual credit' and 'career tech' and 'industry certification,' and for a lot of students, that's just alphabet soup."

Financial information proved particularly difficult to communicate. AHSA1 stated, "Financial aid information is really lacking. A lot of families don't realize there are costs associated with concurrent enrollment, or they don't know how to apply for fee waivers or scholarships." AHSA3 explained, "A lot of families don't understand the costs involved in concurrent enrollment. They hear 'free tuition' and think everything's covered, but there are still fees for books, transportation, lab fees, materials." AHSA4's perspective further illuminated these gaps. They recalled, "I had a lot of questions, about costs, about what the program would

entail, about how this would affect [my child's] high school graduation requirements, and I didn't always get clear answers. Or I'd get one answer from one person and a different answer from someone else. It was confusing." They continued, "There's no centralized resource where you can go and say, 'Here's my situation, what are my options?' It feels very piecemeal."

Participants also identified financial literacy and the hidden costs of concurrent enrollment as persistent barriers to participation. While tuition was covered by state programs, students and families were frequently surprised by fees, the cost of textbooks, and other hidden costs. AHSA1 explained, "I'd also eliminate or significantly reduce costs for students. Concurrent enrollment should be free or nearly free, especially for low-income students, but the state only covers tuition. There's still fees." Others echoed this concern, noting that families often misunderstand what "free tuition" entails. As AHSA2 explained, "Students and families don't understand how concurrent enrollment can save them money in the long run, and they also don't understand the costs involved... We don't do a good enough job of helping families plan for those expenses." Another participant described financial literacy as "a weak spot," acknowledging that "families hear 'free tuition' and think everything's covered, but it's not" (AHSA3). Collectively, these reflections suggest that misunderstandings and incomplete information can result in surprises, particularly for low-income students whose families may not have a full picture when deciding whether to participate.

Adults uniformly acknowledged inadequate support structures. AHSA1 stated plainly, "No, there's definitely not enough support, and it's something I think about a lot because I'm the primary support person for our students, and I can't possibly meet all the needs." AHSA2 concurred, "Honestly, no. I think we're doing better than we were ten years ago, but there are still significant gaps in support." AHSA3 summarized, "No, honestly, I don't think there's

enough support. We're doing the best we can with the resources we have, but there are gaps."

AHSA4 emphasized the implications: "And for parents who aren't educators themselves, who don't know how to navigate the system or who to ask—I can't imagine how much harder it is for them." Adults also noted inconsistent support from partner institutions. AHSA3 observed, "Support from [ATC and SCSC] is inconsistent. Some of the advisors at the community college and tech center are great with high school students, but others treat them like they should already know everything."

Evolving Beliefs

Adults described significant shifts in their own beliefs about educational pathways, often moving from a "college for all" attitude toward recognition that multiple pathways, including CTE, could lead to success. This evolution was accompanied by acknowledgment of their own biases and ongoing concerns about how gender stereotypes and academic tracking continue to shape student choices. Adults wrestled with the tension between guiding students and respecting student agency.

All four adults described evolving from a college-centric worldview. AHSA1 reflected, "When I first started in this role, I was very much in the 'college for everyone' mindset... I think I had this unconscious bias that the traditional academic pathway was superior." AHSA2 agreed, "When I started teaching, I had a pretty narrow view of success... I believed that a four-year college degree was the gold standard and anything else was second best. We were in that mindset of 'college for all,' and I bought into it completely." AHSA3 admitted, "Oh, absolutely. Man, when I was younger, when I first started... I had a ... a pretty narrow view of what success looked like. I thought the goal was to get kids scholarships to play college ball and get their degrees. That was the dream, right?" AHSA4's evolution coincided with their child's decisions.

They confessed, “Okay, so... I want to be honest here. I pushed for college. I really did. And I’m not... I’m not entirely proud of that now, but at the time, it made sense to me.” They explained, “My thinking was that those credits would transfer anywhere, and they would set [my child] up for a four-year degree. I kept saying, ‘Keep your options open, honey. Don’t limit yourself.’ Because I think, um... I think I was worried that if she went the tech school route, she’d be closing doors, you know?”

The shift in perspective often came from witnessing student outcomes. AHSA1 recalled, “I had some conversations with former students who came back and were like, ‘I wish someone had told me about this ATC option,’ or ‘I wish I hadn’t felt like I had to go to a four-year university.’ That really made me rethink things.” AHSA2 observed, “I’ve seen students rack up tremendous debt pursuing degrees they never finished or degrees in fields where they couldn’t find jobs. I’ve also seen students who went into the trades right out of high school... who are now making great money and have stable careers.” AHSA3 reflected on the consequences of their earlier coaching advice: “I’ve seen former players who went to college on scholarships, got injured or just didn’t work out athletically, and then they were stuck at schools they didn’t want to be at, studying things they didn’t care about. Some of them dropped out... And I started thinking, ‘Man, did I give them good advice?’” AHSA4’s shift came from watching their child thrive in CTE: “Seeing [my child] in this program has been eye-opening for me. [They’re] thriving, honestly. [They’re] more engaged than I’ve ever seen [them] in school.” AHSA4 acknowledged, “So I’ve had to admit to myself that maybe I was wrong. Maybe [ATC] was the right choice for [them], even if it wasn’t what I would have chosen. (laughs) I still hope [they] decide to get a degree eventually though. “

Despite evolving beliefs, adults struggled with how prescriptive to be. AHSA1 emphasized, “I’m careful not to push too hard in either direction. I want students to make informed decisions, not just do what I think they should do.” AHSA2 concurred, “Part of growing up is making your own decisions, even if they’re not what the adults in your life would recommend. I’ve learned over the years that my job isn’t to make decisions for students; it’s to give them good information.” AHSA3 used a coaching metaphor to explain this tension: “Ha...students definitely don’t always take my advice. And you know what? That’s part of growing up... You can tell a kid what play to run, but once they’re on the field, they’re gonna do what they think is right.” They shared an example where a student’s choice proved them wrong:

I’ve had plenty of kids do the opposite of what I recommended. I remember this one kid, um, real bright kid, junior year, and I thought he should be loading up on college credit courses. But he wanted to go into the automotive program at the tech center because he loved cars. And I was like, “Dude, you’re smart enough to be an engineer, why do you want to work on cars?” But that’s what he wanted, so that’s what he did. And you know what? He’s doing great. He works at a dealership now, he’s happy, he’s making decent money. I was wrong. (AHSA3)

AHSA4 reflected on the importance of listening: “First, I’d say listen to your kid. Really listen. I almost didn’t, and I’m glad [my child] was persistent enough to stick with what she wanted, but not all kids will push back like that.” They also acknowledged, “Be honest with yourself about your own biases. I thought I was being objective about what was best for [my child], but I was really projecting my own values and experiences onto her.”

Despite changing personal beliefs, adults recognized that some stereotypes persist. AHSA1 observed, “There’s also a strong gender pattern. Our tech programs in traditionally

male-dominated fields like welding, automotive, and construction are overwhelmingly male, while our health sciences and early childhood education programs are overwhelmingly female.” They added, “I’ve tried to encourage students to break out of those stereotypes, but it’s tough. I had a student a few years ago. She went to SCSC junior and senior years. We all thought she’d transfer to OU, but after she finished her associates, she went and got a CDL and drives a truck. She’s one of my favorites to use as an example.” AHSA3 affirmed, “One pattern is gender. We see more boys in programs like welding, automotive, construction, and more females in programs like nursing, cosmetology, early childhood education. Now, that’s starting to change a little bit—we’ve had some girls in welding and some guys in nursing—but the traditional gender patterns are still pretty strong.”

The stigma around CTE remained a concern. AHSA2 stated, “What concerns me is when people assume that tech is only for students who ‘can’t make it’ in academics. That’s a harmful stereotype that we’re trying to break down.” AHSA3 agreed, “What I don’t like is when people treat [ATC] as a lesser option, like it’s only for kids who aren’t smart enough for college. That’s just wrong.” AHSA4 acknowledged similar biases: “Honestly, it’s made me rethink some of my biases about career and technical education. I think I had this outdated idea that [ATC] was for kids who weren’t ‘college material,’ and that’s just not true.”

Concerns

Adults expressed significant concern about student readiness for concurrent enrollment, emphasizing that not all students possess the maturity, time management skills, or academic preparation necessary for success. These concerns were compounded by awareness of structural inequities, transportation barriers, financial constraints, and informational gaps that disproportionately affected low-income, rural, first-generation, and students of color. The

emotional labor of supporting students through these challenges while managing their own workload limitations was a recurring concern.

Adults emphasized that chronological age does not necessarily indicate readiness. AHSA1 explained, “[ATC] also considers work ethic and maturity—they’ll ask me for a recommendation, and I’m honest with them about whether I think a student is ready for that level of independence and responsibility.” AHSA2 elaborated, “Not all students are ready for college-level work or intensive career training when they’re 16 or 17 years old. Some students enroll in these programs because they think it sounds good or because there’s pressure from parents or peers, but they’re not emotionally or academically prepared.”

The shift from high school to college-level expectations proved challenging. AHSA3 detailed, “Time management and maturity are huge factors. Can this kid handle the independence that comes with college courses? Are they organized? Do they procrastinate? College professors aren’t gonna chase you down about missing assignments, so you need to be self-directed.” AHSA4 also worried about early specialization: “What if she changes her mind? What if she discovers a different passion? I always tell kids it’s okay to change direction, but I know some of them feel locked in once they’ve started a program.”

The demands of concurrent enrollment concerned all of the adults. AHSA1 stated, “These are still kids, and we’re asking them to balance high school, college-level coursework or professional training, maybe a job, extracurriculars, family responsibilities.” They described the consequences when students become overloaded: “I’ve seen students burn out, and that’s really hard to watch” (AHSA1). AHSA2 described the pressure and burnout as “heartbreaking” and elaborated, “The workload is another concern. High school is already demanding, and when you

add concurrent enrollment courses or half-day programs on top of regular classes, extracurriculars, part-time jobs, and family, some students are stretched too thin.”

AHSA3 tried to counsel students about realistic expectations: “The advice I always give, no matter what, is, ‘Don’t overload yourself.’ I see kids trying to take three college courses plus AP classes plus sports plus a job, and it’s like, ‘Dude, you’re gonna burn out.’” AHSA4 witnessed this exhaustion and said, “I worry about the workload too. [They’re] trying to balance [their] regular high school classes in the morning, then [they’re] at [ATC] all afternoon, and then has homework for both. [My child’s] exhausted a lot of the time.”

Adults also identified concerns about barriers preventing equitable access. AHSA1 stated directly, “One of my biggest [concerns] is access and equity. Not all students have access to these opportunities because of transportation, cost, scheduling conflicts, lack of information.” They noted, “Students from more affluent families or students whose parents went to college tend to be the kids doing concurrent [programs], and that bothers me” (AHSA1). AHSA2 explained the paradox, stating, “Concurrent enrollment can be a great equalizer...it can also exacerbate inequalities. Students from more educated families often have better information about these programs and more support in navigating them.” AHSA3 summarized, “The students who benefit most from concurrent enrollment are often the ones who already have advantages, supportive parents, good academic preparation, reliable transportation, whatever.” Geographic isolation compounded these challenges. AHSA4 described their rural situation: “We live way out in the county, about forty-five minutes from town, and [my child] has to be there five days a week for the afternoon session even if the high school is out. That’s a lot of driving. She can take the bus, but...[laughs].” They also emphasized the financial worry, “And there’s a cost, even

though it's supposed to be affordable. There are supplies, she needed a MacBook that could run the design software, and that wasn't cheap. I'm managing it, but it's tight" (AHSA4).

Adults also recognized clear racial and socioeconomic disparities in participation. Several participants observed that students from historically marginalized or lower-income backgrounds remain underrepresented in concurrent enrollment programs. AHSA1 noted, "Students of color are somewhat underrepresented in our concurrent enrollment programs overall, which tells me there are access barriers or information gaps that I need to address" (AHSA1). Another described the cultural component of these disparities: "Students from lower-income families are more likely to choose CTE programs, while students from higher-income families tend to do HE concurrent enrollment. I think part of that is cultural, college-educated parents tend to push their kids toward college pathways" (AHSA3). This pattern was especially pronounced among first-generation students, whom AHSA3 described as "less likely to even know these programs exist," These observations point to a structural gap in information and advocacy, where the students most likely to benefit from early access to college credit often remain the least equipped to navigate the system.

Beyond the logistical and structural concerns, participants expressed the emotional weight of their work with students. One described the ongoing effort to reach students who might not view themselves as capable or eligible for concurrent enrollment opportunities. AHSA1 said, "I'm constantly trying to reach students who might not see themselves as candidates for these programs and make sure they know it's an option." They also acknowledged the concern that "there are students who fall through the cracks or who don't get as much individualized attention as they need" (AHSA1). The emotional stakes of advising were particularly visible when students struggled or failed. AHSA3 reflected, "Failing at sixteen or seventeen feels like the end

of the world. I've seen kids spiral into depression after failing a class." Together, these accounts reveal the profound relational labor involved in supporting students through concurrent enrollment.

These four themes (i.e., roles and relationships, navigating the system, evolving beliefs, concerns about access) captured how adults at AHS understand their responsibilities, navigate institutional constraints, and grapple with guiding students through concurrent enrollment decisions. Adults demonstrated self-awareness about their own biases, expressed concern for equity and student well-being, and articulated frustration with disparate systems that limit their ability to provide support. These perspectives set the stage for examining how students experience these same systems and where adult and student viewpoints converge or diverge.

AHSS Interview Findings

The second research question sought to collect information about what factors students considered when determining whether to enroll in a concurrent course of study. A key part of this question is how students perceived the value of CTE and HE in their decision-making and what influenced their perceptions. Students demonstrated a high degree of self-efficacy in their responses; rather than focusing on AHS adults influencing their perceptions of CTE and HE, students described their goals, preferences, and relationships as reasons for their choices. While students generally expressed positive views of both CTE and HE, an interesting finding emerged around institutional reputation. Students articulated perceptions about the prestige or value of the local college and technology center—perceptions that were often reinforced through family anecdotes, peer narratives, and local community discourse. These judgments about reputation seemed to shape the direction of concurrent enrollment. The findings revealed themes of planning for the future, strengthening relationships, navigating the systems, and developing grit.

Planning for the Future

Seven of the thirteen students interviewed had specific career plans developed and had investigated the majors appropriate to achieving those objectives. Five of these career plans were centered on health sciences. Although six students did not state specific career plans, all but one student talked about pursuing concurrent enrollment options in the context of their eventual participation in the workforce. AHSS8 shared, “I’m going to be a pediatric nurse,” while AHSS13 said, “I’m taking my basics now, and I want to stay at [SCSC] for nursing school.” AHSS6 speculated,

Yeah, growing up in a rural area, I've seen how hard it can be to access good healthcare. The nearest hospital is in Anytown, but it's basically just to transfer people to Oklahoma City or Tulsa, which is over an hour away. A lot of rural families can't afford that kind of time and travel...and there's a shortage of doctors in rural areas, so the ones we do have are overworked. I want to be part of the solution...Maybe I'll come back and practice here. That would be pretty awesome.

While many participants aimed for future careers in healthcare, several had equally developed career goals. AHSS12 reflected, “I’ve always wanted to be a teacher, and...the concurrent experience has just made me more confident in the academic world.” AHSS8 enthusiastically elaborated,

I'm planning to transfer to a university with a strong journalism or communications program. I'm looking at Oklahoma State, University of Oklahoma, and maybe University of Missouri, which has one of the best journalism schools in the country. OSU and OU are closer to home, which would be nice, but Mizzou has such a great reputation for journalism that I want to apply. I also want to look for schools that have good marching

bands because I'd love to continue with band in college. That's one of the things I'll miss most when I leave high school, the camaraderie and the experiences we've had together. But I'm excited about what's next. I want to work for a sports network or a newspaper, covering college or professional sports. That's the dream.

Even students with less defined plans articulated a strong desire to “get ahead” in the workforce. AHSS2 reported, [I]

just didn't want to take senior English. I wasn't planning to go to college, but I really liked my Comp teacher. [laughs] This way, I can keep working and take classes online without getting student loans. When I talked to [college advisor name], she said I could do my whole degree online, but I think I might try to take some classes at the school.

AHSS5 remarked with humor, “I'll be at OSU next year, but I have 15 hours and already took my worst subject (laughs).” Likewise, AHSS11 revealed high motivation without a specific plan, stating, “I decided to do college courses so I can graduate a year early!”

Two students selected CTE because it “made sense” for their goals that had already been shaped by local labor markets, family examples, and exposure to particular careers. AHSS2 stated, “My [stepparent] makes good money doing HVAC, so I figured I'd check [ATC] out.”

AHSS7 concurred with the sentiment of following in the footsteps of family, stating, “Most people in my family work in healthcare.” AHSS7 further explained they chose ATC because

It fits what I would like to go on to do more and would help me more in the long run... I thought about which option would give me the best head start. [ATC]'s health sciences program stood out because it's hands-on. You're not just memorizing terms from a book; you're learning skills you'll actually use. That was really appealing to me...I had to plan

carefully. I wanted something that would help me reach my career goals but still leave room for [extracurriculars] I love doing.

Nine of the thirteen student participants emphasized the financial sensibility of enrolling in concurrent programs. Students who enrolled in classes at SCSC discussed the cost of higher education in context of their family circumstances and avoiding debt. AHSS6 considered their options in conversation with a sibling and said, “we talked about how much pressure this would take off our family budget.” AHSS1 elaborated,

My family doesn't have a ton of extra money for college, so this was a way to save thousands of dollars. Well, the biggest thing was just getting ahead. I want to go into healthcare, so I knew I had a lot of school ahead of me. Taking college classes now means I can knock out some of those general education requirements without having to pay for them later.

AHSS13 expressed similar concerns about saving their family money, saying, “The idea of getting college credit for free and saving my [parents] money was honestly the primary motivation for me.”

Some students expressly anticipated their need for financial assistance to pursue HE. AHSS13 elaborated,

Cost is paramount. Nursing is a fantastic career with good pay, but I don't want to have student loans...I know federal aid and scholarships will be crucial. I'm applying for every scholarship I can find. Every dollar counts, and saving money for college is always a priority, which is why concurrent enrollment was such a huge deal. It's not just a bonus for us; it's a financial necessity.

AHSS10 simply repeated, “I also plan to take any scholarship workshop my counselor recommends...[so] I can graduate with less debt.”

HE students highlighted the financial savings of shaving time from their future degree programs. AHSS10 explained, “I look at college like an investment: what’s the total cost, what credits transfer, and what’s the return? Concurrent enrollment is a high-ROI move...and I’m shortening the time to degree.” AHSS9 also “really just wanted a head start on college. My goal was to earn some credits before I graduated so I wouldn’t have to take as many classes later. I also wanted to save money—concurrent enrollment is basically free.”

CTE students focused on the immediacy of entering the professional workforce after high school graduation. AHSS3 succinctly expressed, “The main thing was that I wanted to graduate from high school and be able to make money.” AHSS4 also “wanted to take classes that would set me up for success in a healthcare program. I also thought about cost—graduating high school with an [ATC certificate] is a huge financial benefit.” AHSS2, a student who completed both a technical program and enrolled in HE classes concurrently, said, “I could start working right after the program without student loans. That was a big plus.”

Several student participants contemplated how concurrent coursework expanded their career goals. AHSS5 shared, “I’ve learned I actually like the science side of things more than I expected. I’ve also realized how much I like helping people. It sounds cliché, but I want to do something that feels meaningful.” AHSS4 reflected on their program at ATC. They said “learning more [of the different options within healthcare], I’m also interested in things like physical therapy or maybe even becoming a physician assistant. So my plans haven’t changed completely, but they’ve expanded. I’m more open to exploring different paths now” (AHSS4). Another CTE student, AHSS2, revealed,

Before, I thought I'd just go straight to work after high school. But now I'm thinking maybe I'll take some business classes online through [SCSC]. My professor kind of inspired me that way—she talked a lot about being strategic with your education. I realized if I ever want to start my own company, I'll need to know more about running a business—stuff like accounting, marketing, customer service. I never thought I'd care about that, but now it seems smart.

AHSS10 also discussed their interest in business and other options in the field after participating in concurrent HE. They said,

I'm taking business-related courses. I didn't realize how much national policy connects to everyday decisions, like pricing or hiring, even for small companies. I like using numbers to tell a story—figuring out what customers respond to and how to make better decisions with data. I'm also considering a minor in information systems later to learn some data tools. (AHSS10)

One student speculated on taking a different course entirely. AHSS9 said,

I used to be dead set on business because I wanted to take over my [parent's] company someday. But biology has really opened my eyes to other options. I've started thinking about things like environmental science, agriculture, or wildlife management...I'm not totally sure yet, but I feel more confident that whatever I choose will connect to something I care about. That's been one of the best parts of this experience—it's given me room to explore without pressure.

These trends revealed students' choices in enrollment based on influence from their families and outside forces, including cost of postsecondary options. Several participants recalled success stories within their families and used them as templates for their own ambitions, even if they had not explored less visible alternatives. Students chose between concurrent enrollment

pathways based on their goals and values, but those goals and values are often shaped by relationships rather than institutional data. Interestingly, participation in concurrent coursework reinforced some students' original plans for study, but some students considered other paths as a result. Several participants described how concurrent coursework exposed them to new interests and possibilities, partially as they developed relationships within the institutions.

Strengthening Relationships

Social influences, particularly peer networks, family bonds, and adult role models, played a critical role in shaping student choices. Students often interpreted their options through the familiar lens of family expectations and peer validation. Students frequently made decisions that aligned with their pre-existing social frameworks. Rather than weighing institutional pros and cons in isolation, students described a deep affinity for home. AHSS6 enthused, “My family owns our own house on an 800-acre farm. I have three sisters, my [parents], we all help out my grandpa and grandma on the farm raising over 150 cows. We also have a lot of horses along with dogs.” AHSS12 said, “My [parent] is a teacher at one of our elementary schools in [Anytown]...I like my neighborhood, it is right across from the middle school, so my sister can walk to and from school. I have lived here my entire life, and I feel very safe and comfortable here.” They continued saying, “When I’m [deciding which institution to attend after high school], the three things that matter most to me are price, reputation of the education degree, and location—I don't want to be too far from my family” (AHSS12).

A few students discussed their connection to the community in which they grew up. AHSS3 revealed,

I've been in this school system since kindergarten. It's pretty much all I know! I've had some of the same teachers my older siblings had, so they already knew what to expect

from me. [laughs] It's funny because it feels like growing up in a big extended family—teachers, coaches, and even the cafeteria workers all know your name. It can be a little claustrophobic sometimes, but mostly it's nice.

AHSS7 agreed, saying,

Honestly, I've always liked the small-town atmosphere. You know everyone, people wave when you drive down the street, and the community supports the school like crazy—especially for sports and events...I've had some of the same classmates my whole life, which is kind of special. It's a small school, but that also means the teachers know you really well. They notice if you're slipping, or if you're doing something great—they see it all. That's helped a lot because they've been super encouraging about concurrent enrollment and my future plans.

This attachment to their homes seemed to lead to students being drawn toward institutions that already had a presence in their lives through their family. AHSS1 reminisced, “[SCSC] was where my [parent] attended college, so I went over and looked at her picture in the [Nursing Building].” AHSS2 recalled the relationships that tipped them toward enrolling in CTE: “[My stepparent] went to [ATC] for heat and air, and [they make] good money, so I went over and talked to them. Then, my girlfriend said she was going over there, and I figured it'd be fun to ride with her. [laughs].”

The influence of their families on the students remained at the forefront of all the student interviews. In some cases, students' families provided direct advice on concurrent enrollment decisions. AHSS8 credited their siblings. They said, “My older sisters both did concurrent enrollment [at SCSC], so I already knew about it from hearing them talk about it.... they've told me that concurrent enrollment gave them a head start and made the transition to college easier”

(AHSS8). AHSS1 similarly expressed, “Since [my parent] went through [SCSC] herself, she understands what it takes and she's always encouraging me.”

Even after the enrollment decisions were made, students credited their families with providing structural and practical support as they participated in postsecondary education. AHSS1 said, “I think family support is one of those things that can make or break your concurrent enrollment experience. If you have people at home who understand what you're doing and support your goals, it makes the hard times a lot easier to get through.” According to AHSS4, even their younger siblings were on board. They claimed, “My younger brothers know that when I have a big test or project coming up, I need quiet time to study. They're pretty good about giving me space when I need it” (AHSS4). AHSS8 credited the entire family with supporting their endeavors:

Honestly, my family was a huge support. My [parent] would check in on me and remind me that I was capable of handling it. My [siblings] would text me encouraging messages when they knew I was stressed. My [parent] would tell me how proud he was of me for working so hard. And my younger brother, even though he's just a kid, would try to help out by being quiet when I was studying or bringing me snacks when I was doing homework late at night.

The idea of safety and comfort extended to students' choices to consider their peer relationships as they decided between HE and CTE. AHSS9 relayed, “Two of my friends are in the class, so at least I knew someone. Having a couple of friends in the same class made it feel less overwhelming.” In the same vein, AHSS11 emphasized, “I'm just college material, you know? I mean, all of my friends are going to college too!’ They elaborated, “It felt like the natural thing to do, just another step we were all taking” (AHSS11). AHSS12 “also talked to a

few classmates who were already taking concurrent courses, and they helped calm any initial nerves I had about the workload being too much. Knowing they could handle it made me feel like I could too.” AHSS1 also felt confident in considering their peers’ experience with concurrent coursework. They said, “Sometimes hearing from someone who's actually doing it is more valuable than hearing from adults who did it years ago or who are explaining it from an administrative perspective” (AHSS1).

Similar to their reliance on their families for support once the enrollment decision was made, students reported mutual encouragement with their peer groups. AHSS8 said, “I...leaned on my friends in band. We were all going through similar struggles, trying to balance school and rehearsals and performances, so we understood each other. We'd encourage each other and help each other stay motivated.” AHSS1 agreed, but with the twist that they met new peers in their HE class:

There were actually a few other concurrent students from different high schools, and we kind of gravitated toward each other. We'd sit together, study together before exams, and sometimes we'd text each other if we had questions about assignments. That was really helpful because we were all going through the same thing.

Additional relationships were formed with the professors of their classes. AHSS5 felt, “The teachers here really care, and because it’s small, you get to know them personally. They recognize that concurrent students come from different backgrounds and have different challenges.” AHSS1 explained the benefit of taking in-person classes, stating,

The [Biology] professor was really engaging too. [They] made the material interesting and was always willing to help if you didn't understand something... In the online Composition class, it was harder to connect with other students since we didn't meet in

person. There were discussions where we were supposed to interact, but it's not the same as actually talking face-to-face. I did exchange a few messages with one other student who was also from a local high school, and that was nice, but overall the online class felt more isolating.

Some of the tension between online and in-person modalities was later reflected as students discussed navigating the system after enrollment. Their reliance on the high school counselor was paramount while they were deciding on postsecondary options and while they participated in HE or CTE.

Navigating the Systems

While social influence provided the foundation for students' decision-making, their ability to act on these preferences depended, at least in part, on pragmatic concerns like geographic proximity and ease of navigating the enrollment and class management systems. Nine of thirteen stated that convenience influenced their decision on where to enroll. AHSS9 disclosed, "I decided to attend HE because it offers lots of online concurrent classes. They are also able to accommodate high school students very well." Multiple students expressed that applying and enrolling in HE courses was quick and easy. AHSS8 stated, "I wouldn't change anything about the concurrent enrollment system; it was easy for me to apply. It was a streamlined process, and it only took five minutes." AHSS1 elaborated, "It was the easiest for me to enroll, and the credits are easily transferable." Several other students highlighted that SCSC was the only HE option presented to them as a matter of geographic proximity.

AHSS5 said, "[SCSC] was the only option presented to me, to be completely honest, but I do appreciate the cheap cost and good class." AHSS1, AHSS8, AHSS9, AHSS10, and AHSS11 all shared that SCSC was the only option offered for concurrent enrollment in HE.

Other students iterated similar sentiments of proximity and affordability. AHSS6 echoed, “[SCSC] was the most logical choice because it was the closest college and very affordable.”

AHSS11 expounded on this theme, saying,

Well, the convenience was huge, right? I literally live minutes from the campus. But the biggest factor was that it was the only option our high school really pushed. We partner officially with [SCSC], and they make the enrollment process seamless. I didn't have to compare five different colleges or programs. It was free, it was right there, and it was the established path. Why complicate things? [laughs]

AHSS10 also considered location. They said, “[SCSC] is close enough that transportation isn't a headache” (AHSS10).

At the same time, perceptions of exclusivity shaped how students viewed CTE. AHSS4 claimed, “Certain [CTE] programs are super competitive. The course I took was actually not my first choice.” This reflects the structure of institutional culture as rules and barriers that shape who gets in and who gets left out, even when opportunity appears available on the surface.

AHSS7 explained that CTE is worth the challenging admission requirements. They said,

[ATC's] health sciences program is one of the best in the area, and I liked that it offered real clinical experience. It's more structured than some of the online options, which I needed. I like having a routine and knowing what to expect. Plus, [ATC] feels professional—it's like stepping into a real healthcare environment every day...It's very hands-on. It's cool because you're not just studying; you're applying what you learn right away. It's made me more confident about working with patients.

Institutional navigation often depended on the high school counselor, with 10 of 13 students naming them as the key figure who helped them complete applications and understand

concurrent enrollment options. This gatekeeping role underscored the importance of accurate, timely information in deciding on postsecondary education while in high school. AHSS12 said, “My school counselor was key for the logistics. She guided me through the enrollment process and made sure that the college credits I earned would meet my [high school] graduation requirements.” AHSS10 similarly stated, “My school counselor...explained that I could take college classes at South Central State while still finishing high school [and] get credit for both... If I can take a class once and have it count twice, that’s a no-brainer. [laughs].” AHSS11 credited the high school counselor with being “the project manager on the whole thing” while AHSS8 summed up the experiences of most students with “my school counselor handled all the paperwork and enrollment stuff.” AHSS7, a CTE student, said, “My school counselor...explained that I could take classes at the college or the tech center for both high school and college credit. Once I learned it could save time and money, I was like—why wouldn’t I do that?” AHSS4 also made the decision to attend CTE after conversations with their [parent], counselor, and peers. They said,

My [parent] was my biggest supporter and advisor on this. [They] helped me think through which classes would make sense and how to balance it with my high school workload. I also talked extensively with my school counselor, who was super helpful in walking me through the enrollment process and making sure I understood what credits would count for which high school requirement. I talked to some of my friends who were already doing [ATC] too, just to get their perspective on what it was really like. (AHSS4)

Almost half of the students recalled visits from the CTE and HE recruiters to their high school, and the recollections of these visits further illustrated the need for the dissemination of accurate information in helping students make their decisions. Rather than relying on the high

school counselor to complete the legwork to direct students to programs suitable for their needs, students were able to pair information shared by recruiters with the conversations they engaged in with the counselor who ultimately enrolled them. Without this access, students might have relied on social media, hearsay, or peer models—further reinforcing any existing confirmation bias. But in this case, the counselor’s guidance, coupled with memories of high school assemblies during which recruiters discussed concurrent academic options, appeared to scaffold their growth, helping students become more confident in their reasoning and choices. AHSS9 shared,

I learned about it at school. There was an assembly during my sophomore year where someone from [South Central State] came and explained how it worked—basically, you could take college classes while still in high school and get credit for both. It sounded like a good deal. I didn’t even realize it was possible until that day. I went straight to my counselor afterward and asked how I could get started.

AHSS1 said, “It was mostly at school. I remember there were assemblies where they talked about it—some lady from [SCSC] came to the high school and explained what concurrent enrollment was, how it worked, what the benefits were.” One student learned of HE concurrent enrollment at home. AHSS5 recollected, “I kind of grew up hearing about it. My [parent’s] worked at the college for years, so [they’ve] been talking about concurrent enrollment forever.”

Students discussed navigating the system once they were already enrolled in courses as they reflected on their participation in concurrent enrollment programs. AHSS5 relayed, “[My parent] works at [the college] and told me it was a good idea to get certain classes out of the way here since the classes are smaller, so it’s easier to get help...I think [they’re] right.”

Other students reported on learning to organize their materials and manage their time wisely. Even before classes began, AHSS1 encouraged fellow students, saying, “Don't wait until the last minute to apply or register for classes...Classes fill up really quickly, especially the ones that work well with high school schedules.” AHSS7 preemptively “talked to a few friends who were already [doing a program at ATC], just to see what the workload was like. Most of them said the same thing—it’s not too bad once you get used to it, but you do have to stay organized.”

Once they began their concurrent coursework, students recognized the need to balance their time with organizational tools. AHSS3 reported, “In high school, teachers constantly remind you about deadlines. At [ATC], it’s on you. You have to stay on top of everything. I keep a planner now—I never used to—but it’s the only way I don’t lose track.” AHSS8 concurred, “I’ve had to become a master of time management. I keep a detailed planner where I write down everything—band practices, drama rehearsals, performances, homework due dates, exam dates, everything.” Both AHSS3 and AHSS8 also reported using reminders on their phones to keep themselves on track.

Students also discussed the difficulty of keeping themselves motivated to meet deadlines in asynchronous online HE classes. AHSS12 said, “It all comes down to time management and discipline, especially since the class is online. It’s easy to prioritize the assignments where I have a teacher looking over my shoulder every day. The college work requires a higher level of internal motivation.” AHSS11 echoed,

The biggest challenge is definitely time management and juggling the two sets of deadlines. I'm taking a full load of high school classes plus this online college course. It's easy to push the college work to the back burner because I see my high school teachers

every day, and they remind me. It's all about discipline, which is a skill I'm grateful I'm learning now.

One particularly motivated student shared their tips for staying focused. AHSS10 said,

I batch tasks. For example, on Tuesday evenings I do “English only” to keep my head in one subject. I also set soft deadlines—if something is due on Sunday at 11:59 p.m., my personal deadline is Saturday at 3 p.m. That buffer has saved me from last-minute Wi-Fi issues or a file format mistake. I also keep a short “questions log” in my notes—if I hit three questions on the same assignment, that’s my signal to email the professor with a clear list instead of guessing.

Some students emphasized the learning curve required to navigate the technology and learning management system (LMS). AHSS8 claimed, “Figuring out the online platform at first was confusing. [LMS]—that's the system they use—was really overwhelming when I first logged in. I couldn't figure out where to find things.” AHSS2 agreed, “[The LMS] was kind of confusing at first—some assignments were in weird spots or didn’t have clear directions.” AHSS3 said, “The first few weeks were overwhelming trying to figure out [CTE software].” The social dimension of online learning also presented navigational challenges. AHSS13 reflected, “I definitely miss the in-person connection sometimes. The science class is so challenging that I sometimes wish I was in a lab or a classroom where I could ask a quick question.”

Several students highlighted the need to rely on human resources like their professors and campus tutors. AHSS8 revealed, “At first, I was hesitant [to ask questions] because I didn't want to bother them or look like I couldn't handle the work. But after I got a couple assignments back with grades that weren't what I expected, I realized I needed to ask for clarification when I was unsure.” AHSS8 said, “Communication can be tricky. Some professors are great about

responding, but others take a while, and that's hard when you're confused about an assignment. It's gotten easier now that I know how to ask questions clearly." AHSS12 lamented, "I wish I'd started going to tutoring earlier in the semester instead of waiting until I was really struggling. I also went to my professors' office hours...once you do it, you realize the professors actually want to help you succeed. They're not trying to make things harder—they're there to support you."

AHSS6 learned "that professors want you to succeed, and they're not going to think you're dumb for asking questions. They'd rather you ask than struggle in silence." AHSS1 also advised, "Yes, it's college, but you have support from your high school and from the college...don't be afraid to ask for help...your professors would much rather you ask questions than struggle in silence and fail." AHSS10 shared the biggest surprise they encountered in HE. They said,

Clarity beats talent. People assume the smartest students do best, but the ones who slow down and follow instructions—naming files correctly, hitting word counts, citing sources—tend to avoid losing easy points. Another surprise is how far a respectful email goes. Professors are busy, but if you show that you read the syllabus and still have a precise question, they're pretty helpful.

Developing Grit

While students expressed confidence about their abilities and futures, the concurrent enrollment experience presented significant challenges that tested their resilience. Time management emerged as the primary stressor, with students balancing high school coursework, college classes, extracurricular activities, work obligations, and family responsibilities. The academic rigor of college courses, combined with the structural differences in grading and feedback systems, created additional layers of stress that students had to navigate independently.

The complexity of students' schedules reflected the multifaceted demands on their time. AHSS6 described the reality of rural life intersecting with academic choices:

There have been days where I've had to wake up at 5 AM to help with feeding before school, then go to school all day, work a shift at [local restaurant] in the evening, and then come home and do homework until midnight. During calving season, it's even harder because we're checking on the cows throughout the night to make sure everything's okay. So there have definitely been some rough patches where I felt really stretched thin.

AHSS3 agreed, "Time management is a big one. Between high school, [CTE] work, and just trying to have a life, it's a lot. Sometimes I feel burned out...There were moments when I doubted myself and wondered if I'd taken on too much." AHSS13 highlighted the lack of clear instructions and guidance in online college courses as a stressor. They said,

The biggest challenge isn't the difficulty of the material—it's the lack of clear instructions and guidance. I need to be efficient with my limited time, and if I spend an hour trying to decipher a vague assignment prompt, that's an hour I could have spent studying or working.

This efficiency concern reflected the high-stakes nature of time management for students juggling multiple responsibilities.

Similarly, AHSS8 illuminated the challenge of maintaining excellence in extracurricular activities while managing college coursework. "During marching season in the fall...we're talking 8 AM to 9 PM every day...plus football games on Fridays and competitions on Saturdays. I basically had no free time. I'd be doing homework on my phone during water breaks at practice." AHSS2 articulated the cumulative nature of these pressures. They said, "Between

my high school classes, my tech classes, my college classes and work, there are days I don't stop moving until 9 or 10 p.m. It's not that the work is even that hard, it's just keeping track of it all" (AHSS2). This sentiment revealed how the challenge wasn't necessarily academic difficulty, but rather the executive functioning demands of coordinating multiple systems and schedules.

The structural differences between high school and college systems created an additional layer of stress. AHSS11 identified a particular source of anxiety in the delayed feedback cycle of college courses. They shared, "In high school, you turn something in, and the grade is often back the next day or within a few days. In the college class, especially since it's online, there were long periods—sometimes weeks—where I had no idea what my current grade was" (AHSS11). This uncertainty challenged students accustomed to constant feedback, forcing them to develop new coping mechanisms for managing academic anxiety. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated remarkable resilience through strategic adaptation and support-seeking behaviors. AHSS6 developed creative solutions. They explained,

I've made it work by being really strategic about my time. I do a lot of my homework during slow periods at [local restaurant where I work] when my manager lets me. And I take online classes mostly, which gives me flexibility to do the work when I have time available."

This adaptability revealed how students learned to leverage flexibility within constraints, turning potential obstacles into opportunities for efficiency.

Sibling support emerged as a critical resource to increase student resilience. AHSS8 shared valuable advice from an older sister who had balanced choir and theater with concurrent enrollment. "She told me to be really honest with myself about how many classes I could handle and to not overcommit. She said it's better to take two classes and do well than to take four and

struggle in all of them” (AHSS8). AHSS2 acknowledged the initial uncertainty that many students faced, “I didn’t know what to expect. I was nervous about falling behind or not understanding the instructions.” However, they also noted the importance of instructor support: “It helped that my professor was really clear and patient. She always told us to reach out if we were confused” (AHSS2). This highlighted how institutional support systems could mitigate stress.

Perhaps most significantly, students reframed their challenges as growth opportunities. AHSS1 synthesized this perspective: “Even though I’ve mentioned a lot of challenges, I really am glad I did this. The challenges are all manageable, and they’ve actually helped me grow as a student. I’m more independent, more organized, and more confident than I was before I started.” This growth mindset transformed stress from a barrier into a catalyst for development.

Chapter V Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the perceptions of CTE and HE held by adults and students associated with AHS, a rural high school in Oklahoma. It also investigated how adult perceptions of HE and CTE may influence student perceptions of the options and their subsequent decisions for concurrent enrollment. Discussion of the findings was guided by a conceptual understanding of confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998), developmental theory (Kuhn et al., 2000; Love & Guthrie, 1999; Perry, 1970), and organizational feedback loops (Birnbaum, 1988). These frameworks provide a useful foundation for synthesizing the findings to answer the three research questions:

RQ1: How do AHS adults (parents and educators) perceive ease of access or barriers to students participating in CTE and HE?

RQ2: How do concurrently enrolled AHS students perceive ease of access or barriers to participating CTE and HE?”

RQ3: How do AHS adults influence students’ perception of accessibility and barriers to enrolling in CTE and/or HE as they advise students in concurrent enrollment decisions?

This chapter answers the research questions by interpreting the findings through these conceptual frameworks, connecting the findings to existing literature, and concluding with theoretical and practical implications for educational practice and future research.

Research Question 1

In response to RQ1, findings revealed that AHS adults’ perceptions of CTE and HE have evolved from privileging college as the default aspiration toward a more balanced understanding

that values both pathways as valid routes to success. Overall, adult participants' perceptions of HE and CTE appeared to be in transition. The adults in this study were grappling with the same fundamental question that divided Du Bois (1903/1997) and Washington (1895) over a century ago: should education prioritize practical workforce preparation or broader intellectual development? Similarly, their evolving perceptions reflected the ongoing debate between Dewey's (1916/1997) vision of integrated vocational and academic education versus Snedden and Prosser's (1925) dual-track system. Confirmation bias once supported a singular ideal of college success; cognitive dissonance resulting from students' real-world outcomes may have disrupted that narrative. This may have allowed feedback from the AHS system to reshape institutional culture. Through this process, adults seemed to begin moving toward a more complex understanding of educational value that frames HE and CTE as complementary rather than competing routes to opportunity.

The four adult participants each seemed to reveal how the students themselves created the cognitive dissonance necessary to jostle them out of their mindset that success in HE is the gold standard. Earlier in their careers, educators saw CTE as an alternative for students not bound for college, and a parent participant expressed concern that their child would be limited by their choice to enroll in CTE. Over time, however, observing students graduate with certifications and, possibly more importantly, seeing students satisfied with their life choices led them to reconsider. All of the adult participants indicated a high degree of concern that the students retain the opportunity to make their own decisions for postsecondary education. This gradual shift toward valuing both pathways may reflect the way confirmation bias operates by reinforcing what the adults already believed until repeated evidence challenged those assumptions. As adults encountered examples of students thriving through CTE, the anecdotal evidence itself possibly

became a catalyst for change. This historical privileging of college as the default aspiration aligns with what Corbett (2009) describes as the 'learning to leave' dynamic in rural education, where schools have traditionally functioned as mechanisms of mobility that encourage high-achieving youth to leave their communities in pursuit of educational opportunities. The shift toward valuing CTE alongside HE at AHS may represent a disruption of this long-standing pattern.

Social emphasis on the debt associated with HE also permeated the interviews with adult participants and may have further driven the evolution of their opinions on CTE as a postsecondary education option. While adult participants did not reveal intentional research into student loan debt, the general findings were such that every adult participant was intimately familiar with the detrimental student loan crisis in the nation. Rising tuition and avoiding student loan debt encouraged parents and counselors to view CTE as a practical and financially responsible option. These realizations potentially created internal tension—what cognitive dissonance theory describes as the discomfort that pushes individuals to reconcile conflicting values (Nickerson, 1998). Many still held the belief that a four-year degree represented prestige and mobility, yet they recognized that skilled trades could provide stability and freedom from debt.

The challenge for the adults involved in guiding students in their postsecondary education decisions was recognizing the continued stigma and stereotypes surrounding CTE. The race, class, and gender barriers to participation in postsecondary education weighed on the educators. Several noted that accountability systems and performance reports still emphasize college enrollment rates, reinforcing higher education as the default aspiration. Even with growing respect for technical programs, adults recognized that gender, class, and cultural expectations

still affected advising patterns. Adult participants described wanting students to participate in postsecondary education through known avenues.

Research Question 2

In response to RQ2, students' perceptions of HE and CTE reflected pragmatism and future orientation without particularly distinguishing between the two with value judgments. The influence of community priorities on how students and adults evaluate educational pathways reflects what Sherman (2009) identifies as rural communities' 'moral economies'—frameworks through which residents interpret work, responsibility, and 'good choices.' In communities marked by economic decline, Sherman found that morality increasingly functions as the force underlying social divisions, giving residents new definitions of success and failure. At AHS, these moral frameworks appeared to shape how both adults and students understood the responsibility and respectability associated with different postsecondary choices. Students emphasized both HE and CTE as practical pathways to enter the workforce while shortening their time in or bypassing minimum wage positions entirely. Student participants in both pathways spoke of getting a head start by enrolling in concurrent coursework. They also considered the cost savings of participating in either pathway beneficial.

Students' focus on career plans showed movement along a continuum as they transitioned from doing what the authority says toward choosing for themselves. This instrumentalist logic may align with later stages of development, where students begin to self-author beliefs and decisions based on future goals rather than external expectations (Perry, 1970; Love & Guthrie, 1999; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). The desire to balance job preparation with flexible academic credentials also reflected an epistemic shift from viewing education as the gateway to knowledge toward understanding it as a tool for personalized life management (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). The

focus on planning for the future demonstrated early self-authorship (Love & Guthrie, 1999), yet several students' choices may have reflected confirmation bias in that their concurrent enrollment decision mirrored the success stories of their family members' participation in postsecondary education.

Students reported that their concurrent enrollment decisions were heavily shaped by family, peer, and community identity. References to parents', siblings', and peers' success at CTE or HE showed selective exposure to information within existing social circles. These networks may have formed institutional feedback loops with shared local narratives about which programs were for people like them. These narratives were reproduced across generations as AHS students developed into AHS alumni who offered new students advice similar to what worked for them when they were concurrently enrolled students. This was highly likely given the high number of student participants who noted that they had attended AHS schools throughout their K-12 journey. This pattern aligns with Schafft's (2016) finding that rural youth aspirations are fundamentally shaped by perceived economic opportunity; students who envision viable futures locally are more likely to plan to stay, while those who see limited options anticipate leaving, even when they feel deeply attached to place. The students at AHS who emphasized practical career pathways and staying close to home may have been responding to their perceptions of local economic viability rather than abstract preferences for one educational pathway over another.

The developing grit theme revealed concurrent enrollment as a complex developmental experience that challenged students to mature rapidly while still in high school. Students' ability to navigate these challenges depended not only on individual grit but also on the quality of support systems—from family members who offered wisdom, to flexible managers who allowed

homework during work shifts, to professors who provided clear communication. The online modality, while creating some challenges around feedback and connection, ultimately provided the flexibility that made concurrent enrollment feasible for students with complex schedules. Rather than viewing stress as an unfortunate byproduct of concurrent enrollment, the findings suggest it functioned as a developmental accelerator, pushing students to develop time management skills, self-advocacy, and resilience that will serve them well in their future educational and professional endeavors.

Research Question 3

In response to RQ3, findings revealed that adults' perceptions may directly shape how students interpret and experience concurrent enrollment. Adults framed these programs as efficient and economically wise, and students adopted that framing as their own. The resulting cultural narrative equated early college participation with responsibility and success, illustrating how advising messages become community norms. While adults recognized inequities in access and readiness, students largely perceived enrollment as straightforward—likely reflecting the counselor's skill in mediating obstacles before they became problematic for students. It seemed adults set the frame for how concurrent enrollment was presented, but students internalized and reinterpreted that frame through their experiences and motivations.

Across both datasets, participants described concurrent enrollment as a valuable and practical opportunity. Adults frequently framed the programs as tools for upward mobility and financial savings. The rhetoric of cost, savings, and practicality was echoed by students, who focused on the efficiency of earning college credit early to save money and get a head start on future goals. In this way, adults' economic framing of concurrent enrollment appeared to have become internalized by students. This may have perpetuated a feedback loop; what began as an

advising message about saving time and money evolved into a shared cultural narrative at AHS that equates early college participation with fiscal responsibility and long-term success.

While adults consistently expressed concern about access barriers, students seldom mentioned them directly. Educators described inequities in transportation, academic readiness, and financial literacy, along with persistent racial and socioeconomic gaps in participation. This tracks with historical negative perceptions of CTE, particularly concerning its association with racial minorities and poverty (Hanford, 2014; Oakes, 2005; Levesque et.al., 2000). The absence of perceived barriers in student narratives may reflect how privilege and preparedness operate invisibly. Students may not perceive these barriers due to the skill and knowledge of their adult advisors. What adults recognized as inequity, students experience as normal, again, because barriers were mitigated before students confronted them. These differing accounts illustrate the uneven visibility of structural obstacles—clearly seen from the advising side, but largely invisible from the student perspective.

As a result, student participants most often described the enrollment process as straightforward. They overwhelmingly emphasized the role of their high school counselor in their decisions and as a guide throughout the process. Nearly every student referenced the counselor as the pivotal figure who demystified enrollment and managed communication with colleges and CTE centers. The counselor's role functioned as both translator and advocate, helping students navigate paperwork, deadlines, and institutional expectations. The absence of perceived barriers in student narratives therefore seems to reflect the skill and intervention of this adult guide.

Significantly, the students' reliance on the counselor and their close community and familial ties may have provided insight into how their perceptions of HE and CTE were formed.

These strong relationships smoothed the path for students contemplating concurrent enrollment, but they also closed the door on other potential options. Multiple students revealed that SCSC and ATC were the only options presented to them. Students remained comfortable with the two options presented and failed to question why only two postsecondary institutions were available to them. The focus on institutional reputation as a function of their family members and peers who had attended may reflect a deeper influence on how students' perceptions of their postsecondary opportunities formed. Rather than the adults who specifically advised students of the pathways and how to navigate them, instructing the students how to perceive CTE and HE, the institutional reputations may be so ingrained within the community that the adults were also not questioning the perception of quality.

For both groups, relationships served as a key channel of influence. Students' decisions often seemed most guided by trusted adults and peers rather than institutional messaging. AHSA1 clearly understood their role as a facilitator, advocate, and advisor, while AHSS11 referred to one adult advisor as the project manager for their experience. This relational pattern underscored the small-community context of AHS, where advising depended as much on personal rapport as institutional infrastructure. The result was a trust-based model of influence. Students made decisions through people they know and find credible, not through brochures, data, or representative visits. This relational pattern is characteristic of rural schools, which Schafft (2016) describes as essential community institutions that serve as hubs of social, economic, and civic life. In such contexts, educational decisions are made within dense networks of familiarity and shared history, where institutional reputation is inseparable from personal relationships and community identity. This reliance on trusted authority figures for advice seems to reflect what Perry (1970) describes as dualistic reasoning.

Although adults and students approached concurrent enrollment from different positions, both groups revealed emotional investments in the process. Adults worried about students' maturity, wellbeing, and the pressure of managing multiple identities as high school and college learners. Students, for their part, reflected similar anxieties about workload, self-doubt, and fear of failure. If adults expressed concerns about concurrently enrolled students, the students expressed pressure to optimize their enrollment opportunities and launch their futures sooner rather than later.

Connecting the Findings to the Framework

The conceptual framework may provide a possible explanation for how AHS students navigated their postsecondary decisions. Taken together, my findings suggest that advising at AHS may function as both a stabilizing and constraining force—supportive yet systemically bounded by confirmation bias and institutional resistance to change.

Confirmation Bias and Selective Exposure

The gradual shift toward valuing both pathways reflected the way confirmation bias operates by reinforcing what the adults already believe until repeated evidence challenged those assumptions. As adults encountered examples of students thriving through CTE, the anecdotal evidence itself became a catalyst for changing their perspectives. Students selectively recalled confirming examples while ignoring disconfirming possibilities, exemplifying Nickerson's (1998) form of confirmation bias as selective memory and exposure.

These patterns aligned with Nickerson's (1998) description of selective exposure and interpretation: students remembered evidence that supported the desirability of familiar pathways while overlooking unfamiliar or contradictory information. These preferences also may have reflected institutional and community scripts about which forms of education were valuable.

These tendencies illustrated low-level cognitive dissonance; few students described actively questioning their inherited assumptions, meaning they rarely reached the reflective tension necessary for intellectual growth (Mintz, 2022).

Cognitive Dissonance and Developmental Stagnation

Cognitive dissonance was notably absent in most student responses, potentially suggesting that few encountered or engaged with conflicting information about HE and CTE. Without tension between competing beliefs, students may have had limited opportunities for reflective growth. Mintz (2022) emphasized that intellectual development often requires dissonance that prompts reevaluation of prior assumptions. In the AHS context, students expressed satisfaction with their choices, but rarely described moments of uncertainty or reconsideration.

The few students who did experience these moments of shifting perspective seemed to do so as a direct result of their experiences within CTE or HE coursework. These students identified options for career paths beyond their original ones, or in one case, decided to participate in both CTE and HE simultaneously. The lack of cognitive challenge may be indicative that institutional and advising structures may unintentionally reinforce comfort over curiosity.

Perry's Model of Intellectual Development

Perry's (1970) model of intellectual development offers another valuable lens. Adult participants described moving from dualistic thinking (i.e., college is good, trades are lesser) toward multiplicity, where they acknowledged multiple valid options but still struggled to evaluate them on equal terms. This developmental movement potentially explained why ambivalence persisted because adults may intellectually endorse both pathways yet emotionally privilege HE over CTE.

When discussing the findings through Perry's (1970) model, most AHS students appeared situated in the dualistic or multiplistic stages of intellectual development. They relied heavily on external authorities to validate their decisions, reflecting dualistic thinking. Some participants, however, displayed emerging signs of self-authorship, such as prioritizing financial independence or flexible scheduling over social conformity. Love and Guthrie's (1999) extension of Perry's theory underscored that such development depends on the environment's capacity to foster critical reflection. The AHS system, while supportive, may insulate students from the ambiguity necessary for intellectual growth. Without deliberate opportunities to confront contrasting viewpoints, students' belief systems might remain unchallenged, limiting epistemic advancement.

Gruenewald's (2003) concept of a critical pedagogy of place offers an alternative framework for understanding rural students' developmental trajectories. He argues that educational systems must simultaneously account for local ecological, cultural, and economic contexts while helping students critically examine the power structures that shape those contexts. Through processes of 'decolonization' and 'reinhabitation,' educators can help rural students scrutinize the assumption that success requires leaving while affirming local knowledge and exploring possibilities for community sustainability. Applied to AHS, this perspective suggests that the adults' evolving appreciation for CTE may represent not developmental stagnation but rather a growing recognition of place-based forms of success.

Viewed through Perry's (1970) model, students' reasoning reflected both dependence on authority and early self-authorship. Their confidence in trusted adults may have demonstrated developmental grounding in dualism, while their pragmatic pursuit of goals potentially shows progress toward multiplicity. Many students seemed to operate in dualism or early multiplicity,

where right answers were supplied by trusted authorities or peers. As these students become adults who may perpetuate the cycle, their perceptions of the value of postsecondary pathways could conceivably become the trusted authority for subsequent generations.

Birnbaum's Organizational Feedback Loops

Findings suggested that only when the positive workforce outcomes for students with CTE credentials circulated back through the system did AHS adults' perceptions begin to adjust. Birnbaum's (1988) systems theory may explain this dynamic: information flowed through centralized channels—especially the counselor—creating efficient but narrow feedback loops. This structure may have reproduced institutional hierarchies, privileging HE's accessibility over CTE's selectivity. Students' reliance on familiar options such as SCSC and ATC potentially underscored how institutional reputation and community ties guided choice-making. In this small-community model, it appeared that relationships rather than data drove decision-making, reinforcing trust-based but limited advising ecosystems.

Birnbaum's (1988) systems theory could illuminate how institutional structures and communication patterns perpetuated cultural norms. Students overwhelmingly identified the high school counselor as the key facilitator of concurrent enrollment before and after students chose between the pathways. Prior to student enrollment, some students in this study credited the counselor with telling them about their options.

However, almost every student named the counselor as the person who facilitated their entry and maintained their progress once they had enrolled in either pathway. This seemingly demonstrated a centralized feedback system where information flows through a single authority. While efficient, this dynamic may have limited the diversity of perspectives students encountered. Similarly, simplified HE enrollment processes and competitive CTE admissions

seemed to reflect organizational priorities that shaped perceptions of accessibility and prestige. Adult participants acknowledged that CTE had shifted from an inclusive alternative to an exclusive program for high-achieving students, which could be interpreted as reinforcing feedback loops that sustained social hierarchies between HE and CTE.

The theme of accessibility—ease of enrollment, proximity, counselor guidance—appeared to continue to highlight Birnbaum’s organizational systems theory. It is possible that institutions with streamlined procedures, like online forms and local access, lowered barriers and thus attracted concurrent students. Students’ praise for convenience demonstrated how institutional design could have functioned as a positive feedback loop sustaining enrollment patterns. Conversely, limited capacity in competitive CTE programs potentially generated exclusionary feedback loops that may have reinforced inequity discussed by both student CTE participants and adult advisors.

Adults’ comments revealed the possibility that structural filters may reassign CTE’s traditional role from what was once for kids who are not college-bound to an elite opportunity for postsecondary education. That shift may have produced cognitive dissonance among educators adapting to changing definitions of success. Despite the expressed desire of AHS adults to remain neutral as they advised students in concurrent enrollment decisions, it appeared institutional processes both reflected and reinforced cultural bias. When systems privileged ease of access in HE over CTE, they may have shaped which pathways were easiest to navigate, regardless of whether the fit was sound for individual students.

AHSA findings also seemed to highlight how institutional feedback loops reproduced themselves. It could be interpreted that the counselors served as gatekeepers, or feedback-control agents in Birnbaum’s (1988) model, by funneling information from CTE and HE institutions to

students and their parents. Educators also expressed tension between inclusion ideals and selective program requirements, and AHS adults may have subtly intimated who belonged in CTE or HE. It is possible that students internalized this value signaling, reinforcing Perry's (1970) dualistic hierarchy of right and wrong choices and confirming biases that students may already have through peer, familial, and community interactions.

Integration Across the Framework

Confirmation bias possibly explained the internalization of familiar community discourse (Nickerson, 1998); the absence of cognitive dissonance potentially highlights a developmental plateau (Mintz, 2022). Institutional feedback loops demonstrate how policies and communication sustain the status quo (Birnbaum, 1988), and Perry's (1970) model situates these behaviors along a continuum of cognitive maturity. Together, these insights seemed to illustrate a developmental ecology where student agency operated within the constraints of social and institutional bias.

The intersections of adult and student perspectives suggested both convergence and dissonance. Adults and students shared similar interests in future careers and economic realities of postsecondary education, but they diverged sharply in their awareness of inequity and systemic barriers. Adults perceive complexity within the systems; students perceive simplicity because the adults interfered with navigating the systems. Findings from this study suggested that AHS students make concurrent enrollment decisions not purely on academic merit or labor market data, but within a matrix of future goals, relationships, and ease of use in navigating the systems. Far from being passive recipients of advice, students filtered information through a lens of their own experience. While adult perceptions and institutional reputations mattered, students seemed to demonstrate considerable agency in crafting their choices. These findings emphasized the importance of school counselors and early exposure to multiple postsecondary narratives.

Theoretical Implications

This study may extend theoretical understanding of how social cognition and developmental theory intersect in rural educational contexts. It is important to note that these findings emerge from a specific rural context and may not generalize uniformly across all rural schools. As Crockett, Carlo, and Temmen (2016) observe, rural communities vary widely and must be understood as unique. The study at AHS revealed that confirmation bias may not operate only at the individual level but also as a mechanism that perpetuates these historical debates within institutions. Adult participants described moving from a hierarchy that privileged HE toward recognizing both pathways as valid. However, they appeared to struggle to escape the either-or dilemma of dualistic thinking entirely, echoing Perry's (1970) observation that intellectual development requires deliberately incorporating cognitive dissonance into the decision-making process. The institutional feedback loops documented at AHS reproduced historical disputes even as AHS adults attempted to value both pathways equally, suggesting that the Smith-Hughes Act's (1917) separate funding streams for vocational education continue to shape how schools organize and present these choices to students.

The findings revealed no evidence of structured dissent within the advising process. The absence of dissenting voices within AHS's advising model may illustrate the need for the "Tenth Man Rule," which is the deliberate practice of assigning someone to adopt a contradictory view when consensus emerges too easily (Dudley, 2021; Schwenk, 1984). The centralized feedback loop through the counselor, combined with strong community consensus about institutional reputation and appropriate pathways for people like us, created precisely the conditions that the Tenth Man Rule was designed to disrupt. When all adult advisors share similar educational backgrounds, household incomes well above the median, and a white racial identity, the risk of

unconscious consensus that fails to serve all students increases substantially. The theoretical rationale for introducing this concept in the conceptual framework was to provide a potential intervention strategy; the findings demonstrate why such an intervention may be necessary at AHS and in similar rural contexts.

An absence of cognitive dissonance among AHS students may have broader implications for the critical thinking deficits documented in Chapter I. As noted, Oklahoma students demonstrate troublingly low preparation for college-level work, with only 10% meeting ACT college readiness benchmarks and only 6% ready for STEM fields (OSRHE, 2023a). Even college students at SCSC barely achieved proficient on critical thinking assessments (scoring 110.7 out of 120) (IES, n.d.). The findings of this study suggest a possible connection between students' lack of exposure to cognitive dissonance during their concurrent enrollment advising and experiences and a failure to develop the critical thinking skills that require wrestling with complexity, ambiguity, and competing perspectives. If students remain in dualistic thinking stages—accepting authority figures' guidance without question—they may enter college underprepared for the intellectual work of relativistic reasoning that HE is designed to foster. This developmental stopping point could contribute to the cycle of low critical thinking scores, as students who never learned to question assumptions or evaluate competing evidence in high school may struggle with these skills in college and beyond.

Furthermore, adult participants' concerns about race, class, and gender barriers in CTE access demonstrate that the historical stigmatization documented by Hanford (2014), Oakes (2005), and Levesque et al. (2000) remains operative, albeit in inverted form. Where CTE was once the lesser option for students not bound for college, adults in this study described it as

increasingly exclusive and competitive, potentially creating new forms of inequity that restrict access differently than in the past.

Similarly, Perry's framework, when applied to advising contexts, underscores how educators' developmental positions may influence how they guide students. It is possible that the absence of cognitive dissonance among students highlights a developmental plateau that may be characteristic of tightly knit rural environments with strong consensus cultures. Deviation from community norms is likely to result in subtle discouragement. As a result, students may become stuck in duality until they encounter frameworks that disrupt their acceptance of community epistemology.

This study addresses several gaps in the existing literature on concurrent enrollment and CTE-HE pathways. While extensive research documents CTE's historical development and federal policy evolution (Gordon & Schultz, 2020; Stone & Lewis, 2012), limited practical work examines how these overarching policies operate within specific rural contexts where few institutional options and community relationships create unique decision-making environments. This case study of AHS provides a close look at how national policy debates about CTE versus HE manifest in Anytown advising practices.

Although Nickerson (1998) extensively studied confirmation bias in individual decision-making and Birnbaum (1988) formulated the theory of organizational feedback loops in higher education institutions, this study bridges these frameworks to demonstrate how cognitive bias may be operating systemically within AHS advising structures. The finding that confirmation bias seems to perpetuate itself across generations extends theoretical understanding of how institutional memory and culture reproduce themselves through families and community relationships rather than formal policy.

While developmental theory (Perry, 1970; Love & Guthrie, 1999) has been applied extensively to college students' intellectual growth, this study applies these frameworks to high school students' concurrent enrollment decision-making and seemed to reveal that many students make postsecondary commitments while still in dualistic thinking stages. This may have implications for the timing and structure of concurrent enrollment advising that previous literature has not addressed.

Practical Implications

The findings point to several actionable implications for educators, administrators, and policymakers. These findings suggested the need for more transparent institutional messaging, early career exploration, and supportive advising that allows students to consider a wider range of options before internalizing a fixed trajectory into higher education. More broadly, they raised important questions about how institutions can better support students as they move from externally defined beliefs toward self-authored lives.

Advising Practice

Advising models should intentionally create cognitive dissonance by exposing students to diverse narratives of postsecondary success. Advising reform requires a deliberate shift toward creating structured dissonance in student conversations. Rather than reinforcing familiar pathways, counselors should intentionally expose students to diverse success models—including alumni who pursued unconventional routes, professionals who transitioned between CTE and HE, and individuals who combined both pathways. This exposure challenges the confirmation bias that keeps students locked into inherited assumptions. Encouraging students to engage in structured reflection and dialogue that introduces dissonance could help them transition toward more complex, self-authored reasoning. When students encounter narratives that contradict their

expectations, they develop the cognitive flexibility necessary for authentic self-authorship. Such dissonance promotes intellectual growth by forcing students to confront and reconcile competing perspectives, ultimately leading to more thoughtful and personally meaningful postsecondary choices. Introducing diverse narratives is particularly important in rural contexts where, as Sherman (2009) documents, expectations around family unity and life trajectories exert powerful influence on how young people imagine adulthood. Sherman found that early childbearing, marriage, and family-centered living were widely viewed as traditional, morally grounded life paths, while those who delayed such milestones were treated with suspicion. When the culturally preferred life course centers on stability, proximity, and family responsibility, students may need explicit exposure to alternative models to recognize that other pathways are equally valid.

Educator Development

Professional development for counselors and teachers should include training in recognizing and mitigating confirmation bias to ensure more balanced advising. Faculty development must address the ways counselors and teachers unconsciously perpetuate confirmation bias within institutional echo chambers. Professional development programs should train educators to recognize their own biases—including assumptions about which students belong in CTE versus HE—and to understand how these biases shape advising conversations. Training should emphasize the power of language, the subtle signals embedded in phrases like *college material* or *hands-on learner*, and the cumulative impact of seemingly neutral guidance. By becoming aware of these patterns, educators can disrupt feedback loops that inadvertently channel students toward predetermined paths. This self-awareness enables counselors to present concurrent enrollment options more equitably, ensuring that all students receive unbiased

information regardless of their academic profile, socioeconomic background, or perceived ability.

Institutional Communication

Institutions should evaluate feedback mechanisms that reinforce inequities. Institutional policy implications call for streamlining and diversifying communication feedback loops to counter institutional silos. Institutional design should prioritize not just academic rigor but also structural flexibility and clear communication pathways that acknowledge the multifaceted realities of students' lives. Current practices often isolate HE and CTE messaging, with each pathway promoted through separate channels that reinforce existing hierarchies.

To address this, high schools should implement joint information sessions featuring alumni from both CTE and HE programs, panel discussions that highlight the complementary nature of technical and academic credentials, and collaborative recruitment events where representatives from technology centers and colleges present side-by-side. These structural changes dismantle the implicit ranking of pathways and signal institutional commitment to valuing diverse forms of postsecondary education. Additionally, policies should mandate transparent communication about enrollment processes, costs, and outcomes for both CTE and HE, ensuring that students and families have access to comparable data when making decisions.

State Policy

These findings also have implications for Oklahoma educational policy. As discussed in Chapter I, state leadership has increasingly framed CTE and HE as opposing pathways, with rhetoric that positions higher education as indoctrination while promoting career and technical education as practical workforce preparation (Ferguson, 2025; McDonald, 2024). However, adult participants at AHS demonstrated more nuanced perceptions, viewing both pathways as

complementary rather than competing routes to success. The state's divestment in higher education between 2008 and 2019 (Hamby, 2021) creates real economic barriers that were reflected in participants' concerns about student loan debt—concerns that disproportionately affect students and families of color (Hamby, 2021) and likely contribute to adults' increasing endorsement of CTE as a financially safer choice. This tension reflects what Corbett (2009) identifies as HE simultaneously functioning as spaces for individual opportunity and as institutions that drain communities of their most educated youth. Policymakers must grapple with this tension rather than simply positioning CTE and HE as opposing choices. Rather than reinforcing this false dichotomy, policymakers should invest in advising infrastructure that helps students understand how CTE and HE can complement each other and should support the developmental work necessary for students to move from dualistic toward self-authored reasoning about their educational futures. Without deliberate policy intervention, the confirmation bias and narrow feedback loops documented in this study may cause students in rural contexts to internalize oversimplified narratives about postsecondary education that align with political messaging rather than their own best interests.

This study contributes to the understanding of Oklahoma's unique CareerTech system, which operates independently from the Department of Education (Advance CTE, 2023). While Oklahoma's CareerTech governance structure has been documented, little research examines how this independence shapes student and adult perceptions of CTE relative to HE, particularly in rural communities where CareerTech centers and community colleges serve overlapping populations. This also connects with Smith-Hughes (1917) when considering that Oklahoma is unique in its separation of CTE from the two-year college system. By separating the funding streams in Oklahoma, policymakers created a unique paradigm that may reveal the funding

disparity between CTE and HE more so than might be seen in other states, in which the two pathways are often housed together on two-year college campuses and the college issues the certifications. Partnerships between HE and CTE in Oklahoma must be intentional and reciprocal in ways that may not be evident elsewhere.

Limitations

This study was limited by sampling bias. Sampling bias can occur when “individuals represented by the sample data systematically misrepresent the population” (Walters, 2021, p. 3). While several parents expressed interest in participating, I encountered less enthusiasm when I attempted to schedule meetings. This is a form of selection bias (Walters, 2021) in the sense that only parents motivated to find time in their schedule participate and resulted in a smaller sample of adult educators and parents than was optimal. Additionally, a seminal student participant who referred multiple friends to participate became a hub which may have limited the demographics of students I recruited for the study.

The study is also limited by survivorship bias (Walters, 2021; Brown et al., 1992; Czeisler et al., 2021). This study only included students, recent AHS graduates or seniors, who were successful in their concurrent coursework at the time of data collection. Students who attempted concurrent enrollment but withdrew, those who encountered insurmountable barriers and never enrolled, or those who were discouraged from participating are not represented in these findings. This sampling approach may present an overly optimistic view of concurrent enrollment experiences, as the perceptions of students who survived the selection and enrollment process likely differ systematically from those who did not (Czeisler et al., 2021). The absence of these voices—particularly students who struggled, failed, or dropped out—limits the study’s

ability to fully capture the range of challenges and barriers within the concurrent enrollment system.

A further bias in sampling is reflected in the demographics of participant subsets. Both participant subsets were relatively homogenous. Within the adult participants group, all participants were white, aged between 35 and 60, possessed graduate degrees, and reported household incomes significantly higher than the median for the area. Student participants' reported household incomes were all well above the median for the region, limiting insights into how lower-income families navigate concurrent enrollment decisions. While student racial demographics more closely approximated community demographics, the findings may not fully capture the experiences of all demographic groups. These limitations affect the transferability of findings to other rural contexts with different demographic compositions as highlighted in the work of Crockett, Carlo, and Temmen (2016).

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could further investigate how structured exposure to dissonant perspectives influences student decision-making over time. Follow-up studies could interview the AHS student participants once they enter the workforce and compare their perceptions of the choices they made to the outcomes they experienced as adults. Additional AHS studies could expand on how students are navigating and balancing concurrent enrollment with their high school identities and the students who did not survive concurrent coursework, either in the decision-making stage or post-enrollment. This would flesh out the data students revealed as they discussed navigating the systems. It could also reveal possibilities for different advising models to assess student readiness and maturity for concurrent coursework in either pathway. Furthermore, comparative case studies between rural and urban contexts could reveal how local

feedback loops differ in their impact on bias and access and build on this work. Including more adult voices from parents, educators, and institutional representatives from HE and CTE could provide a fuller understanding of how institutional norms are reproduced and challenged.

Additional research could also explore whether intentional “Tenth Man” dissent strategies can increase the complexity of student choice-making. This approach involves deliberately inviting contrary viewpoints during advising sessions, ensuring that at least one voice challenges prevailing assumptions about the right pathway. For example, when a high-achieving student expresses interest in a four-year university, a counselor might introduce perspectives on how CTE credentials could complement or accelerate their career goals. Conversely, when a student gravitates toward technical training, the counselor might present scenarios where additional academic coursework expands future opportunities. Research could examine whether this structured dissent prompts students to engage more deeply with their options, reduces confirmation bias, and leads to decisions characterized by greater self-authorship and long-term satisfaction. This strategy for research could also reveal insights into the reasons students did not persist in concurrent coursework.

Conclusion

This study examined how adults and students at AHS, a rural Oklahoma high school, perceive CTE and HE concurrent enrollment options, and how those perceptions shape student decision-making. The purpose was to understand not only what students and adults believe about these pathways, but also how institutional structures, relationships, and cognitive processes interact to guide students toward particular postsecondary futures. Through interviews with four adult participants and thirteen student participants, this study revealed that while adults’ perceptions have evolved from privileging college toward valuing both pathways, confirmation

bias, limited cognitive dissonance, and narrow feedback loops continue to constrain the range of options students consider.

This study directly addresses the problem statement, asking whether students' concurrent enrollment decisions are guided by data-driven criteria or by adults' personal perceptions of CTE and HE value. The findings demonstrate that at AHS personal perceptions based on community and family connections may supersede data to shape students' postsecondary pathways. Adults' evolving views on CTE and HE may be filtered through confirmation bias and transmitted to students, becoming an important mechanism through which students understand their options.

No evidence emerged of formalized rubrics, assessment tools, or data-driven placement systems beyond HE and CTE requirements. Instead, the counselor's role as a trusted advocate and the influence of family conversations about people like us determined which pathways students considered. This reliance on relational advising, while creating supportive environments for students who fit expected profiles, potentially limits exposure to alternatives and reinforces rather than disrupts community-level confirmation bias about appropriate pathways for different types of students.

The conceptual frameworks of confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), Perry's (1970) model of intellectual development, and Birnbaum's (1988) organizational feedback loops provided a useful interpretive framework to contemplate what the findings revealed about how students at AHS made decisions about postsecondary education. The juxtaposition of these frameworks seems to reveal that concurrent enrollment decisions are not simply rational calculations but are embedded in social and institutional systems that shape belief and behavior. This study contributes to the field by demonstrating how these theoretical frameworks may intersect in rural educational contexts where tight-knit communities, centralized

advising systems, and limited institutional options create unique conditions for student development.

Theoretically, this work may help to extend understanding of how confirmation bias operates at both individual and institutional levels, how the absence of cognitive dissonance can produce developmental plateaus, and how organizational feedback loops may perpetuate educational hierarchies even as individual actors work to dismantle them. Practically, the findings suggest that supporting students in moving from dualistic toward self-authored reasoning requires deliberate pedagogical and institutional interventions. By disrupting confirmation bias and cultivating cognitive dissonance, educators may be able to foster the reflective capacity that leads to more informed, intentional, and equitable postsecondary choices.

Moving forward, educational practice must prioritize advising approaches that intentionally introduce diverse success narratives, professional development that helps educators recognize their own biases, and institutional policies that communicate the complementary value of CTE and HE pathways. Future research should examine whether structured dissent strategies can increase complexity in student decision-making and should follow students longitudinally to understand how their concurrent enrollment experiences shape their adult perspectives on the choices they made. This study contributes to ongoing conversations about equity, access, and student agency in postsecondary transitions, particularly in rural contexts where community relationships and institutional structures exert profound influence on the pathways young people pursue.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interviews

Students:

1. Demographics:
 1. Where are you from?
 2. Have you been in [Anytown] Schools for K-12?
 3. Tell me a bit about your family—parents, siblings, extended family.
 4. What do the adults in your life do for work?
 5. Do you have a rough idea of your household income?
 6. Would you like to share your race?
2. How did you learn about concurrent enrollment options?
3. Who did you talk to about concurrent enrollment options? (Prompt: Family? People at School? Friends?)
4. When you were considering your choices, what were some things you thought about?
5. Where did you end up enrolling?
6. What are you studying in your program?
7. Have your interests or future plans shifted at all since you began studying concurrently?
8. Would you make the same choice if you had it to do again?
9. What advice would you give to other high school students considering concurrent enrollment in CTE or HE?
10. If you could improve the concurrent enrollment experience for future students, what changes would you recommend?

Parents:

1. Demographics:
 1. Where are you from?
 2. Has your child been in [Anytown] Schools for K-12?
 3. Tell me a bit about your family—spouse, children.
 4. What is your level of education?
 5. What do you do for work?
 6. What is your household income? (Emphasize range.)
 7. Will you share your race?
2. How did you learn about concurrent enrollment options for your child?
3. Who did you speak to for information about programs?
4. What advice did you give to your student as they were deciding between CTE and HE?
5. Did your child choose the option that you considered best?
6. Has your opinion on the best choice changed while your child has been enrolled?
7. How would you describe the difference between CTE and HE programs?
8. Do you believe CTE courses can lead to long-term career success, or do you view them as stepping stones to further education?
9. Do you have any concerns about your child’s participation in concurrent enrollment, whether in CTE or HE?
10. Have you noticed any academic or social challenges your child faces in their concurrent enrollment courses?
11. Do you think there is enough support (academic advising, financial aid, etc.) for students and parents navigating CTE and HE programs?

12. What advice would you give to other parents whose children are considering concurrent enrollment in CTE or HE?
13. If you could improve the concurrent enrollment process for students and parents, what changes would you recommend?

School personnel (Principal, Counselors, Instructors):

1. Demographics:
 1. Where are you from?
 2. How long have you worked for AHS?
 3. Tell me a bit about your work.
 4. What is your level of education?
 5. What is your household income? (Emphasize range.)
 6. Do you have any perception of your family of origin's household income when you were a child?
 7. Will you share your race?
2. How did you learn about concurrent enrollment options for your students?
3. Who did you speak to for information about programs?
4. What training or professional development have you experienced to advise students between HE and CTE?
5. What advice do you give to your students as they were deciding between CTE and HE?
6. Will you share the placement scores required for students to enroll in HE?
7. Same again for CTE?
8. Do your students always take your advice? Do the institutions have reciprocal policies in place?
9. Have your opinions on the best choice changed during the course of your career?
10. How would you describe the difference between CTE and HE programs?
11. Do you believe CTE courses can lead to long-term career success, or do you view them as stepping stones to further education?

12. Do you have any concerns about students' participation in concurrent enrollment, whether in CTE or HE?
13. Have you noticed any academic or social challenges students face in their concurrent enrollment courses?
14. Do you think there is enough support (academic advising, financial aid, etc.) for students and parents navigating CTE and HE programs?
15. If you could improve the concurrent enrollment process for students and parents, what changes would you recommend?
16. How would you describe your role in guiding students toward CTE and/or HE concurrent enrollment opportunities?
17. What factors do you consider when advising students on whether to take CTE or HE courses?
18. Do you feel that students fully understand the differences between CTE and HE pathways before enrolling? Why or why not?
19. How do you think concurrent enrollment in CTE and HE impacts students' overall high school experience?
20. Have you noticed any patterns in which students choose CTE vs. HE courses? If so, what trends have you observed?
21. How do you think CTE or HE courses influence students' career and college aspirations?
22. Have you observed differences in student engagement or performance between those enrolled in CTE vs. HE courses?
23. Do you believe concurrent enrollment students are better prepared for college or the workforce compared to students who only take traditional high school courses?

24. Are there specific fields or industries where you see CTE as a better option for students than a traditional college pathway?

Appendix B
Parent/Guardian Recruitment

Yasminda Choate

Doctoral Candidate

University of Oklahoma

ychoate@ou.edu

580-320-0355

March 15, 2025

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I am inviting you to participate in a research study exploring how high school students are advised to pursue post-secondary education, including college, career and technical education (CTE), and other options beyond high school.

As a parent or guardian, your perspective is essential. You play a significant role in helping your child navigate educational decisions, and your insights can help us better understand how families experience and support the advising process.

Participation in this study would involve a 30-60 minute interview where you'll have the opportunity to share your thoughts on the information, guidance, and resources your child has received. Your responses will be kept confidential and used solely for educational research purposes.

By sharing your experience, you'll be contributing to efforts that aim to strengthen how schools support students and families in planning for life after high school.

If you are interested in participating or have questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at ychoate@ou.edu.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and continued support of your child's educational journey.

Sincerely,

Yasminda Choate

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix C
AHS Personnel Recruitment

Yasminda Choate

Doctoral Candidate

University of Oklahoma

ychoate@ou.edu

580-320-0355

March 15, 2025

Dear AHS Personnel,

I am inviting you to participate in a research study exploring how high school students are advised to pursue post-secondary education concurrently, including college, career and technical education (CTE), and other options beyond high school.

As AHS professionals, your perspective is essential. You play a significant role in helping students navigate educational decisions, and your insights can help us better understand how AHS manages the advising process.

Participation in this study would involve a 30-60 minute interview where you'll have the opportunity to share your thoughts on the information, guidance, and resources students have received. Your responses will be kept confidential and used solely for educational research purposes.

By sharing your experience, you'll be contributing to efforts that aim to strengthen how schools support students and families in planning for life after high school.

If you are interested in participating or have questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at ychoate@ou.edu.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and continued support of your child's educational journey.

Sincerely,

Yasminda Choate

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix D
AHS Student Recruitment

Yasminda Choate

Doctoral Candidate

University of Oklahoma

ychoate@ou.edu

580-320-0355

March 15, 2025

Dear AHS Student,

I am inviting you to participate in a research study exploring how high school students are advised to pursue post-secondary education concurrently, including college, career and technical education (CTE), and other options beyond high school.

As an AHS student, your perspective is essential. You play a significant role in helping to understand how students navigate educational decisions, and your insights can help us better understand how AHS manages the advising process.

Participation in this study would involve a 30-60 minute interview where you'll have the opportunity to share your thoughts on the information, guidance, and resources students have received. Your responses will be kept confidential and used solely for educational research purposes.

By sharing your experience, you'll be contributing to efforts that aim to strengthen how schools support students and families in planning for life after high school.

If you are interested in participating or have questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at ychoate@ou.edu.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and support for future AHS students!

Sincerely,

Yasminda Choate

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix E
Informed Consent
Oral Consent to Participate in Research

University of Oklahoma

Would you like to be involved in research at the University of Oklahoma?

I am Yasminda Choate from the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department at the University of Oklahoma, and I invite you to participate in my research project: Perceptions of CTE and Higher Education.

This research is being conducted at Anytown High School. You were selected as a possible participant because you are affiliated with [AHS] as a student, parent, or personnel. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research is to get a picture of how students are making the choice to participate in higher education and/or CTE while they are concurrently enrolled in [AHS].

How many participants will be in this research? Up to 40

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to be in this research, you will be asked questions about how you made the choice to enroll at [SCSC] or [ATC] while still a student at [AHS]. Parents and personnel will be asked what advice you gave to students about their concurrent enrollment choices.

How long will this take?

Your participation will take between 30-90 minutes for the interview. You may also want to plan some time to review the transcript from our conversation and clarify any remarks you would like to elaborate on.

What are the risks and/or benefits if I participate?

The risk from participating in this research is minimal. Students may find they have opinions that differ from those of their parents and/or school personnel which may create some discomfort.

The benefits of participating in this research are intangible for most students; however, parents and school personnel may find that this study provides an opportunity to examine whether they are intentionally advising students according to their principles.

Audio or video recorded data collection: There is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using audio and video recordings. If this occurred, your identity and statements you made would become known to people who are not on the research team. To minimize this risk, the researchers will transfer data to, and store your data on, a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office.

Data collected online or by a device and transmitted electronically: You will be asked to participate in an interview via Zoom as part of this research. The organization hosting the data collection platform has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. There is a risk that the external organization, which is not part of the research team, may gain access to or retain your data or your IP address which could be used to re-identify you. No assurance can be made about their use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research.

Will I be compensated for participating?

You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this research.

Who will see my information?

In research reports, there will be no information that will make it possible to identify you.

Research records will be stored securely and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to the records.

You have the right to access the research data that has been collected about you as a part of this research. However, you may not have access to this information until the entire research has completely finished and you consent to this temporary restriction.

Do I have to participate?

No. If you do not participate, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the research. If you decide to participate, you may choose not to answer some question(s) and can stop participating at any time.

Will my identity be anonymous or confidential?

Your identity will be confidential. Your name will be coded to preserve confidentiality. Please check all of the options that you agree to:

I agree to be quoted directly, without the use of my name. ☐ Yes ☐ No

What will happen to my data in the future?

I might share your deidentified research data or use it in future research without obtaining additional consent from you.

Audio Recording of Research Activities

To assist with accurate recording of your responses, interviews may be recorded on an audio recording device. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording without penalty. If you do not agree to audio-recording, you cannot participate in this research.)

I consent to audio recording. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Video Recording of Research Activities

To assist with accurate recording of your responses interviews may be recorded on a video recording device. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording. If you do not agree to video-recording, you may be interviewed with cameras off in a virtual environment. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to video recording. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Will I be contacted again?

The researcher might contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research.

I give my permission for the researcher to contact me in the future. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Who do I contact with questions, concerns, or complaints?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research or have experienced a research-related injury, contact me at 580-320-0355 and/or ychoate@ou.edu. You may also contact my advisor Dr. Daniel Springer at 405-325-4202 and/or dspringer@ou.edu.

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) or if you cannot reach the researcher(s).

Finally, would you like a printed or electronic copy of the information we have just reviewed?

_____ (note response)

Date of interview: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

Mailing or Email address for electronic consent copy: _____

Name of Researcher and Date of the Consent Process: _____

Signature of the Researcher: _____