

LEADING BASIC SKILLS EDUCATION IN NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY
COLLEGES: SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

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DEDICATION

I dedicated this work to the memory of my late father, William G. Franklin, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

LEADING BASIC SKILLS EDUCATION IN NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY
COLLEGES: SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

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This qualitative study focuses on North Carolina community college basic skills departmental directors. In this study, interviews were the means to gather data and to give North Carolina community college basic skills directors a voice. The participants' shared stories of their personal experiences in the execution of their duties as departmental directors revealed the successes and challenges that they face as they strive to make their programs effective and efficient, while they dispense educational services to the public they serve. The findings of this study reveal which policies, procedures, and practices that direct North Carolina basic skills educational programs are effective and which are not. Additionally, the findings of this study suggest implications for practice for North Carolina community college basic skills directors, North Carolina community college executive leadership teams, and for the North Carolina Community College System's College and Career Readiness Division.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Leading Basic Skills Education in North Carolina Community Colleges

Basic skills educational programming was designed to educate our nation's marginalized and underserved students, provide them an opportunity to engage in higher educational endeavors, and give them an opportunity to share in our nation's wealth and prosperity (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Dowd, 2003; Levin, 2007a). Basic skills education has two overarching objectives. The first is to provide the student with the necessary minimal skills in reading, writing, and math studies essential for successful self-sustainability in a free-market economy (Bahr, 2010). The second objective, "... which follows from the first, is to open the door to educational and economic advancement by resolving deficiencies that obstruct access to post-secondary credentials" (p. 211).

For the citizens of North Carolina, basic skills education is an important part of educational services offered by North Carolina community colleges. During the 2008-2009 school year (the last year of available data at the time of this study) 19,148 North Carolina public high-school students dropped out of school while North Carolina community colleges enrolled 16,403 public high school dropouts (86%) that same school year into a community college basic skills program (North Carolina Community College System, 2012a). All North Carolina community colleges are mandated by the state legislature to offer basic skills programming to citizens of the State (North Carolina Community College System, 2012b).

Since basic skills education is seen as essential in order to ensure at-risk, underserved, marginalized, and non-traditional students' access to post-secondary education (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; Bahr, 2010; Dowd, 2003; Levin,

2007a; Vaughn, 2006), it is relevant to describe the successes and challenges of North Carolina basic skills educational programming. As such, the focus of this study will be on descriptions of the successes and challenges of basic skills programs from the perspectives of NC community college basic skills directors. The research question that guides this qualitative study is: To what do basic skills directors, at high and low performing basic skills programs, attribute the performance of their programs?

Basic Skills Education in North Carolina's Community College System

The North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) is the third largest in the nation based on the number of colleges, with community colleges distributed within a 30-minute drive of the homes of its citizens (North Carolina Community College System, 2012b). There are 58 community colleges serving all 100 counties in the state of North Carolina. During the 2009-2010 school year, one in eight (12.5%) of North Carolinians aged 18 and up (the mean student age was 34) enrolled in classes at one of the state's 58 community colleges. The total number of state citizens educationally served in North Carolina community colleges during the 2009-2010 school year was 850,000 students (North Carolina Community College System, 2012a). The total enrollment figure for North Carolina community college basic skills students during 2009-2010 was 121,708 (US Department of Education, 2012a). The 121,708 basic skills students enrolled in North Carolina community colleges across the state represent 14.3% of the total student body enrollment in North Carolina community colleges for the 2009-2010 school year.

The NCCCS, at the time of this study, did not collect data on specific gender, racial, and economic status attributes of basic skills students. However, the NCCCS does collect basic skills student entrance-grade level data that they label as Student

Demographics. The 2015 NCCCS student-demographics' data showed 27% of basic skills students were enrolled in ESL classes and must overcome barriers with the English language before they can even begin GED and high school equivalency coursework. Fifty-seven percent of basic skills students initially placement-tested into the lower ABE educational functioning levels of grades 0-8.9, and 16% of basic skills students initially placed into the higher educational functioning levels of grades 9th through 12th (K. Pauly, personal communication, February 24, 2015).

Performance Measures in North Carolina Community Colleges

The State Board of Community Colleges (SBCC) began collecting and analyzing educational data from the state's 58 community colleges in 1993. In 2010, Dr. Scott Ralls, the president of the NCCCS at that time, initiated the Performance Measures Committee to develop performance based student success measures for all community colleges in the state. The Performance Measures Committee formally selected eight measures, approved by the SBCC in 2011, to come into effect beginning in 2013 (North Carolina Community College System, 2014a). At this time, eight student success performance measures were adopted:

1. Basic Skills Student Progress
2. GED Diploma Passing Rate
3. Developmental Student Success Rate in College-Level English Courses
4. Developmental Student Success Rate in College-Level Math Courses
5. First Year Progression
6. Curriculum Student Completion
7. Licensure and Certification Passing Rate

8. College Transfer Performance

Beginning in 2013, based upon three years of previous data, baselines for each of the eight performance measures were set at two standard deviations below the community college system mean, while goals were set at one standard deviation above the system mean. Every three years (beginning again for the 2016 school year) new data will be compiled which will result in new baseline and goal standards being set for the community colleges (North Carolina Community College System, 2015a). Of these eight student success performance measures, Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Diploma Passing Rate relate specifically to North Carolina basic skills education, and to this study.

Definitions of Terms

Adult Basic Education (ABE). Instruction that accomplishes the objectives of traditional education through high school completion.

Adult Secondary Education (ASE). Adult Secondary Education (ASE) is a program of instruction (9.0 grade level and above or the equivalent) designed to prepare adults for further education or transition toward skill obtainment and employment. Adult Secondary Education includes the Adult High School (AHS) Diploma program and the High School Equivalency (HSE) Diploma program (North Carolina Community College System, 2014b).

Appalachian State University Basic Skills Professional Development. Adult Basic Skills Professional Development at Appalachian State University (ASU) is part of the Reich College of Education. This department presents face-to-face workshops, produces training materials, and conducts weeklong summer professional development sessions, since 1998. The ASU Basic Skills Professional

Development department's mission is to provide relevant, timely, accessible and effective professional development for adult basic skills educators (Appalachian State University, 2016).

Autonomy. The condition of being independent. In educational institutions

“Autonomy...is considered to be the best precondition for an effective response to changing needs in terms of knowledge, skills, and qualifications” (Berka & Penneman, 2000, p. ix).

Basic Skills. Basic Skills education is literacy and numeracy education for adults who have not acquired these skills to a level sufficient for everyday adult life. “Basic skills are those foundation skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and English as a Second Language, as well as learning skills and study skills, which are necessary for students to succeed in college-level work” (Boroch, Fillpot, Hope, Johnstone, Mery, Serban, Smith, & Gabriner, 2007, p.4).

College and Career Readiness Division of the NCCCS. The College and Career Readiness Division provides leadership, oversight, professional development and policy guidance to local community colleges and community-based organizations regarding literacy education. These literacy education programs include Adult Basic Education (ABE), English as a Second Language (ESL), and Adult Secondary Education (ASE) (North Carolina Community College System, 2016a).

Contextualized instruction. The “...teaching of basic skills in the context of disciplinary topic areas” (Perin, 2011, p. 3). Contextualization of basic skills “...is an instructional approach that creates explicit connections between the teaching of

reading, writing, or math on one hand, and instruction in a discipline area on the other (Perrin, 2011, p. 5).

Compensatory Education. North Carolina community college Compensatory Education is specifically for adults with intellectual disabilities. The purpose of the program is to compensate adults with developmental disabilities for the lack of, or inadequate, education received earlier (Smith, 2008).

Educational Functioning Level (EFL). Educational functioning levels are the National Reporting System's grade-level distributions. Grade levels one through eight constitute adult basic education (ABE). Grade levels nine through twelve constitute adult secondary education (ASE). The initial test assessment is the basis for placing students in an entering educational functioning level. This is the baseline upon which programs measure student learning gains (Guy, 2006).

Full Time Equivalency (FTE). For basic skills education: Calculation of Extension FTE is as follows: One student who takes 16 hours of class instruction per semester (16 weeks) for two semesters generates 512 hours. Further, the 512 hours is added to the result of multiplying 16 hours of instruction by 11 weeks for the summer session, resulting in 688 hours, or one annual extension FTE: 1 Annual Extension FTE = 16 hours X 16 weeks x 2 semesters = 512 + (16 hours X 11 weeks for summer) = 688 hours (North Carolina Community College System, 2016b).

General Equivalency Diploma, General Educational Development (GED). "The GED diploma validates the academic knowledge and skills required for admission to further education or employment opportunities" (Auchter, 1998, p. 1).

Literacy Education Information System (LEIS). Basic skills student data is entered into the Literacy Education Information System (LEIS) and transmitted to the NCCCS. The NCCCS compiles the data and calculates the composite measure and adjustment for each college. In North Carolina basic skills programs, instructors fill out LEIS forms to track and document students' achievements (North Carolina Community College System, 2015a).

Underserved students. Students who typically are from low-income families and are the first students in their family to attend college (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Delimitations

This study was delimited to directors of community college basic skills departments in the state of North Carolina community college system.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Two-Year Colleges

From 1901 until the end of the 1920s, two-year junior colleges primarily focused on delivering a general liberal arts studies curriculum to their students, in anticipation of their students' eventual transfers into four-year institutions (Kasper, 2002). The Great Depression of the 1930s and subsequent high numbers of unemployed citizens compelled two-year colleges to begin offering trade-specific job-training programs, in addition to their general liberal arts courses and programs (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012a; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Kasper, 2002; Vaughan, 2006). Due to the nation's economic woes of the 1930s and the two-year colleges' adaptive responses to needed workforce training during that decade, our nation's two-year colleges became more flexible institutions in their capacity to offer curriculum and work-force training programs which directly (and quickly) benefited citizens and addressed their communities' specific local workforce needs (Kasper, 2002; Vaughan, 2006).

When World War II ended in 1945, military industries necessarily converted to consumer goods industries and highly skilled workers were essential. Two-year junior colleges once again quickly adapted to the needs of citizens and their local communities by training students and returning war veterans to fill newly opened manufacturing positions (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012b; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Our nation's rapid economic transformation after World War II was made possible with GI Bill higher education students, along with increased numbers of students from the general civilian population seeking post-high school education, who then filled the

jobs that needed their skills gained through higher education (Vaughn, 2006). By 1950, there were 330 two-year colleges throughout the nation offering higher education curriculum courses and work-force training programs (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012a; Vaughan, 2006).

The Birth of the Community College

In 1947, President Harry Truman's Commission on Higher Education for American Democracy (known simply as The Truman Commission) introduced the term "community college" into our nation's lexicon (Gilbert & Heller, 2010). As noted by Shannon and Smith (2006), "of all the developments in American higher education, few have had a greater impact than the creation of the egalitarian mission of the community, technical, and junior colleges" (p. 15). However, the Truman Commission felt the term "junior college" did not accurately reflect the educational services that the nation's two-year junior colleges were actually providing. At that specific time in the nation's collective consciousness, the term junior college expressed the inherent concept that students would complete their first two years of a baccalaureate general liberal arts education at the junior college, and then transfer to four-year institutions. In actuality, by 1947, two-year junior colleges were heavily involved in "...terminal vocational education" (Gilbert & Heller, 2010, p. 7).

President Truman suggested the creation of a national network of public community-based two-year colleges to serve the local needs and idiosyncrasies of the particular communities surrounding the colleges. These community colleges would offer anyone who wanted to enroll "open-access" to higher education, while remaining more affordable than traditional four-year universities (Gilbert & Heller, 2010). Our nation's

community colleges, from that time on, have been charged with the mission of educating the nation's citizens with the ideals of "...open access, comprehensiveness in course and program offerings, and community building" (Vaughan, 2006, p. 1). After the release of the 1947 Truman Commission report, community college administrators were expected to assess the educational needs of their communities, and to provide programs of "terminal education" which benefited each specific community and its citizens (Gilbert & Heller, 2010, p. 8).

Higher education leaders, educational innovators, and educational institutions in the United States feverishly answered President Truman's call to open-access education and between 1950 and 1960, 82 new community colleges opened their doors to students in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012a; Vaughan, 2006). During the 1960s, 457 new community colleges (more than the total of all community colleges in existence before that decade began) opened their doors to the public (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012a). The decade of the 1960s saw community colleges spreading across every state of the nation, fulfilling Truman's vision by creating a national network of open-access two-year higher educational institutions (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012a).

From a humble beginning in 1901 with 6 students (Joliet Junior College, 2012) to a national network of 1,167 public community colleges serving 7.2 million students 113 years later (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012a), community colleges have "...signaled a dramatic change that expanded educational opportunity from only the affluent to include the poorest and most disadvantaged among us" (Fifield, 2006, p. 1).

The Traditional Mission of the Community College

President Truman stressed that community colleges were to have mission statements written to serve local communities and to expand the boundaries of higher education inclusion to underrepresented citizens such as women, minorities, working adults, and the economically disadvantaged (Burke, 2008). Truman's mission was to open the doors of higher education to everyone willing to learn and share in the equal opportunities promised by this nation's founding fathers (Burke, 2008; Gilbert & Heller, 2010).

According to Quigley and Bailey (2003), the Truman Commission's report originally intended the mission of the community colleges to be fivefold:

1. The community college will primarily serve the local community by conducting timely surveys in order to adapt educational programs to match the educational needs of the community.
2. Community college programs will serve a cross-section of youth and adult student populations, with "...consideration be given not only to apprentice training but also to cooperative procedures which provide for the older students' alternate periods of attendance at college and remunerative work" (p. 6).
3. Community colleges will provide a total educational effort of general and vocational programming; "The vocational aspect of one's education must not, therefore, tend to segregate "workers" from "citizens" (p. 6).
4. Transfer education.
5. A comprehensive Adult Education program.

Background of Basic Skills Education

In 1942, the American Council on Education created the General Education Development (GED) test. The creation of the GED high school equivalency was directed at returning World War II veterans and was designed to help veterans earn the necessary credentials essential for college enrollment, thereby widening their employment prospects in general (Messerschmidt, 2014). Although the creation of the GED testing battery and GED diploma preceded the Truman Commission Report on Education, the GED has since been incorporated into states' departments of education and community college basic skills programmatic offerings. The first state to offer the GED testing credentials to non-veteran students was New York, in 1947. Within a decade, the GED testing was available to non-veteran students across the nation (Garvey & Grobe, 2011). The GED and high school equivalency programs inside of our nation's community colleges' basic skills departments are a vital part of basic skills education today (Levin, 2007).

Shortly after the Truman Commission report, community colleges began embracing the noble educational missions of affordability, comprehensiveness in courses and programs, and open access to all students who wished to attend (Gilbert & Heller, 2010; Vaughan, 2006). Soon it became apparent to community college leaders that there were great disparities between students' abilities manifesting themselves in primary and secondary educational institutions (Bahr, 2010). Because of the community colleges' affordability and open-door policies, large numbers of students who were not prepared for academic success at the college level were being admitted into community college programs (Levin & Calcagno, 2008). The need to offer community college students basic skills education, also known as post-secondary remedial education and developmental education, was becoming apparent as early as the 1950s (Bahr, 2010).

Community colleges open their doors and collegiate access to low socio-economic status students, minorities, non-traditional, and students whose "...prior academic performance had been marginal" (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014, p. 33). Basic skills educational programs in our nation's community colleges "...grew as the percentage of students poorly prepared in secondary schools swelled community college rolls" (p. 28).

The Importance of Basic Skills Education

Messerschmidt (2014, p. 115) informs us "[a] lack of a high school diploma or its equivalent effects adults personally, socially, and economically, and extends out to influence their communities". Figures from the US Department of Education (2012b) and the American Association of Community Colleges (2012a) revealed that total enrollment for publicly financed community colleges nationwide in 2008 was 6.9 million students. Of the 6.9 million students attending publicly funded community colleges, 2,364,051 students, or 34.8%, were enrolled in Adult Basic Skills Education programs in 2008 (US Department of Education, 2012c). US Department of Education projections for 2020 community college enrollment is 8.02 million students total, with 2.8 - 3 million students (34.9% - 37.4%) needing Adult Basic Education course-work (US Department of Education, 2012d). Since their inception, a principal purpose of community colleges has been their assistance in educating underprepared, underrepresented, and non-traditional students in gaining the basic skills necessary for success in college level studies and workforce-training (Illowsky, 2008).

The above figures demonstrate the ratio of total community college students to the number of community college students who need basic skills education. This relationship

shows how strong the need is for basic skills programs in our nation's community colleges, and how important it is for students in our communities to be able to continue to access community college basic skills programs (Bahr, 2010; Levin & Kater, 2012; Vaughn, 2006). As Vaughan (2006) maintains, the perspective of those involved in higher education at the community college is that basic skills education is a decisive force in its commitment to the college's open access policy, encouraging the success of all students, and building community; "...society cannot leave anyone behind" (p. 11).

Bureau of Labor Statistics projections for the years 2012 to 2022 indicate that 63.3 percent of the 30 fastest-growing job sectors will require employees to have education beyond high school (US Department of Education, 2014) and that 40 percent of all new jobs will demand an associate's degree at minimum (US Department of Education, 2012a). Ananiadou, Jenkins, and Wolf (2004) assert that basic skills education is essential for increasing numeracy and literary skills, which in turn lead to an individual's strongly enhanced future earnings potential and employment stability. In addition, Illowsky (2008) states "Eliminating differential success rates within basic skills individual courses and in programs is a key component of educational equity" (p. 91).

In order to ensure that college education opportunities are available to previously low-performing secondary school students, low socio-economic status students, and non-traditional and minority students, basic skills education serves as the pipeline to higher education. Nationwide, in 2012, basic skills students took 800,000 GED tests (Messerschmidt, 2014). During the 2009 school year, 660,000 basic skills GED students across the nation took the full battery of five GED tests with 75% (495,000) of these students earning their GED diplomas (Garvey & Grobe, 2011). A study conducted by the

GED Testing Service on a sample of 1000 randomly selected 2003 cohort basic skills students nationwide, revealed that 50% of the students desired their GED diploma in order to continue their post-secondary education. Of these 1000 participants, 307 (30.7%) had earned their GED diplomas and enrolled in community college curriculum courses by the 2008 school year (Garvey & Grobe, 2011).

Data from a 2009 study, conducted by the American Council on Education, revealed that 77.8% of the 2003 national cohort of GED graduates enrolled in community colleges or in certificate programs (Ryder, 2011). Study results released in 2009 showed that in the state of Iowa, 13% of GED completers from the 2004 cohort entered college curriculum programs (Ryder, 2011). A 2012 study conducted in the state of Washington revealed that 30 percent of the basic skills students who completed their GED studies entered college-level courses (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Basics skills education is fundamental in educating our nation's under-represented and marginalized citizenry to the post-secondary education and potential economic opportunities available to them (Levin, 2007; Vaughn, 2006).

North Carolina Community College Basic Skills Directors

According to the North Carolina Community College System, North Carolina community college basic skills directors are responsible to the State while dispensing services to the citizens of the State. In this position, they are expected to:

1. Assist in the development of policies, guidelines, and procedures for Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language, family literacy, English Literacy/Civics Education, and Project IDEAL (Improving Distance Education for Adult Learners)

2. Assist in the interpretation of standards, policies, rules and regulations affecting Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language, family literacy, English Literacy/Civics Education, and Project IDEAL
3. Provide professional development training opportunities for Adult Basic Education, ESL, and distance education instructors
4. Generate Requests for Proposals for special funding as well as review and analyze applications for special funding
5. Coordinate and monitor new program initiatives
6. Assist in coordinating the Adult Basic Skills Professional Development Project at Appalachian State University
7. Coordinate family literacy programs (North Carolina Community College System, 2012a).

North Carolina Basic Skills Performance Measures

The two North Carolina community college student success performance measures that pertain to North Carolina basic skills education are Basic Skills Student Progress and the GED Diploma Passing Rate. North Carolina community colleges are evaluated yearly on four levels in regards to these performance measures: Meets or Exceeds Goal, Above College Average/Below Goal, Below College Average/Above Baseline, and Below Baseline (North Carolina Community College System, 2015a).

When basic skills students advance from their initial testing placement level to the next or any higher educational functioning level within one program year (as determined by the Test of Adult Basic Education or the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System), they have demonstrated student progress. The community college then receives

credit for facilitating the student's progress. As basic skills students progress through the educational functioning levels, basic skills instructors constantly encourage the student to progress until she or he reaches the highest educational level, and then proceeds to take the GED test battery. Any students who earn their GED credentials, provided they also meet several other attendance requirements (explained below), will enable the college to receive credit for the student performance measure of GED Diploma Pass Rate.

The purpose of the Basic Skills Student Progress performance measure is “[t]o ensure adults with low literacy skills are progressing academically toward basic skill attainment necessary for employment and self-sufficiency” (North Carolina Community College System, 2015a, p. 5). Student progress is based upon a basic skills student's increase in at least one educational functioning level (EFL) during a program year. For example, a new basic skills student who places into the ABE-Low level must progress up to the ABE-High educational functioning level within a program year in order for the college to meet the goal of basic skills student progress for that student. The North Carolina basic skills educational functioning levels from lowest to highest are designated as:

1. ABE Literacy
2. Beginning Adult Basic Education (ABE-Beginning)
3. Low Intermediate Adult Basic Education (ABE-Low)
4. High Intermediate Adult Basic Education (ABE-High)
5. Low Adult Secondary Education (ASE-Low)
6. High Adult Secondary Education (ASE-High/GED & Adult High School Equivalency level)

When a North Carolina basic skills student reaches the last educational functioning level, ASE-High, they may proceed with GED testing. If a student enrolls in a community college basic skills program and immediately places into the ASE-High level, no educational functioning level progress is possible. Table 1 demonstrates the North Carolina Basic Skills educational functioning levels and their grade level equivalents.

Table 1

North Carolina Basic Skills Educational Functioning Levels

Level	Grade Equivalent
ABE Literacy	0 – 1.9
ABE Beginning	2 – 3.9
ABE Low	4 – 5.9
ABE High	6 – 8.9
ASE Low	9 – 10.9
ASE High	11 - 12.9

In North Carolina basic skills departments, either the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) or the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS test) captures student progress through educational functioning levels. Basic skills instructors report students' test results on the Literacy Education Information System (LEIS) forms as students undergo testing in the course of their basic skills studies (North Carolina Community College System, 2014a).

The purpose of the GED Diploma Pass Rate performance measure is “To ensure quality GED preparation and high levels of GED attainment” (North Carolina Community College System, 2015a, p. 6). This performance measure is gauged upon:

GED students with an initial placement of Low Adult Secondary Education (ASE- Low) or High Adult Secondary Education (ASE-High) who take at least one GED test during the program year (July 1 – June 30), and have 12 or more total contact hours, and receive a GED diploma.

(North Carolina Community College System, 2015a, p. 5)

If a North Carolina community college basic skills student meets these conditions, the college has met the GED Pass Rate goal for that student.

The compiled 2015 data for all 58 NC community colleges and their performances in meeting the goal of 51.2% (with a baseline of 20.6%) of basic skills students demonstrating an increase in educational functioning level progress are represented in Figure 1 (North Carolina Community College System, 2015a).

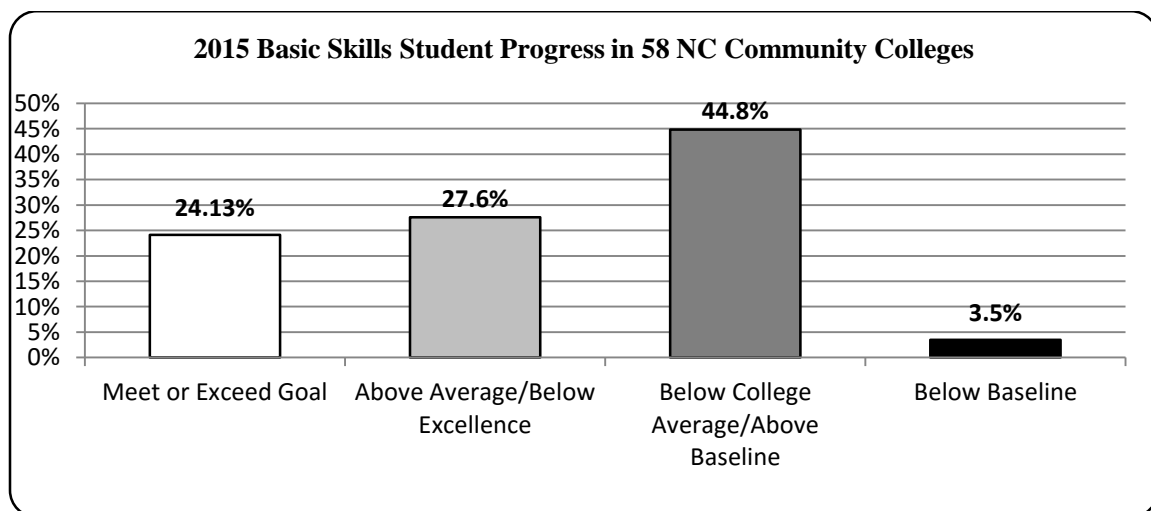


Figure 1. 2015 Basic Skills Student Progress in 58 NC Community Colleges.

Basic Skills 2015 Student Progress Performance Measure Data Summary

For 2015, the NCCCS basic skills student progress performance measure data revealed that 24.13% of the state's community colleges met or exceeded the system-wide goal of 51.2% of basic skills students demonstrating educational functioning level progress for the school year; 27.58% of the community colleges were above college average but below excellence (the goal); 44.82% of the community colleges were above the baseline but below college average; and 3.5% of the community colleges were below the baseline figure in facilitating their students' educational level progress.

The compiled 2015 data for the 58 North Carolina community colleges and their performances in meeting the goal of 82% (with a baseline of 49.3%) of basic skills GED students, who placed into the cohort, passing the GED test battery and earning their GED diplomas are represented in Figure 2 (North Carolina Community College System, 2015a).

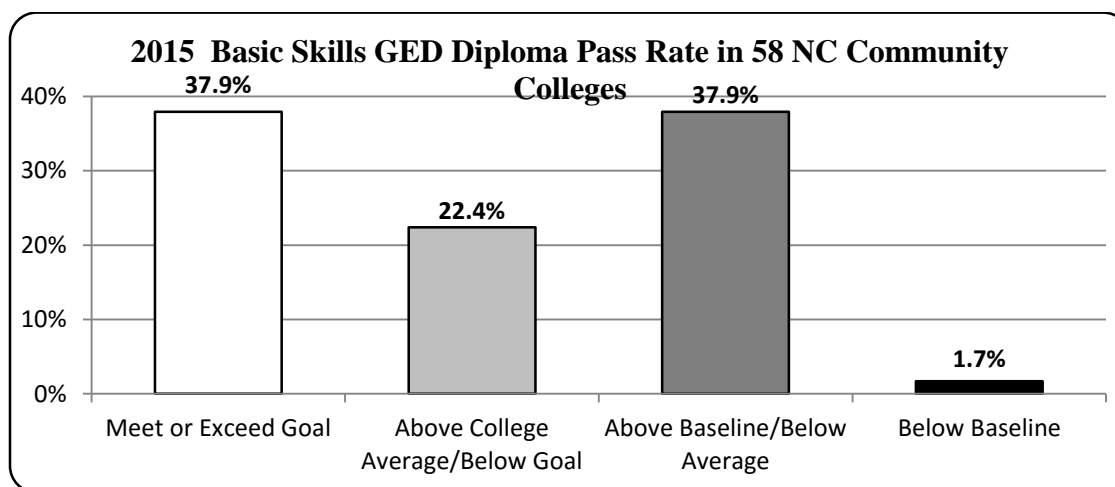


Figure 2. 2015 GED Student Diploma Pass Rate in 58 NC Community Colleges.

Basic Skills 2015 GED Pass Rate Performance Measure Data Summary

The NCCCS basic skills GED Diploma Pass Rate performance measure data compiled for the year 2015, revealed that 37.93% of the state's community colleges met or exceeded the system-wide goal of 82% of basic skills GED students, who placed into the cohort, graduating with a GED diploma; 22.4% of the community colleges were above college average but below excellence (the goal); 37.94% of the community colleges were above the baseline but below the college average; and 1.72% of the community colleges were below the baseline figure set by the NCCCS for GED cohort students obtaining their GED diplomas.

Conceptual Frameworks

The conceptual frameworks that guide this study are Lipsky's (2010) model of the street-level bureaucrat, the NCCCS Basic Skills Director Position Description, mentioned on page 24 (North Carolina Community College System, 2012a), and the 2015 NCCCS student success measures of Basic Skills Student Progress and student GED Diploma Pass Rate data. The 2015 student success measures data is published in the North Carolina Community College System's 2015 Performance Measures for Student Success Report (North Carolina Community College System, 2015a).

North Carolina community college basic skills directors fit the profile of a street level bureaucrat (Lipsky, 2010). Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy model informs us "[p]ublic service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work are called street-level bureaucrats..." (p. 3). Street-level bureaucracies are the locations where citizens directly engage "...with the government they have implicitly constructed" (p. xi).

Basic skills directors, as street-level bureaucrats, are in charge of dispensing services to the citizens of a community, have the use of personal discretion in deciding the levels and conditions of dispensation, and hold power over the citizens seeking the public service (Lipsky, 2010). Citizens hope for fair and equitable treatment when they come to a public service provider, and street-level bureaucrats must perform their duties ethically and professionally while finding the "...correct balance between compassion and flexibility...impartiality and rigid rule-application" (p. 16). Street-level bureaucrats "...are constantly torn by the demands of service recipients to improve effectiveness and responsiveness...to improve the efficacy and efficiency of government services" (p. 4).

Lipsky's (2010) model of the street-level bureaucrat discusses the critical role street-level bureaucrats have in our social institutions. Because community colleges are "...dominant institutions..." in a community, they help to define and shape the community's identity (p. 10). In educational settings, street-level bureaucrats act as agents of social control because they have a principal role "...in socializing the population to the economic order and likely opportunities for different strata of the population" (p.11). Community college basic skills directors are public sector employees who dispense services from the State and interact directly with the citizens of the local community; as such, they are street-level bureaucrats and "...agents of social control" (p. 11). Therefore, a goal of this study is that the descriptions of North Carolina community college basic skills directors of the successes and challenges they encounter in their programs will provide insight into how North Carolina basic skills programming can become more effective and responsive in educating nontraditional, under-represented, and marginalized students.

Rationale for the Study

For the 2015 school year, 14 of the 58 (24.13%) North Carolina community colleges met or exceeded the Basic Skills Student Progress performance measure, while 22 of 58 (37.93%) North Carolina community colleges met or exceeded the goal for the GED Diploma Pass Rate performance measure. Conversely, and perhaps more importantly, these figures demonstrate that 44 of the 58 (75%) North Carolina community colleges did not meet the set goal for the Basic Skills Student Progress performance measure and that 36 of the 58 colleges (62%) did not meet the set goal for the GED Diploma Pass Rate performance measure.

North Carolina basic skills directors engage with citizens and demonstrate personal discretion in the implementation of their duties as they coordinate and monitor new program initiatives (North Carolina Community College System, 2012a) on campus and at off-campus locations. The scheduling of on-campus basic skills courses and specific locations designated for off-campus implementation of basic skills programs, assigned by North Carolina basic skills directors, are an important issue for working and/or long-distance students and potential students. Many Basic skills students face challenges in regards to their ways and means of physically getting to the classroom locations and in regards as to being able to coordinate their daily schedules with the specific beginning and ending times of the classes (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Levin, 2007). The North Carolina community college basic skills directors' descriptions of their programs' successes and challenges may help facilitate and guide basic skills programmatic initiatives and instructional best practices for the future.

As mandated by the state, North Carolina community college basic skills directors must assist in the development of policies, guidelines, and procedures for Adult Basic Education, as well as assist in the interpretation of standards, policies, rules and regulations affecting Adult Basic Education (North Carolina Community College System, 2012a). The directors' perspectives on their programs' successes and challenges, with regard to the 2015 NCCCS student success measures may help positively guide North Carolina community colleges' basic skills programs toward programming and best practices that ensure the rise in student progress and GED student completion rates.

Additionally, this study will give voice to a group of educational professionals, whose voices have yet to be heard, and whose professional experiences and programmatic insights may offer practical implications in the field of basic skills education.

Purpose for the Study

The purpose of this study is to describe the successes and challenges of North Carolina community college basic skills educational programming. Through face-to-face interviews with North Carolina community college basic skills directors, it is hoped to discover what directors at low and high-performing North Carolina community college basic skills programs attribute the performance of their programs.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

A social institution can be fully understood only if we do not limit ourselves to the abstract study of its formal organization, but analyze the way in which it appears in the personal experience of various members of the group and follow the influence which it has upon their lives. (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1919, cited in Galletta & Cross, 2013, p. 45)

Research Design and Procedure

This is a descriptive qualitative study, in which face-to-face and phone interviews were the method of obtaining perspectives North Carolina community college basic skills directors, in high and low-performing basic skills programs, have about their programs' performances, successes, and challenges. By utilizing personal face-to-face and phone interviews in order to capture data, I directly communicated with participants, allowing them to tell their detailed and in-depth stories that revealed their perspectives, thoughts, and motives (Creswell, 2007; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). Seidman (2006) informs us that "Social abstractions like "education" are best understood through the experiences of the individuals whose work and lives are the stuff upon which the abstractions are built" (p. 10). In addition, Creswell (2007) stresses

The strongest and most scholarly rationale for a study, I believe, comes from the scholarly literature: a need exists to add or to fill a gap in the literature or to provide a voice for individuals not heard in the literature. (p. 102)

This descriptive qualitative study was conducted in order to fill a gap in the published literature, and to better understand a specific group of educators

whose voices have yet to be heard and whose personal perspectives of their educational programs' performances, successes, and challenges have yet to be studied. The overarching question that guided this study was "To what do basic skills directors, at high and low-performing NC community college basic skills programs, attribute the performance of their programs?"

In June 2015, I sent out email letters of introduction and invitation to participate in this study to 20 North Carolina Community College basic skills directors. Ten of the letters were sent to directors of low-performing basic skills programs across the state, and 10 letters went to directors of high-performing basic skills programs across the state. These high and low-performing community college programs were identified by using the June 2015 Performance Summary which is published by the NCCCS (North Carolina Community College System, 2015a).

Initially, fifteen basic skills directors in total answered the email invitations by saying they were interested in participating in this study; nine of the directors were from high-performing basic skills programs, and six of the responses were from directors of low-performing basic skills programs. Of the initial 20 program invitations, five program directors provided no response. When it came time to schedule interview sessions, nine directors followed through with interview sessions: four directors from high-performing programs and five directors from low-performing programs. Of this final group of participants, six of the respondents agreed to face-to-face interviews, while three basic skills directors, two from high-performing programs and one from a low-performing basic skills program, agreed to an hour-long phone interview session. Five of the face-to-face interview sessions lasted an hour each, while one face-to-face interview lasted for 2

hours and 10 minutes. Two phone interview sessions lasted for an hour each, and one phone interview lasted for 1.25 hours.

The original intent was to conduct all interviews face-to-face. However, as the interview process progressed, it became increasingly difficult to schedule meeting times with the basic skills directors from across the large state of North Carolina due to time constraints. Therefore, the interview sessions are a combination of face-to-face interviews and phone call interviews. The first six interviews I conducted were face-to-face interviews, while three subsequent interviews were conducted by phone. The phone interviews went surprisingly well, and perhaps the interviewees were even more candid over the phone, as they otherwise would have been in a face-to-face meeting.

Participants

The group of participants consisted of nine North Carolina community college basic skills program directors. Six participants are female, and three are male. The ages of the basic skills directors ranged from the mid-forties into the mid to late-sixties. At the time of the interview sessions, seven directors held MA degrees with one of these directors working on an Ed.D degree in community college administration. One director held an Ed.D degree and one director held a BA degree. Classroom teaching experience varies. Eight of the basic skills directors have classroom teaching experience in Adult Education. One director had no classroom teaching experience, having moved through the ranks in administrative positions.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants and were recorded on a digital recording device as they occurred. The following sections document the

methods in which the interview protocol was adopted, informed consent was obtained, participants understood that their anonymity was secured, and they were protected from any potential harm from information they shared.

Interview Protocol

A number of scholars (Galletta & Cross, 2013; Gubrium, 2012; Willis, 2005) recommend that researchers develop their interview protocol in order to have a sense of the direction they wish to navigate the interview session and that they pilot test their interview questions in order to ascertain their effectiveness. Therefore, I developed a written interview protocol to aid in my consistency of asking questions during the interview sessions, and I conducted a pilot interview that provided an opportunity for me to become accustomed to the interview process, make any necessary adjustments in interview questions, and to help me adjust my question probing and question follow-up techniques.

I began the interview session by stating the purpose of my research study, and expressing gratitude for the participant taking time to participate in the study. At the face-to-face interview sessions, I ensured the participants understood and signed the consent forms. Additionally, I provided the participants with copies of both the NCCCS Basic Skills Director Position and Duties description (North Carolina Community College System, 2012a), and a copy of the 2015 Performance Measures for Student Success Report. For the phone call interview sessions, I described to the participants my conceptual frameworks of the NCCCS basic skills director job description duties and the 2015 NCCCS Performance Measures Report, as identified in the study.

Interview Questions

Interview question 1 focuses on the basic skills director's professional background. Interview questions 2 and 3 focus on NC community college basic skills directors' roles as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010) and their perspectives of their abilities to improve program efficiency and efficacy. Interview questions 4 and 5 were designed around the NCCCS Basic Skills Director Position and Duties descriptions. Interview questions 6, 7, and 8 were designed around the 2015 NCCCS Student Performance Measures Report of Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Diploma Passing Rate. The interview questions follow:

1. Tell me about your professional background. What led you to this community college and this basic skills departmental directorship?
2. Consider your formal duties as the director of a basic skills program and tell me about your ability to exercise autonomy in the execution of your work. Are you able to implement your ideas and strategies according to policies, rules and/or regulations? If so, tell me about a time when you did so.
3. Consider again your formal duties as the director of a basic skills program. In contrast to the last question, think of a time when policies, rules and/or regulations, prevented you from exercising autonomy in the execution of your work. What was that like?
4. Consider the NCCCS Student Performance Measures Report of Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Diploma Passing Rate. Describe two or three of the successes in your program that stand out for you.

5. Consider again the NCCCS Student Performance Measures Report of Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Diploma Passing Rate. Describe two or three of the challenges in your program that stand out for you.
6. Are the NCCCS performance measure goals realistic? Why, why not?
7. Are there NCCCS system-wide procedures and/or mandates that hamper your ability to improve your basic skills program? If so, describe two or three of them.
8. Are there college-level procedures and/or mandates that hamper your ability to improve your basic skills program? If so, describe two or three of them.
9. What else would you like to tell me about the successes and challenges you face as the director of a basic skills program?

Follow-up Probe Questions

1. Did you study to be a community college administrator? Did you rise through the ranks at this particular college? Do you have classroom teaching experience?
2. What enabled you to use, or not use, your personal discretion in deciding the levels of programmatic dispensation?
3. Were program effectiveness and efficacy issues eventually addressed? Was/were there a conflict(s), or difficulties encountered, due to the NCCCS rules and regulations?
4. Are your policy and procedure suggestions given credence by your college's high-level administrators? By the NCCCS administrators?
5. Are you able to address your programmatic concerns with high-level college administrators? With the NCCCS administrators?

6. What initiatives have helped your program to succeed? What initiatives would you implement to improve your program?
7. Can you inform NCCCS management that there are system-wide procedures and/or mandates that hamper your ability to improve your basic skills program? Why or why not?
8. Can you inform your college's management that there are system-wide procedures and/or mandates that hamper your ability to improve your basic skills program? Why or why not?

Interview questions were designed around Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucrat model, the NCCCS Basic Skills Director Position and Duties descriptions (North Carolina Community College System, 2012a), and the North Carolina Community College System's 2015 Performance Measures for Student Success Report (http://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/sites/default/files/data-warehouse/2015_performance_report_6-23-15.pdf). In relation to Lipsky's (2010) street level bureaucrat model, do North Carolina community college basic skills directors feel they "...have substantial discretion in the execution of their work"? (p. 3). What were North Carolina community college basic skills directors' perspectives about their role in improving the "...effectiveness and responsiveness... [of their programs while] improve[ing] the efficacy and efficiency of government services" ? (p. 4). In regards to the NCCCS Basic Skills Director Position and Duties description, what were the basic skills directors' perspectives of their roles as they "[a]ssist in the interpretation of standards, policies, rules and regulations affecting Adult Basic Skills Education? (North Carolina Community College System, 2012a). In relation to the NCCCS 2015

Performance Measures for Student Success Report, to what do basic skills directors at high and low-performing North Carolina community college basic skills programs attribute the performance of their programs?

Data Analysis Procedures

As researchers analyze qualitative data, they initiate the "...search for general statements about relationships and underlying themes..." (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 207). Qualitative data analysis requires a series of thoughtful and ordered procedures (Creswell, 2007; Groenewald, 2004). The researcher records and then transcribes the interview data, looks for recurring themes within segments of interview transcriptions, and organizes and summarizes the themes into meaningful concepts (Creswell, 2007; Groenewald, 2004). Seidman (2006) also recommends marking individual passages in the transcriptions, and then grouping these identified passages into categories, as the researcher looks for "...the categories for thematic connections within and among them" (p. 119). Coding is an integral process of data analysis (Creswell, 2007; Weston, Gandell, Beauchamp, McAlpine, Wiseman, & Beauchamp, 2001). Through the procedure of coding interview data, the researcher constructs, names, and accredits compatible data characteristics into categories that help the researcher develop thematic connections and an understanding of the interview data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010).

Seidman (2006), as well as Plano Clark and Creswell (2010), recommend that the interview data be transcribed, reduced, analyzed, and interpreted, before writing and sharing the study results. The researcher's objective is to extract the interview data that he or she is interested in and to "...reduce and then shape the material into a form in which it can be shared or displayed" (Seidman, 2012, p. 121).

As suggested by Creswell and Plano Clark (2012), I followed a four-step method for analyzing the qualitative data gathered for this study (see Figure 3). These four steps are “...preparing the data, exploring and coding the data, developing descriptions and themes from the codes, and validating the findings” (p. 280). For this study, the four steps for data analysis proposed by Creswell and Plano Clark are applicable in dealing with a large amount of transcribed interview data. Once the interview data were transcribed verbatim, I was able to read, and re-read, many times the interview transcripts while I internalized the general overall perspectives and descriptions, in response to the interview questions, provided by the study participants. This provided me with a “...general sense of the data” (p. 277).

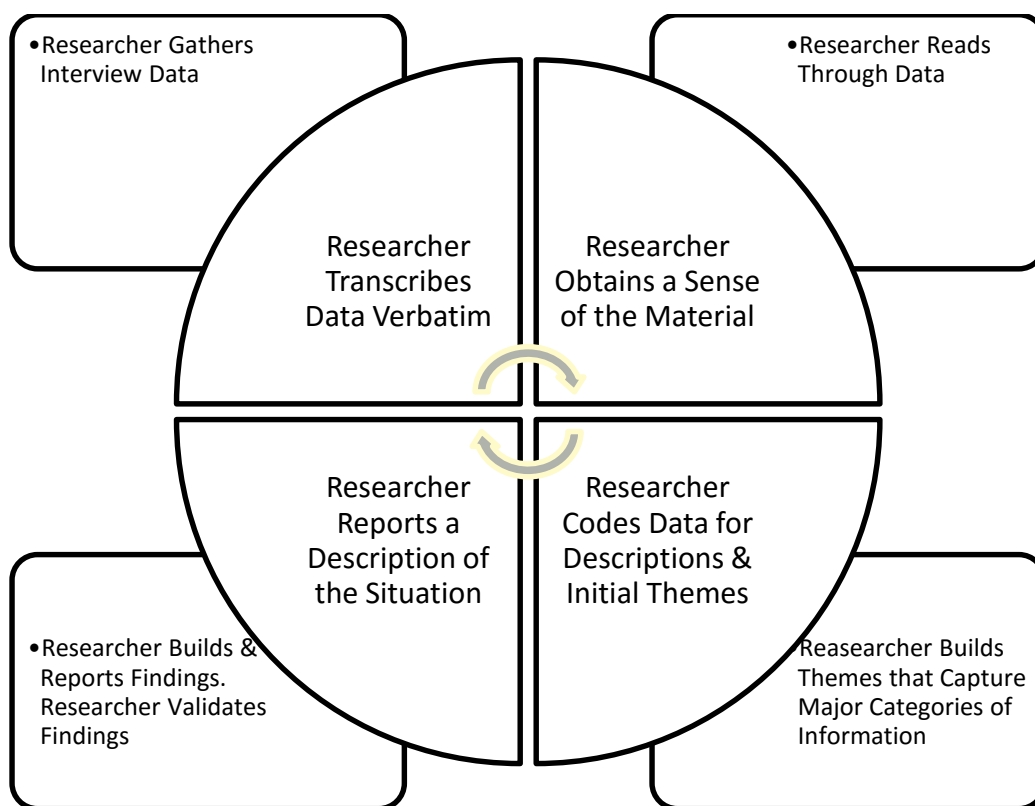


Figure 3. Process of Qualitative Data Analysis

Initially, with a general understanding of the data, I began to notice and underline broad common themes and terms, which occurred in the different interview transcripts. As I began the process of writing the analysis of the findings, I was able to identify text sections with overarching themes and began to distill the data more specifically with principal keywords as benchmarks for organizing and distilling the interviews in more detail.

As I obtained an overall sense of the transcribed data, I began associating overall themes with particular codes. I went back to the transcribed data many times, re-reading the transcripts and reevaluating my overall sense of the data. This in turn increased my understanding of the data, which further directed my interpretation of the findings.

Step one was the gathering of interview data and then transcribing verbatim the recorded interview sessions. When the transcriptions of the interview sessions were completed, I proceeded to step two and began to analyze the data by hand to detect codes and index principal themes. In this step, I utilized the recommendation of Creswell and Plano Clark (2012) of using colored highlighters to underline principal words and concepts stated in the interviewees' own words (also known as *in vivo* codes) to differentiate meaningful themes. I also made many marginal notations within the transcriptions to make connections between codes, principal themes, and sub-themes.

Keywords for coding the transcribed data relate to Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucrat conceptual framework, the North Carolina Community College System duties description for basic skills directors, and selections from the research literature (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Levin, 2007b). Step three involved the process of beginning to develop and capture principle themes according to keywords and concepts mentioned

repeatedly by the different participants, and to then begin describing major categories of information. Finally step four, was formulating a cohesive description of the perspectives North Carolina community college basic skills directors have about the successes and challenges in their programs. Step four allowed me to think more critically and introspectively about the data, as I reduced step three's initial 48 codes identified throughout that transcript data to 10 principal themes, and decided which codes and themes initially identified were actually subsets of principal themes.

Credibility, Transferability, and Dependability

The researcher conducting a qualitative study must "...address soundness, credibility, and trustworthiness" of the gathered data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 251). The soundness of a qualitative research study is addressed when the researcher "...respond(s) to cannons that stand as criteria against which all trustworthiness of the project can be evaluated" (p. 143). Three criteria against which qualitative studies are measured are credibility, transferability, and dependability (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

The credibility of a study is satisfactorily addressed when the researcher sets the study parameters of participants and settings and stays within those parameters, chooses the appropriate conceptual or theoretical framework to guide the study, and "...ensure(s) that the subject was accurately identified and described" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 143). For this study, the parameters of participant selection and setting were correctly chosen and adhered to. The NCCCS basic skills director position job duties guideline and Lipsky's (2010) conceptual framework of the street-level bureaucrat are appropriate frameworks for guiding this study. This study's subject was accurately identified and described.

Transferability in qualitative research is also known as generalizability and/or applicability (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The qualitative researcher's goal is not to conduct a study that is necessarily transferable to other similar groups of participants, but to conduct a study that produces "...a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with a detailed study of that situation (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 174). The findings of this study are based upon the perspectives of basic skills directors from one educational program division, within one community college system located in one state, and therefore may not be generalizable or transferrable to other state's basic skills programs.

Dependability of a qualitative study is addressed when the researcher adapts and "...account(s) for changing conditions in the phenomenon chosen for study as well as change in the design created by increasingly refined understanding of the setting" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 154). Participant interviews were conducted within a community college setting and with participants who are North Carolina community college basic skills program directors. Therefore, this study was conducted in a stable setting with a group of participants who did not undergo changing conditions as the interviews and research progressed.

Bracketing

My 12-year professional relationship inside of a North Carolina community college basic skills program necessarily constructed personal preconceptions about the research topic at hand, so I utilized the bracketing method which helped me "...mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 80).

Bracketing is a useful strategy to nullify the effects of personal bias on the part of the researcher and to "...ensure that the researcher's perspectives do not overwhelm the perspectives of the participants" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2012, p. 287). It is essential that the qualitative researcher "...approach the [study] with a naïve sense of wonder, without the prejudices of our culture and history" (Langdrige, 2012, p. 22). By employing bracketing, the setting aside of one's preconceptions about a phenomena, (Langdrige, 2012 ; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2012; Tufford & Newman, 2010), the researcher attempts to minimize speculation and, instead, focuses on the "...phenomenon as it appears" while describing (not explaining) the phenomenon under study (Langdrige, 2012, p. 24). The bracketing procedure "...may free the researcher to engage more extensively with the raw data" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 86).

My bracketing method continued into and through the transcription, coding, and data analysis phases, where new, emerging data and themes might have elicited spontaneous and even previously unrecognized personal feelings and emotions. I noted my personal reactions as they occurred, and reflected upon them in order to help me confront and nullify any personal biases I may have had about the revelations of the data (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

While conducting this study, I also employed memoing by taking notes and writing memos to myself as I collected and analyzed data; in this way, the notes and memos were available to me throughout the research project in order for me to reflect upon the data and "...explore feelings about the research endeavor" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 86). By noting my personal reflections and memoing throughout the entire data gathering and analysis process, I identified and confronted personal experiences and

preconceptions that possibly may have affected my perceptions of the participants' responses to the interview questions.

Researcher Professional Bias

I am a fulltime basic skills instructor who has been involved in North Carolina community college basic skills education since 2004. I have spent my community college career in one North Carolina community college, which is located in the western region of the state. I have been, and still am, a classroom instructor in the NCCCS Basic Skills educational areas of Adult Basic Education (ABE), English as a Second Language (ESL), and General Equivalency Diploma (also known as the General Education Development and GED). In 2007, I earned my MA/Ed Community College Administration degree, but I have not yet been in an administrative leadership position in the community college setting.

Ethical Issues

Care must be taken in ensuring the protection of the participants from current or future harm caused by the potential current or future release of qualitative data from interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Care must also be taken in order to build a trusting relationship with the study participants so the "...quality and credibility..." of the data gathered can be augmented, and an ethical research study ensues (p. 101). The participants in this study were consenting adults who were asked to share their perspectives of their workplace experiences. Participants of face-to-face interview sessions were asked to read and sign an informed consent form. The informed consent form was explained prior to the personal interviews in order to ensure the participants' full understanding of the information contained therein. All participants' identities in this

study will remain confidential, the digitally audio-recorded qualitative interview data will be stored securely, and the audio data will not be released in the future without the consent of the interview participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research Findings

The purposes of this study are twofold: describe the successes and challenges of North Carolina community college basic skills educational programming, through interview data gathered from North Carolina community college basic skills directors, and to discover to what basic skills directors at high and low-performing NC community college basic skills programs attribute the performance of their programs. Lipsky's (2010) conceptual model of the street-level bureaucrat, as well as the North Carolina Community College System duties description for basic skills directors were used as frameworks for this study. The principle interview questions that guided the data gathering process were:

1. Consider your formal duties as the director of a basic skills program and tell me about your ability to exercise autonomy in the execution of your work.
2. In contrast to the last question, think of a time when policies, rules and/or regulations, prevented you from exercising autonomy in the execution of your work.
3. Consider the NCCCS Student Performance Measures Report of Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Diploma Passing Rate. Describe two or three of the successes in your program that stand out for you.
4. Consider again the NCCCS Student Performance Measures Report of Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Diploma Passing Rate. Describe two or three of the challenges in your program that stand out for you.
5. Are the NCCCS performance measure goals realistic?

6. Are there NCCCS system-wide procedures, policies, and/or mandates that hamper your ability to improve your basic skills program?
7. Are there college-level procedures, policies, and/or mandates that hamper your ability to improve your basic skills program?

Based upon the North Carolina Community College System June 2015

Performance Summary Report (North Carolina Community College System, 2015a), basic skills directors from low and high-performing programs were identified and asked to participate in this study. Low-performing programs are identified as being *Below Baseline Level* and/or *Above Baseline Level but Below Average* in the two state-wide North Carolina Community College System's performance measures of Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Pass Rate. High-performing programs are identified as being *Above College Average*, *Below Excellence* and/or *Meet or Exceed Level* in the two performance measures of Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Pass Rate.

North Carolina community colleges' basic skills programs are part of the larger community college academic structure. Depending on the particular community college in North Carolina, the basic skills department may be under a larger departmental umbrella of Continuing Education, Workforce Development, Instructional Services, or perhaps Academic Success; each of these departments will have a vice president and or a departmental dean who supervise the overall direction and performance of their basic skills directors and departments. With this in mind, it was pertinent to ask basic skills directors about their perceptions of their autonomy in making important departmental decisions for basic skills programming at their colleges.

The nine North Carolina community college basic skills director participants were chosen for this study based upon their programs' performances, as identified in the NCCCS June 2015 Performance Summary Report. Five participants are directors of low-performing basic skills programs, and four participants are directors from high-performing basic skills programs. Numbers were assigned to the participants in order to protect anonymity.

Participant Experience and Identifier Designations

The five basic skills director participants from the low-performing programs are designated as participants #1 through #5. The four basic skills director participants from the high-performing programs are designated as participants #6 through #9 (see Table 2).

1. Participant #1 is female, has 43 total years of basic skills and adult education career experience, seven years of basic skills classroom teaching experience, holds an MA/adult education degree, and has been in the NC community college basic skills directorship position for five years at the time of the interview session.
2. Participant #2 is female, has 17 total years of basic skills and adult education career experience, 15 years of basic skills classroom teaching experience, holds an MA/adult education administration degree, and has been in the NC community college basic skills directorship position for two years at the time of the interview session.
3. Participant #3 is female, has 13 total years of basic skills and adult education career experience, two years of basic skills classroom teaching experience, holds an MA/community college administration degree, and has been in the NC

community college basic skills directorship position for three years at the time of the interview session.

4. Participant #4 is female, has 32 total years of basic skills and adult education career experience, four years of basic skills classroom teaching experience, holds an MA/counseling degree, and has been in the NC community college basic skills directorship position for one year at the time of the interview session.
5. Participant #5 is male, has 30 total years of basic skills and adult education career experience, five years of basic skills classroom teaching experience, holds an MA/education administration degree, and has been in the NC community college basic skills directorship position for three years at the time of the interview session.
6. Participant #6 is female, has 23 total years of basic skills and adult education career experience, five years of basic skills classroom teaching experience, holds an MA/counseling degree, and has been in the NC community college basic skills directorship position for four years at the time of the interview session.
7. Participant #7 is female, has 26 total years of basic skills and adult education career experience, four years of basic skills classroom teaching experience, holds an MA/adult education degree, and has been in the NC community college basic skills directorship position for two years at the time of the interview session.
8. Participant #8 is male, has 12 total years of basic skills and adult education career experience, zero years of basic skills classroom teaching experience, holds a BA/business administration degree, and has been in the NC community college

basic skills directorship position for two and one half years at the time of the interview session.

9. Participant #9 is male, has 31 total years of basic skills and adult education career experience, 18 years of basic skills classroom teaching experience, holds an Ed/D education leadership degree, and has been in the NC community college basic skills directorship position for one year at the time of the interview session.

Table 2

Participant Experience and Identifier Designation

Participant	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9
Gender	F	F	F	F	M	F	F	M	M
Degree Attained	MA	MA	MA	MA	MA	MA	MA	BA	Ed D
Degree Specialty	Adult Educ	Adult Educ Admin	Comm College Admin	Counseling	Educ Admin	Counseling	Educ Admin	Business Admin	Ed Leadership
Years in Adult Education	43	17	13	32	30	23	26	12	31
Classroom Teaching Experience	7	15	2	4	5	5	4	0	18
Years as Basic Skills Director	5	2	3	1	3	4	2	2.5	1

Director Use of Autonomy

Basic Skills Directors' Perceptions of Low-Performing Programs

When asked to explain their perspectives of their use of personal and professional autonomy in decision-making processes in their management of basic skills departments, participants' responses indicated that autonomy is linked to specific aspects of their duties and performance in their departments. Principal themes that presented themselves from the data about perceptions of professional autonomy in the execution of their duties were: director autonomy in general, autonomy in the major restructuring of their basic

skills departments, and autonomy in making programmatic changes due to departmental restructurings away from traditional basic skills departments into departments of College and Career Readiness, foreseeing the need to transition basic skills students into higher education or employment settings.

Director autonomy in general.

Four of the five basic skills directors of low-performing basic skills programs reported that they were able to exercise high levels of personal autonomy-in-general in the execution of their duties. These participant responses demonstrated that this group of basic skills directors was given the authority and the opportunities to implement their programmatic initiatives and strategies. These directors were enthusiastic in praise of their colleges' high-level administrators in regards to being able to use their personal decision-making power in general day-to-day departmental operations and procedures. One of the basic skills director participants from a low-performing program expressed frustration that she did not have autonomy in making important hiring decisions she feels are necessary for her department to successfully navigate departmental restructuring efforts, which I will expand upon later in this section.

First, I will expound upon the 4 of 5 of basic skills directors from low-performing programs who felt they are able to use their personal autonomy in the execution of their duties.

In response to the query presented her about her use of personal autonomy in the execution of her duties, participant #2, from a mid-sized community college in the eastern part of the state exclaimed:

I have a wonderful dean who gives me quite a bit of leeway to do anything we want to do. I have a staff of coordinators and full time teachers, a retention and a data specialists. We pretty much have the freedom to do whatever we think will work.

A second basic skills director, participant # 3, from a large community college located in central North Carolina stated “Yes! I have the full support of the college’s administration. I have little difficulty in implementing my ideas for the program”. Participant # 1, with 40 plus years of adult education leadership experience and who is a director from a large community college basic skills program, offered a personal insight into the relationship of basic skills directors and their autonomy in regards to their interactions among college presidents, vice presidents, and departmental deans:

I definitely have had the flexibility to make the decisions that impact our profession...adult education is this unique field in and of itself that when you are in the Department of Education [here the participant is referring to states other than North Carolina] you’re not working with kids so you’re different. When you’re in a community college system you’re not working with credit classes so you’re different. You’re unique, and usually in those cases your supervisor doesn’t fully understand everything that there is to run an adult education program.

Participant #4, the basic skills director with only one year in her director position, explained that in general she felt she had the support of her college’s leadership team, but that she had not pushed hard for the use of her professional autonomy in the

implementation of ideas since she is still new to the college. She explained her leadership strategy as she gets a feel for the college and the employees in her department:

I have a coaching background, and I approach things pretty much like a team. In a way that it's not "It's my way or the highway". So any decisions that I made, they [departmental staff] made. I have a lot of their input. I feel like with team buy-in it's a lot easier to implement change.

However, regarding one important area of her professional duties in the new restructuring process her basic skills department is undergoing, this director has been stymied in the use of her professional autonomy and in hiring the qualified personnel, she needs to hire (participant #4 communication, October 12, 2015).

Director autonomy and departmental restructuring.

In regards to basic skills directors using their personal and professional autonomy in negotiating with their college's executive administrators the details of renaming and restructuring their departments, participant #1 explained more in depth about the restructuring of basic skills programs that is occurring in North Carolina community colleges today and how directors' autonomy facilitates important departmental change:

Since I came on board at [college name] about five years ago, we've had two total reorganizations of our department. Each time I go to my supervisor....he regards us as the experts. So, I sit down and explain this is why we need to reorganize, [and] this is what we need to do to reflect the vision of WIOA [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act]. He says "OK, I'll run it by the president and get his OK", and it happens. So, I'm very fortunate in that regard.

Another participant (#4), who comes from a long previous career in public school administration, explained that she had to have several meetings with her dean and vice president about the WIOA regulations. These meetings discussed issues that are affecting North Carolina community colleges' basic skills departmental procedures, the need to reorganize her department to gear up for student transitions into higher education course work or employment, and her professional autonomy:

We changed our program dramatically, and one of the biggest things that we did was work on trying to change the way our teachers teach. This was a very traditional program and you know with my experience and my background, I felt we needed to get the teachers out of workbooks and out of the worksheets and do a lot more of the hands on project-based contextualized instruction. It's in line with most of the research; just trying to get the teachers to put in a lot more time into planning and to get the students doing things and interacting with each other rather than interacting with a piece of paper.

While four of the five participants from low-performing programs feel they are allowed the autonomy to make the important decisions and programmatic changes that are necessary for their departments' restructuring, one basic skills director (participant #4) from a low-performing program is frustrated about her stifled professional autonomy. She has had difficulty in implementing her ideas for restructuring her basic skills department and in being able to hire the staff that she needs to help her achieve her restructuring goals:

One of the things that I was led to do was fading out Compensatory Ed. So now, I've had to completely restructure all of our positions. We are being mandated to do things we haven't been doing in the past because of WIOA and Career Pathways. But I can't take someone who's never written a curriculum before and say "Create a Bridge class for such and such" or "Create a Career Pathway and contextualized lessons for this and for that." It's hard, and we have been pushing for that and pushing transition for our students and having someone in the positions to help with student transitions, and I'm not allowed to hire the people I need to get in this department to do these things.

In addition, as mentioned above in the words of director participants, a major aspect of the departmental restructuring process is to restructure the way in which their instructors deliver educational content to the students. The WIOA regulation makes traditional basic skills lab settings and traditional methods of basic skills' course delivery almost obsolete (participant #1 communication, June 19, 2015). Basic skills directors are finding that in order to meet the educational guidelines set out by WIOA, and to set up the required pathways and transitions for students into post-secondary education and employment, that specific content-area learning outcomes and contextualized instruction must now be offered to students.

Director autonomy and restructured basic skills course offerings.

Since the beginning of the 2015-2016 program year, North Carolina community college basic skills programs have been directed from the North Carolina Community College System, via the state legislature, to transition basic skills students into higher

education curriculum programs or into a productive employment situation (participant # 9 communication, August 27, 2015). Statewide, community college basic skills directors are currently reorganizing their departments and programs and moving away from simply graduating students with the GED or High School Equivalency (HSE) certification, and moving towards preparing students for higher education enrollment and/or meaningful workplace transitions. One way in which basic skills directors are restructuring their departments, is by moving basic skills students away from an open multi-subject-based lab setting, and designing courses that reflect students' real world ambitions and goals (participant # 9 communication, August 27, 2015).

All five of the basic skills directors in the group of low-performing programs interviewed for this study related how they were under pressure from the North Carolina Community College System to find ways in which to begin transitioning basic skills students into either higher education courses, meaningful employment, or both. In this regards, directors' autonomy plays a vital role in the relationships that they have with their colleges' senior-level administrators and with their students (participant #1 communication, June 29, 2015). In this section concerning directors' autonomy and their ideas and initiatives for restructuring basic skills course offerings and transitioning students into curriculum or meaningful work, we hear how directors are focusing on much more than just the traditional GED or High School Equivalency certification for their students.

When it comes to basic skills programmatic content and basic skills directors' abilities to make changes to their traditional programs by adapting newly designed basic skills course offerings and departmental strategies to fit the needs of students in the 21st

Century, autonomy for the director is an important issue. Not only are basic skills students being offered the basic skills coursework that prepares them for the GED or HSE test components, new for 2015 is the transitioning of current GED and HSE diploma seekers into curriculum courses, also known as Pathways or Basic Skills Plus, even before they finish their GED or HSE certification. Basic skills directors are now overseeing their programs' blending of traditional basic skills coursework with curriculum pathways, as well as student pathways to community-based employment agencies and businesses. These newly created Pathways are designed to transition basic skills students into the realm of curriculum studies and/or employment much more readily and efficiently than previously facilitated by basic skills departments (participant #7 communication, June 26, 2015). Due to these developments, North Carolina basic skills directors are now responsible for their departments' negotiating relationships with curriculum programs and community businesses (participant #6 communication, June 12, 2015).

Four of the five low-performing program basic skills directors interviewed specifically mentioned that their ideas for evolving basic skills course offerings to students were given credence by the colleges' top-level administrators. Participant #3 described an aspect of transitioning students from high school equivalency programs into curriculum studies that is now underway in many North Carolina community college basic skills departments:

I feel the basic skills students need a taste of how curriculum students see the world, and I began implementing strategies to offer contextualized

instruction in our basic skills classes almost as soon as I became director here. Mixing basic skills with curriculum is a good idea in my opinion.

The traditional method of enrolling basic skills students into an open-lab setting with multi-subject teacher facilitated classes is giving way to directors developing contextualized coursework that is pertinent for the students' progress into specific curriculum programs. Participant #2 related the current trend of transitioning basic skills students into her college's curriculum programs. She spoke of how her use of professional autonomy directs the programmatic changes as she promotes her ideas, strategies, and initiatives with the curriculum side of the college:

We changed the structure of the program so that our classes were not set up by levels any more, not by any academic levels, but by interest area. So we are teaching Adult Basic Education skills in the context of health careers, in the context of business and computer careers, in the context of trades like automotive, welding and construction, that kind of thing. We also set up classes that are taught in the context of career exploration, so we are trying to meet the interests and needs of our students, rather than make sure they can read better or simply do math better.

Participant #2 went into depth about the need for new and exciting course offerings for basic skills students, as opposed to the traditional lab-model based GED, HSE, and basic skills instruction of the past:

We are moving into contextualized instruction, and teaching in project-based instruction. We have projects now and we have competitions with our students, our foundation helps fund those, and teaching with using

research that supports the way adults learn. We're making sure we're doing activities where the students are interacting. The way adults learn, the research says they need to talk about their learning, they need to interact with each other, and they need to have a stake in it and it needs to be something they're motivated by. It can't be out of context. Those kinds of things we've really focused on. So changing to that kind of instruction; direct instruction, evidence-based instruction, and engaged learning, that's what we're doing. I think it's making a difference.

As basic skills directors use their professional autonomy in negotiating their departments' new directions and new curriculums with their colleges' executive leadership teams, while also focusing on transitioning basic skills students into curriculum or career pathways, they need to negotiate with their college's senior-level administrators about the ultimate direction and goals for the new basic skills departments. In this matter, director "...expertise and autonomy play an important role in negotiating with V.P.s and deans, in order to get new ideas implemented" (participant #8 communication, July 10, 2015).

Basic Skills Directors' Perceptions of High-Performing Programs

Two principal themes regarding director autonomy presented themselves in the interview data from four basic skills directors from high-performing programs. The first was autonomy in general (mentioned by all four directors), and the second was about the trust given to them by their executive leadership teams (three of four participants), which allowed them high levels of professional autonomy use in the executions of their duties. Whereas all five basic skills directors from low-performing programs mentioned the

restructuring of their departments being connected to their use of autonomy in the workplace, only one director from the high-performing program participants mentioned restructuring. In her case, she placed more emphasis on the trust that her leadership team had given her and her decision-making, as she restructures her basic skills department.

Director autonomy in general.

All four (100%) of the basic skills directors from high-performing programs stated that they are allowed, in general, to utilize high levels of personal and professional autonomy in the execution of their work duties. One of the four directors (participant #9) in this group of participants had been in his basic skills directorship position one year at the time of the interview session, and he described a general sense of possessing high levels of autonomy, but he did clarify by stating that not all of his initiatives were given approval from executive leadership. His perceptions of this situation are discussed at the end of this section.

One of the high-levels of autonomy-use directors (participant #6) from a medium sized program in a community college located in the western region of the state declared:

As long as I'm within the policies of the college and the state board, I have a great deal of autonomy. I don't feel overly restricted by the policies that are in place by the college or the state. I know many directors who don't have the level of autonomy that I do, so I feel pretty fortunate.

A second director (participant #7) from a high-performing program gave enthusiastic praise to her college's executive leadership team when asked about her use of autonomy in the work environment; "This college has been very supportive and there's not a level of micromanagement here in the time that I've worked at the college". This

high caliber of praise, regarding directors being able to use their autonomy in general in the execution of their duties, was common in the interview data of the high-performing program group of directors.

Participant #8, from a high-performing basic skills program in the eastern part of the state, related how his immediate supervisor is new to the college and, consequently, new to the ways in which Adult Education programs function in the community college setting. Here, he describes how his personal and professional autonomy plays a role in his decision-making processes:

For the most part I feel that I can implement my ideas. We have had a lot of transition here. My boss, my division chair, is not as familiar with basic skills as our past boss was. So, a lot of times I'll just take the risk and I'll go ahead and make important decisions on my own, go with it, and I'll explain myself later.

Only one of the four directors (participant #9), a director of less than one year in his position at the college, stated that his use of personal and professional autonomy is at times limited, but that he feels he has the support of the college administration when it comes to using his autonomy in general:

Generally, I find that they give me autonomy on a certain level of decision-making, but there's a lot of checks and balances. I try to respect the hierarchy that governs the program. I have to fit into the larger vision of the college. Some of my ideas can't be implemented because of some reason or another or because maybe they won't serve the priorities of the college.

Three of the four above directors, who perceived their executive leadership teams as letting them use high levels of professional autonomy in the workplace, also provided interview data that related a strong sense of trust that they felt their superiors had for them and their autonomous decision-making.

Director autonomy and trust of executive leadership.

Seventy five percent of basic skills directors from this group of high-performing program participants related how they felt fortunate that their colleges' executive leadership recognized the important roles played by the basic skills directors, and how trust plays an essential role in their relationships. These directors felt they have earned the trust from their colleges' leadership to make decisions on their own, which allowed them utilize professional autonomy to make timely decisions. Participant #6, from a medium-sized western North Carolina high-performing basic skills program, stated:

I feel very fortunate that I have the trust of the leadership of the college, and so they have afforded me a great deal of autonomy within the boundaries of the policies of the state board code of the North Carolina Community College System office.

Another director (participant #8), from one of the highest ranked basic skills programs in the state for 2015, stated how he has earned the trust of his superiors to the point of being able to quantize his perceptions on when he will make use of his personal autonomy, and why sometimes his use of professional autonomy is important to get things accomplished in a timely manner:

As far as self-governing, if I am about 50 to 60% sure about something and if I have a gut-feeling about something, I'm going to go with it! I am

going to go for it if I can't get an answer from someone. If I can get an answer in a certain amount of time, I'll wait for that answer. But if it's something that needs to be done and I need to make a decision and I have 50% to 60% of the information I need and I have a good feeling that the decision I'm about to make is a good decision, I'm going to go with it. If I just sit by and be idle, and not do anything, then it's not going to happen! If I wait for someone else to give me an answer, it's probably not going to happen either.

Participant #7, the basic skills director of a large program located in the center of the state, also talked about how her executive leadership team trusts her to the point of letting her make most of the important decisions regarding her basic skills program, and how trust plays a role in her use of autonomy:

I experience a lot of autonomy in my position. I have the full trust of my dean. I get all my reports in on time and I am constantly in communication with the system office in Raleigh. My dean lets me talk to Raleigh, and he lets me take almost total charge of our college's basic skills program.

One director in particular (participant #6) gave an in-depth assessment of how her executive leadership team's trust is so important in facilitating her use of professional autonomy, as she develops her plan for the department's restructuring:

Nobody from the upper levels...nobody period, has told me to reorganize the department. As I'm looking around and I'm thinking about what we need to do and I'm looking at our present setup, I don't know how we're going to do it and we don't have any additional money. So I came up with

the idea of restructuring as a way to meet the needs. I took it to the president, I took it to the VPs, and I took it to my supervisor and the dean. I've also talked to state personal and I've talked to other directors. I've vetted it in a lot of different ways, and I have the complete support of everybody. Nobody is trying to micromanage it or anything like that. I feel very empowered in that way that they trust my judgment.

Directors Prevented From Exercising Autonomy

Basic Skills Directors' Perceptions of Low-Performing Programs

When asked about when they felt their use of professional autonomy was restricted in any way by college leadership, four of the five participants from low-performing programs felt they were not prevented from exercising professional autonomy in the execution of their work. However, participant #4, who had been in her position for only one year at the time of the data collection process, recounted how she felt restricted in the use of her autonomy in certain matters of hiring specifically trained personnel for her department; personnel she deemed essential for her basic skills department's restructuring for an emphasis on student transitions. In her situation, professional autonomy was hindered due to budgetary restraints imposed by her college's executive leadership team:

The administration is looking at a zillion ways to cut us and yet that's difficult because we are being mandated to do things we haven't been doing in the past because of WIOA and Career Pathways. I'm trying to do that, without trained staff to do that.

Basic Skills Directors' Perceptions of High-Performing Programs

Three of four basic skills directors from high-performing programs stated they did not feel that their use of professional autonomy was restricted in any way by their executive leadership teams. Their responses ranged from “ Hmmm (pause). Prevented me? (long pause). I’m drawing a blank here”, to “I can’t really think of a time that our administration at the college was an issue in that”, to an unequivocal “No! Never have I been challenged about the use of my professional autonomy here at this college”.

One of the four directors from high-performing basic skills programs, participant #9, did have input as to times he felt he was prevented from using professional autonomy in the execution of his duties. He felt that there were hiring decisions he felt impelled to act upon, but that hiring decisions were not his alone to make. He also mentioned some ideas for which he wanted to use his professional autonomy, but that his specific initiatives were deemed to be not in line with college priorities at the time:

I’d like to hire particular people but the hiring comes through a committee and there’s one or two hires that I would’ve liked to have made but couldn’t. I’d also like to have a smoking area for the students. I’d like to change the schedules sometimes. These ideas were not college priorities when I proposed them.

A second high-performing program director (participant # 6) mentioned how her college’s previous administration prohibited the use of her professional autonomy regarding a basic skills’ budgetary-change initiative she proposed about essential accommodations given to hearing and sight impaired basic skills students. Her ideas were implemented when a new executive leadership team was installed to run her college. This participant went into detail about her proposed initiative, the previous administration’s

denial of her initiative, and the eventual implementation of her initiative when a new college president was hired:

For several years, I advocated for the cost of accommodations to be paid out of the college budget rather than out of the basic skills budget, because those things are paid for other students out of the college budget. When we have a student who's hearing impaired and needs an interpreter, and an interpreter is a minimum of \$25 an hour and you need that for 30 hours a week, it's a lot of money! It didn't seem equitable with what was happening with the rest of the college. We fought for several years to get that changed. I had vice presidential group support, but it didn't happen until we had a change in administration.

Successes in Meeting NCCCS Performance Measures Goals

Basic Skills Directors' Perceptions of Low-Performing Programs

Participants were asked to consider the NCCCS Student Performance Measures of Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Pass Rate and to what they can attribute successes in their programs' meeting of the goals. By definition, the low-performing programs did not meet the North Carolina Community College System's set goal in Student Performance, GED Pass Rate, or both areas. Are the low-performing programs operating their programs differently than high-performing programs? This question addressed this aspect of North Carolina community college basic skills low-performing programs in an attempt to discover why some programs are not meeting the system-wide goals for the two system-wide basic skills performance measures. Three principle themes emerged as participants from low-performing programs discussed their perceptions of the

successes in their programs. Themes identified are: contextualized instruction, professional development for instructors, and implementing managed-enrollment.

Four of five of the participants in low-performing basic skills programs discussed the value of restructuring their classes away from open-lab settings into contextualized instruction course offerings for their students' success. Four out of five of the participants stated that making sure their instructors receive professional development trainings that facilitate direct instruction was important for programmatic and student success. Three out of five stated that a managed-enrollment policy replacing the traditional open-ended rolling-enrollment as also being an essential factor in improving their programs' performance measures numbers.

Basic skills success with contextualized instruction.

“What we are hearing from our students is that they appreciate face-face instruction” (participant #4 communication, October 12, 2015). During this time of transition for basic skills programs across the state, directors are leaving the lab-based instructional method behind in favor of more direct and contextualized instruction for their basic skills students; “Teaching our students concepts with a real-world and practical hands-on approach” (participant #7 communication, June 26, 2015).

Transitioning instructional methods take time and it takes time for the gains to be documented, but directors from low-performing programs are beginning to make the transitions that are positively impacting their programs' performance measures numbers (participant #7 communication, June 26, 2015).

A director at a medium-sized college (participant #2) explained why their numbers went down because of the system-wide change in the GED test at the end of

2014, which negatively affected some basic skills programs across the state (participant #3 communication, July 20, 2015). She explained how her department is recovering from the drops in basic skills performance measures percentage numbers from 2013-2014, subsequently making the programmatic changes necessary to bring her performance numbers up for 2015 and beyond, and how the concept of teaching basic skills to students via contextualized instruction has resulted in student performance gains:

We actually went down between 2013 and 2014. Our EFL gains went down and our GED Pass Rate completion too. At the end of 2013 students were just taking the tests because they were trying to finish their GEDs before the old test was done away with. We did focus a lot on that. We did drop a lot of our processes and procedures in order to help those students that could, go ahead and finish. Once that was out of the way, we focused on changing our instruction and focusing on contextualized instruction.

We just sent a new report for this year to our system office, and I think our numbers are going to be much much better. The biggest difference is that we really are focusing on teaching contextually, making sure our students are engaged and enjoying coming to class, that it's not boring, and teaching in contexts that they're interested in.

Participant #2 explained how the basic skills open-lab instructional model is no longer relevant to today's student. She described how her basic skills program's contextualized instruction course offerings tie into the Basic Skills Plus initiative, transitioning students into the workforce or higher education settings, and how students

are much more motivated than in the past to continue studying relevant and useful information in their newly styled basic skills classes:

We've come a long, long, way because we're trying to teach in context.

We talk to the welding department people and they're telling us the kinds of skills that their students need to have and that their high school graduates aren't coming with. You know, finding area and finding perimeter and things like that, and we teach it! When I talk to college counselors, I say "...and maybe we can give you a better prepared student if you stick with us!" And that's what we try to do.

Four of the five participants in this group described how they were meeting basic skills students' needs with contextualized and direct instruction and in teaching for specific skills that the student will carry on into the workforce, or will carry with them in their ascent into higher education curricula classwork. Participant #2 described a North Carolina community college basic skills educational model trend; how the Basic Skills Plus initiative and the new basic skills contextualized instruction model interact:

For Basic Skills Plus, we have nine pathways: automotive technician, construction technician, computer information technician, welding, medical assistant, early childhood, farm tech, Certified Nursing Assistant 1, and computerized machining. If you're in adult secondary level, ninth grade or higher, you can qualify to enroll in those classes and it's free! If they're lower than adult secondary level, they can go into a career-cluster class that teaches in the context of that class. So they're already starting in the content of what they're interested in pursuing. That's probably the

most successful thing we do here....there's more motivation. We've added advising components so all of our full time staff will have a group of students to advise and we'll track the advising. We'll really help them along to get them to make the transition to college, if that's where they're going, or help them get attached to [employment] agencies if that's the direction they want to go in.

As basic skills programs and departments across the state focus on contextualized instruction in order to better facilitate transitioning their students into the workforce or into curriculum classes, the state's Basic Skills Plus initiative is becoming more an integral part of North Carolina community college basic skills programmatic offerings. Basic Skills Plus course offerings tie into the curriculum offerings of the individual community colleges (participant #6 communication, June 12, 2015).

The NCCCS is tasking basic skills directors across the state to focus on transitioning their students into gainful employment or curriculum classes, thereby meeting the mandates in the federal WIOA legislation (participant interview, June 12, 2015). As the use of contextualized instruction and the Basic Skills Plus initiative course offerings expand, two of the directors in the group of low-performing programs mentioned a trend that they have noticed recently; the trend of basic skills and curriculum merging and what that means for the traditional stand-alone basic skills departments. Basic skills departments in some colleges are beginning to be seen as an integral part of the college, and some basic skills directors are being asked to sit at the policy table as their programs merge with the curriculum sides of the colleges (participant #1 communication, June 29, 2015). A director (participant #2) explained:

I think it's been very helpful that our particular college has recognized that because we are academic in nature that we are really Continuing Ed. Our program is actually housed in curriculum and that's a trend that has been going on across the state. More and more basic skills programs are functioning through curriculum. Because of that, I think it's opened some doors for our students.

One director (participant #1) from a very large basic skills program mentioned how she is the basic skill departmental director, and that her college has recently taken the steps to make her position a dean level position so she does sit at the policy table; she is the Director of Basic Skills and also Dean of College and Career Readiness. Here she explained why this is an important trend, as the reputation of basic skills in general benefits by this situation. "The biggest thing is sometimes, and it's getting better, is the perception that basic skills students are less than the regular college students. We'll always battle that because sometimes it's a reputation that's hard to live down".

Participant #3 noted that the contextualized class structure is certainly benefiting her program, and that she expected her performance measure numbers to increase. If basic skills programs have the reputation that their students are somehow second-place to curriculum students, this director explained how that perception is now changing for the better as North Carolina community college basic skills programs, due to implementing contextualized instruction for their students, are restructuring in ways that connect them with the curriculum sides of the colleges:

We have a wonderful program at the state level called Basic Skills Plus that allows students to enroll in curriculum or Continuing Education

classes at the same time as working on their GED, high school equivalency, or Adult High School diploma...it really opens up opportunities for students because we're curriculum. I think it's opened doors for us that were not always open before. So we have partnerships across campus...in both Con Ed. and curriculum and that allows us to offer these classes in context.

She expressed the higher levels of basic skills students' motivation to learn and their growing feelings of inclusiveness, now that her basic skills department is merging basic skills course work with the curriculum programs:

We have partnerships with people...we take tours of the welding department. Old equipment is donated to our health cluster class from the CNA-1 and the nursing program. That's been a real positive. That's the hands-on learning again. I think that our college has come a long way in recognizing that we kind of straddle continuing education and curriculum.

Basic skills success and teacher professional development.

As basic skills programs across the state are adopting a direct-instruction method of contextualized course offerings and getting away from the open-lab setting of basic skills educational delivery, directors are discovering it is necessary to give basic skills instructors the tools and strategies they will need in the newly redesigned classroom setting (participant #6 communication, June 12, 2015). Four out of the five basic skills directors from low-performing programs related the importance of getting their instructors the training they need in order to become content-based classroom teachers; a model that is new to basic skills instructional methods (participant #2 communication,

July 8, 2015). Participant #2 explained the importance of making sure her instructors receive pertinent professional development that helps transition basic skills instructors from facilitating open-lab learning settings, to becoming in-front-of-the-classroom content-based instructors:

What we've been doing in our workshops and in our professional development, is making sure that our teachers have those skills and to make sure that they have those strategies for instruction. My experience over the years since 1998 has been that most [basic skills] teachers put everybody in a workbook; "you need reading, you need writing...work in this and ask me if you have a question", so there's not a lot of whole-group instruction and there's not a lot of direct instruction. So changing to that kind of instruction, direct instruction, evidence-based instruction, and engaged learning, that's what we're doing. I think it's making a difference.

This participant explained terminology for the new instructional model and how basic skills teachers no longer will be educational generalists facilitating open-lab settings:

Explicit instruction is a terminology that's used in our workshops. Explicit instruction...it's the same as direct instruction...but going back to teacher-in-front-of-the-classroom-teaching, having a plan and having an objective and teaching to that objective. One of the biggest aids to that is that the state has adopted adult content standards so that the teachers have a curriculum guide, and it's not teaching out of the text-book, but it's teaching out of the content standards that we know adults need in order to be successful.

Another basic skills director (participant #7) stated that her instructors are “...focused on changing our instruction and focusing on contextualized instruction”.

Success with managed-enrollment vs traditional open-enrollment.

Three of the low-performing program basic skills directors mentioned that they have implemented a managed-enrollment system for their departments. Traditionally in the past, basic skills departments across the state served students in an open-enrollment come-when-you-will lab setting. The model of open-enrollment is giving away to a structured managed-enrollment and specific-time oriented student registration systems in North Carolina community colleges’ basic skills programs across the state (participant #8 communication, July 10, 2015). “This year we were very close to the [performance measures] goals. I attribute part of that to our switch to managed-enrolled classes, because it does seem to increase student retention” explained a director from a community college located in a large metropolitan area (participant #2 communication, July 8, 2015).

Participant # 1, from a large urban area low-performing basic skills program talked about improvements she made in her program since she arrived as director. She stated that a managed-enrollment student-registration system has increased her department’s percentages in meeting the system-wide goal for the Student Progress Measure:

Prior to when I came here five years ago, it was predominately an entirely lab-based structure with the exception of ESL and special learning needs students or Comp Ed, and achievement was not good at all. But it’s taken awhile to get back to where we’re half-way decent because what we

learned was that when you switch to managed-enrolled classes it has a lot of advantages such as increasing student retention and helping to keep the instructors on a consistent forward trajectory as they teach their classes through the semester.

How does the managed-enrollment system function in a basic skills program?

Basic skills directors spoke of eight-week enrollment time periods versus four-week enrollment time periods. All five of the low-performing program basic skill directors mentioned that they had begun their managed-enrollment sessions with eight-week time periods, but that student attrition in between registration sessions was a factor in four of them readjusting their timed schedules to reflect the benefits of the four-week student registration sessions. One of the participants from this group was still using an eight-week student registration model for new student enrollments. Four of the five participants from low-performing programs described how their four-week course schedule enrollment procedure was a benefit over eight-week registration sessions. A participant (participant #3) from a mid-eastern North Carolina community college described well her basic skills department's four-week managed-enrollment system, which has helped them with student retention issues and better meets basic skills students' needs as they are directed to specific classes based upon when they enroll:

We do orientation for about four weeks in a row at the beginning of each semester, and we do it again after spring break and fall break. Brand new students only come in about every four weeks, so they [teachers] have about four weeks where they can instruct their class as a whole.

She further explained why the teachers prefer managed-enrollment of basic skills students, as opposed to the traditional open rolling-enrollment model. “We used to just have open-enrollment and the teachers would get really frustrated with having new students put into their class. They constantly had to repeat material for new students”.

Basic Skills Directors’ Perceptions of High-Performing Programs

When basic skills directors from high-performing programs talked about programmatic successes in their meeting of the statewide performance measure goals, three principle themes emerged from the data: instructor professional development, managed-enrollment, and having dedicated student-success personnel in their departments. Three of the four directors immediately said instructor professional development was the key to their programs’ successes. Three of four of the directors also stated that the move to managed-enrollment was key in their programs maintaining or moving into the high-performing basic skills program category. As well, three of the four high-performing program directors mentioned that having dedicated student-success personnel in their departments was also a key factor in their programs’ overall successes.

Program success and instructor professional development.

Seventy five percent of the high-performing program directors interviewed for this study stated that ongoing professional development for their departments’ instructors was key for basic skills programmatic success. Within this group of directors who stated that professional development for their instructors was crucial for their programs’ successes, all three stated specifically that the instructor credentialing aspect of professional development was an important facet of their basic skills programmatic successes. Additionally, these three directors mentioned specifically that they follow the

published research and academic literature regarding basic skills professional development and instructional best practices.

A director (participant #8) whose program numbers for the 2014 Basic Skills Student Progress percentage rose from 48.6% to 52.4% in 2015 and whose 2014 GED Pass Rate of 64.9% rose to 83.3% in 2015, said, “I think getting teachers to take the core certification classes in Adult Education has helped a lot! We have seven instructors that have completed all of the requirements and earned their Silver Certification in Adult Education” (participant #8 communication, July 10, 2015). This same director referenced his continual and regular reading of the published literature regarding basic skills’ best practices, and his insistence of why professional development opportunities for his instructors was his top priority in maintaining success in his program’s performance measures percentages:

It’s a proven fact; teachers that know more and have those certifications are going to do better. I just saw a paper from the system office...an analysis of teachers with certifications in the state of North Carolina and of teachers without certifications in the state of North Carolina. It showed that the progress of the students with the teachers with certifications was at 22% and the ones without certifications, their progress was at 17%.

A second director (participant #6) from a medium-sized basic skills program located in western NC (whose impressive gains in the two basic skills student performance measures are indicated in the Successes and Managed-Enrollment section below) echoed the above perspective about getting her instructors the credentialing that fits the new contextualized instruction model that basic skills programs are moving to:

Credentialed teachers understand how to use evidence-based strategies...what they've been taught is based on research. We have supported a lot of professional development. Research has shown that students who are in classes that are taught by instructors who have gone through and received the credential through the state for basic skills, do better and they have greater gains. So, we have definitely focused more on seeing that people get that professional development.

A third director (participant #7) from a large basic skills program explained a principle reason why she thought her program consistently was a top-performer in meeting the basic skills performance goals set by the NCCCS. "Historically, we have always been very strong with our performance measures. Part of that is professional development and making ongoing professional development available to our instructors, who are the front-line people". This director's 2014 Basic Skills Student Success rate of 52.1% went up to 53.8% in 2015, and her program's 2014 GED Pass Rate of 76.1% climbed to 86.0% in 2015, placing her department solidly into the Meets/Exceeds category of Basic Skills Performance Measures.

Program success and managed-enrollment.

Seventy five percent of the directors of high-performing basic skills programs emphasized how their programmatic switch to managed-enrollment from an open rolling-enrollment system has helped them to move up in their performance measures numbers, or allowed them to maintain the high percentage figures they already had in meeting the community college system-wide set goals for the basic skills performance measures.

Participant #6 from a mid-sized basic skills program in western NC, whose performance measures' percentages in both the Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Pass Rate went up by 7.5 points and 27.7 points respectively from 2014 to 2015, had this to say about the significant increases in the two performance measures' percentages and success of her program:

The move to managed-enrollment; it has made an incredible difference. It has allowed more quality teaching to occur, as versus tutoring.

Tutoring...can be very useful in some places, but students need directed instruction. So by instituting that, what we've seen is a decrease in the number of our students and an increase in our average hours per students and great gains. So managed-enrollment is a biggie.

Another director (participant #8) from a high-performing basic skills program (whose performance numbers increased from 2014 to 2015) talked about how managed-enrollment has helped his program as well when it comes to the basic skills student progress performance measure; "We have less students these days, but we have managed-enrollment. The students come through an orientation session. They feel more like regular college students and their attendance is very good". The third director (participant #7) in this group of high-performing program directors stated how managed-enrollment has played an important part in her program's ability to keep students motivated and coming back for quality instruction. She also mentioned the revolving door of basic skills student attendance: "Before managed-enrollment, we had a revolving door with students coming and going at will. Now that we have managed-enrollment, we don't have the revolving door".

Program success and dedicated student-success personnel.

Three of the four directors from high-performing basic skills programs related that a positive aspect of their programs' successes was due in part to their re-positioning of employees into, or hiring new employees into, roles dedicated specifically for fostering student-success. WIOA is prompting basic skills directors to restructure their programs away from the traditional open-lab settings of the past into programs featuring contextualized instruction with a prominent focus on transitioning students into higher education or workplace settings. These directors have found a need to place employees in strategic positions specifically designed for enhanced student success and transitioning opportunities (participant #7 communication, June 26, 2015).

By placing basic skills departmental personnel into positions designed specifically to interact with students on a one-on-one basis, in order to discover students' specific needs, directors are finding that their basic skills students appreciate the student-centered focus and personalized help and direction that these dedicated student-success advocates are providing (participant #6 communication, June 12, 2015). A high-performing program director (participant #9) from a community college in the mid-section of the state, when asked to describe some successes his program has had, responded:

One of the changes we made this year in how that performance indicator works, is that we changed the Retention Specialist position into a Success Coach, where she personally tracks the students and introduces them to student services, and tries to identify the career pathways that the students desire during orientation.

If a basic skills director had the budgetary means, she might hire a dedicated student-success advocate person for specific educational and specific student-support purposes. Here, participant #6 recounted a full time hire who is the math and science specialist:

Another thing that has been very helpful has been by creating a position for a math and science academic specialist, a full time position. I think that it has helped us to have more consistency in our math instruction and of course math is the area of greatest contention for so many people. I think that has helped a lot. Our math and science academic specialist has developed strategies and ways of working with students, and she has moved towards more contextualized teaching.

This director, since the initial interview with her was conducted, has also repositioned one of her previous fulltime instructors to become her new full time Language Arts Specialist. In addition to moving the full time instructor into the newly created fulltime position of Language Arts Specialist, her departmental restructuring has allowed her to also reposition a second full time office-support staff person into a newly created full time Student Success Advisor position (participant #6 communication, November 23, 2015).

The third out of four high-performing program directors (participant #7) who mentioned programmatic successes by having dedicated staff in place for one-on-one student success coaching, told about how WIOA has guided one of her decisions in regards to departmental staffing:

WIOA is driving some new stuff because WIOA is more focused on post-secondary, and it's always been focused on jobs. We now have a part time person who builds partnerships with the business community. That's a really important thing, building partnerships with some of our community partners who might have jobs available for students.

Challenges in Meeting NCCCS Performance Measures Goals

Basic Skills Directors' Perceptions of Low-Performing Programs

“One of our issues, just because of the population we serve, is retention and the commitment level of some of our students” (participant #4 communication, October 12, 2015). When basic skills directors from low-performing programs were asked to describe the challenges their basic skills programs face in meeting the NCCCS performance measures goals, three participants from low-performing programs responded right away that student retention was their main challenge. One basic skills director (participant #3) from the low-performing programs' group of participants stated that the changing of the GED test for 2014 was her principal challenge to her program's meeting of the student performance measure goal for 2015, but that her GED Graduation Pass Rate percentages for 2015 were 100% higher than a normal year.

Student retention challenges.

“OK...the biggest challenge in meeting the performance measures is hanging onto the students long enough for them to make progress!” related a director (participant #2) from a mid-sized community college which hosts a medium sized basic skills program in their community. The same participant elaborated that student retention in basic skills education is not just an issue for her particular program alone, but is an issue basic skills

programs across the state and across the nation face; “Retention is a big big challenge, and I’m saying that’s probably across the country. When I go to national conferences, everybody seems to have this same problem.” A second basic skills director from a medium-sized program in the center of the state responded immediately when asked this question “Retention! It is our program’s biggest challenge just keeping our students enrolled!” (participant #8 communication, July 10, 2015).

Prior to 2015, GED test publishers recommended that basic skills students pre-test in one academic subject area, study for 60 hours in that specific subject area, and then post-test in that subject area for any EFL gains. In accordance with the test publishers’ recommendations, the state of North Carolina expects that basic skills directors follow the testing guidelines set by the test publishers. However, according to the NCCCS “College and Career Readiness: Updated Assessment Policy” published in 2014, the test publishers recommended between 30 to 40 hours of instruction, effective as of the 2015 school year. The North Carolina Community College System policy makers and testing materials publishers realized that the 60-hour study-time before post-testing benchmark was difficult for basic skills programs across the state, and nation, to maintain (North Carolina Community College System, 2014b). A basic skills director (participant #5) explained why this prior standard operating procedure of pre-test, study 60 hours, then post-test, was a major challenge to community college basic skills programs in meeting the performance measures goal in student performance:

The biggest challenge is getting them to stay, because...they’re counted [in the cohort] after they’ve earned 12 hours of instruction. The testing companies that we deal with...the Test of Adult Basic Ed (TABE),

CASAS, don't want you to [student-progress] test but every 60 hours, which is the standard in North Carolina. If you can't hold on to them [students] for 60 hours, then you don't get your outcomes. It's hard! Traditionally and typically, most programs lose about 50% of their students before they get 30 hours of instruction in, which means none of those students post-test...the biggest challenge is holding on to them.

One positive development in North Carolina basic skills education for 2015 and beyond, is that the state realized that student retention is a major issue for basic skills programs across the state in meeting the student progress performance measure. They also realized that the student-must-have-post-test rule after 60 hours of instruction was not a productive way to measure students' gains in educational functioning levels. New for 2015 and beyond is, if a student attends classes for at least 12 hours but then drops out of or fades away from the program before they complete a post-test, that student's performance will not count against the basic skills program; the student will not be placed into the cohort until they post-test.

Even though the state of North Carolina has relaxed its mandates on how students with 12 hours of instruction but without post-tests will no longer count against the programs' performance measures numbers, North Carolina basic skills directors still have National Reporting Standards (NRS) to follow. Student retention is still an ongoing challenge that basic skills directors face (participant #4 communication, October 12, 2015). Participant #2 explained how the new NC state rule is beneficial to basic skills programs across the state, but that the National Reporting System standards still require

basic skills programs to retain their students for a time long enough to successfully post-test:

Up until this year, if you didn't post-test them they counted against you if they got 12 hours or more [of instruction]. This year [2015], the state has decided that if they have a post-test then they'll count, and if they don't have a post-test they won't count against you. But the National Reporting Systems standard still is going to count. So they [NRS] expect us to test at least 65% of our students, after they've earned 12 hours or more. So that's a challenge.

Another study participant (participant #5) explained that the previous state-level GED Student Pass Rate performance measure is no more after 2014, but how current WIOA legislation performance measures standards will be taking the place of it, and how student retention will still be an important issue for North Carolina basic skills directors to contend with:

WIOA has several standards that we will be held accountable for. It goes along with the National Reporting System standards, which are different from the state's standards. The state had the two student performance standards, now it has only the one for basic skills which is EFL, Educational Functioning Level progress. Until this year students didn't count in that number until they had earned 60 hours of instruction and then they had to be post-tested. If they didn't make gains they hurt you and if you didn't post-test them after 60 hours that hurt you. Now, the new standard [is] if they get 12 hours of instruction and a post-test, they will

count in our EFL performance measure. Well, this is good and bad because you still can't test them until they've had 60 [hours], according to the [publisher of the] test that you're giving. So, the majority of our students we still need to hang onto for at least 60 hours..

Basic Skills Directors' Perceptions of High-Performing Programs

When asked to consider the NCCCS Student Performance Measures Report of Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Diploma Pass Rate and to describe two or three of the principle challenges in their programs that stand out for them, two directors from high-performing programs immediately said that the way performance measures are calculated create negative issues for their programs. Two directors mentioned that new teachers and teacher-turnover is a challenge to basic skills programs reaching performance measures' goals. One director stated that student retention is a challenge to program success.

Challenges with the NCCCS calculations of performance measures.

Fifty percent of the respondents in the group of high-performing directors related of issues in how the performance measures are calculated. Both directors mentioned that there are issues in the way the NCCCS calculates these performance measures that create challenges to meeting their student GED Pass Rate goal. There are two issues with the GED Pass Rate performance measure in that "...the way that they calculate it...precludes it from being an accurate measure of effectiveness" (participant #6 communication, June 12, 2015). One director (participant #6) explained how some students who attend classes, take GED tests and earn their GED diplomas, are not even included in the cohort and final tabulations of the state when calculating the measurement for the program year:

Let's start with the GED Pass Rate. This is not just a challenge within our program, it's a challenge of the progress measure itself. The way they chose to calculate it, they exclude students who are ASE-Low and ASE-High students. So, if you come into the program year at the higher level you are not included in the cohort.

A director (participant #8) from a medium sized program explained another issue with the way in which the GED Pass Rate performance measure counts against basic skills programs:

If a student takes so much as one GED test in the program year but they're not ready to take a second test, they go into the cohort. But, if they don't complete it [the GED test battery] by the end of the program year...then they count against the program!

Participant #9 talked about not only the challenge presented by the way the GED Pass Rate performance measure is calculated, but also by a potential serious conflict arising from the way in which the GED Pass Rate is calculated by the NCCCS:

The downside is that people might be thinking about the numbers and playing the system. If you bring in a student who is really struggling and you want to help them, you can help the student but you hurt the program because they hurt your pass rate. That was one of the drawbacks of the GED Pass Rate measure.

As part of the NCCCS redesigning its Basic Skills Division into the College and Career Readiness Division, the GED Pass Rate performance measure has been discontinued as of the 2015-2016 program year. This is welcome news for basic skills directors

(participant #6 communication, June 12, 2015), but as one basic skills director from a high-performing program explained, “Now, I did hear that at the state level, they may bring back the GED Pass Rate measure eventually. So what you’re discovering now about the GED Pass Rate may be important at a later date” (participant #9 communication, August 27, 2015),

Another calculation issue with a specific basic skills performance measure that creates a challenge to programmatic success involves the performance measure of Basic Skill Student Progress. If a student enrolls in a basic skills program within a time-frame that puts the enrollment close to the program’s end-of-year deadlines, then a challenging issue arises. Participant # 9 detailed the challenging issues surrounding the manner in which the Basic Skills Student Progress measure is calculated:

With the student progress educational functioning level, you have to consider the timing of intake of students. If you bring in new students late in the fiscal year, they are not going to be able to make a movement from one level to another because there is not enough time. If you don’t let them in, you preclude the opportunity for the students. If you do let them in the educational functional level movement percentage drops, because they’re in the program but they didn’t move. If you don’t bring them in, then your FTEs go down and your funding is reduced as well.

Teacher turn-over and new instructor challenges.

Two of the high-performing basic skills directors mentioned that teacher-turnover and new teachers not being adequately trained to understand basic skills testing procedures and the LEIS reporting forms, used to document students’ EFL movements,

created challenges for their programs' ultimate successes in meeting the student progress performance measure goal. One director (participant # 8) explained:

Sometimes the teacher turnover is a challenge! It's difficult sometimes to get really great teachers. Even though their application may say one thing, when you get the teacher in the class, you see something totally different! I'm like, "Who is this person that went through the interview with us? With all four of us? Is this the same person?" The way a student will tell you they don't like the teacher is, they will just leave!

This director also mentioned that it's difficult to find qualified basic skills teachers and that qualified teachers already employed at his institution eventually go elsewhere for employment, because of the pay and minimal hours given to teachers. "The good teacher-retention problem, well, the pay is a factor. Some schools pay more than others. The amount of hours they're allowed to work is definitely a negative factor" (participant #8 communication, July 10, 2015).

Currently, community colleges in North Carolina pay part time basic skills instructors (adjuncts are the majority of the instructor pool in basic skills departments) between \$17 and \$20 an hour (participant #7 communication, June 26, 2015). Adjunct basic skills instructors are allowed to teach a maximum of only 16 hours a week in the classroom. Here, participant #8 explained the situation surrounding the difficulty of attracting and holding onto good instructors:

We initially had teachers that could teach in the classroom 25 to 28 hours a week, but we had to slice that pretty much in half. I have a couple left that do 16 hours a week in the classroom. Those teachers that I had that

were doing 25 to 28 hours a week in the classroom, it was their livelihood and they were paid by the hour and there were no benefits attached to it, but we had to cut their hours about 40% to 50%! So, a lot of them, well, they left.

A second director (participant #7) spoke of the challenges she has had with new teachers who aren't previously experienced with the basic skills' testing procedures and the state reporting LEIS forms, which document the students' educational functioning level progress:

2014 year was the big challenge for all of us statewide. For the performance measures, it was the lowest we've ever performed. We also had new staff changes and we had some new instructors come aboard. I thought everybody was doing everything in the same way, but they weren't and now that I've been doing the paperwork at the end of this summer one session, I see that I have some work to do with 12 to 14 instructors, and about their understanding of the testing and reporting gains on the LEIS forms.

Student retention challenges.

For one director in particular, student retention poses a challenge to his program. "Students sometimes just can't get to class! That's one of the big issues for basic skills". This same director (participant #8) from a high-performing basic skills program located in the eastern region of the state exclaimed:

Retention! I don't care what you do, you know the clientele we have...the student can have the best of intentions coming in here. They're a ball of

fire, raring to go, and then the first little bump in the road, it's well, "I can't come to class".

Are the Performance Measures Goals Realistic?

Basic Skills Directors' Perceptions of Low-Performing Programs

When asked if the two NCCCS basic skills performance measures were realistic for program accountability, four of five directors from low-performing programs said that the previous two measures were not realistic. However, now that the Student Progress performance measure is redefined, these four directors stated that this remaining student progress measure is realistic and fair. One basic skills director who had been in her position only for one year at the time of the interview, responded with neither a firm yes nor a no, as to if she perceived the performance measures goals to be realistic.

Four out of the five directors from low-performing programs who stated their positive perceptions of the recently redefined Student Progress performance measure were quick to specify that the old measures were not indicative of the real progress that basic skills programs made with their students. Here, participant #5 explained the positive effects of the changes to the basic skills performance measures:

The GED measure, well I'm glad it's going away altogether! Before, the student had to have a placement of ASE-Low or ASE-High. But what if the student just needed a quick refresher, or maybe we didn't post-test you because you didn't meet the publisher's required hours or maybe we did post-test you but you didn't post-test to ASE-Low but you went and took the GED and passed the whole thing! So, I wish they'd have taken that out before because really it should be about if the student came into your

institution and received X amount of hours of instruction and then wasn't able to complete the GED, to me that would be more reflective of what we do as a school.

Participant #3 explained why the new basic skills Student Progress performance measure is fair:

Yes, I think that it's definitely fair. Because your denominator is, well, with the former goal, your denominator was 60 hours regardless of if they post-tested or not. But with the 60 hours, that to me wasn't fair because it just throws everybody into the mix. With the 12 hours [revision], obviously we're not going to post-test people at 12 hours, but it's at least fair in that it's only going to put those that did post-test into your denominator, instead of anybody and everybody that had enough hours.

Participant #2 exclaimed, "They're realistic! We should be making educational functioning level gains and we should be encouraging the students in seeing success".

Another director (participant #1) from a low-performing basic skills program in a large community college stated:

Well I think the past ones, not so much. The new one is realistic. The previous one that measures educational gain for all students with 60 hours or more is not realistic. The new measure includes just those students that were post-tested. I think that is a fairer version of educational gain.

One community college basic skills director (participant #4) from a low-performing program, who had only been in her position for a year at the time of the interview but has many previous years' experience as a public school administrator,

responded neither with a definitive “yes”, nor with a “no” as to the performance measure goals being realistic:

Well, I want to believe they are! I don't know if they're realistic because we have so many things going against us that are different from curriculum, for our [basic skills] students. I don't know. I just think that some success can't be measured with a number. I don't know that they have the right formula yet...Having come from the public school system where everything rides on test scores, I'm just so disenchanted with things like that, and now I come here and the community college system is trying to follow suit, putting numbers on everything.

Basic Skills Directors' Perceptions of High-Performing Programs

The high-performing program basic skills directors responded in a similar manner as the low-performing program directors when asked if they thought the basic skills performance measures were realistic units of measuring student and program success. All four of the high-performing program directors described how the two previous performance measures were not indicative of a basic skills program's success, but that the new and revised single performance measure of Student Progress was “...probably as realistic as we can make it” (participant #7 communication, June 26, 2015). A director from a mid-sized high-performing program mentioned, “I did not feel that the GED Pass Rate was a good measure, and that's going away. The Student Progress measure, I think that's a pretty good measure” (participant #6 communication, June 12, 2015).

Three of the four directors in this group mentioned that the previous performance measure of GED Pass Rate was not a good indicator of their programs' achievements in

educating their basic skills students. A common response among high-performing participants' replies was made by one director in particular; "The GED Pass Rate I think was well-intentioned, but I think it could have been calibrated much better...I think the parameters of the measurement didn't always reflect the quality of the program" (participant #9 communication, August 27, 2015). This director was the only director, who had something positive to say about the GED Pass Rate performance measure; "Even though it could have been calibrated better, I think the net effect for us was probably positive because it really kept our eye on the ball" (participant #9 communication, August 27, 2015). In a follow-up email this director explained further, "I did think the intent of the measure was constructive, but the parameters should have been recalibrated to measure success rates. For example, if the timeframe followed cohorts over a longer period, this adjustment could frame student accomplishments better" (participant #9 communication, March 11, 2016).

Participant #8, from a high-performing basic skills program in eastern North Carolina, related why it is important for teachers to understand the Student Progress performance measure, and how to align that knowledge with their classroom teaching strategies:

I think they're more realistic now that I understand them! (laughs).

Because in the past, when I first started here, you got credit for a student moving like a scale score movement from 0 to 999! But now they have to move an Educational Functioning Level. For them to do that, that teacher in the classroom has to know what they're doing. Most of the time it's not going to happen in one session or one semester. It might take a couple of

sessions or a couple of semesters for a student to move an EFL, and when the teachers are doing what they're supposed to be doing in the classroom, it's going to happen. I do think they're realistic.

Often basic skills instructors are not told about the two principle reasons behind the importance of student progression through the EFLs, which are student progress and program funding (participant #3 communication, July 20, 2015). This director also mentioned that basic skills teachers must be told the value of the educational functioning levels, and why students need to demonstrate movement through the levels so the college receives funding from student gains:

I think it's difficult for some instructors to understand that, if someone is not giving them that information on a regular basis, and what I mean by that is hitting on it during every professional development session, just a basic "OK, this is what an educational functioning level is. Here are the six for ABE and ASE and here are the six for ESL. Tell them how important it is to be conscious of their students progressing through the level.

System-wide Procedures that Hamper Basic Skills Programmatic Success

Basic Skills Directors' Perceptions of Low-Performing Programs

When asked to share their perceptions about if there are NCCCS system-wide procedures or policies that hamper basic skills directors in the execution of their duties, two of five directors from low-performing programs answered "No". One director stated that the lack of timely reports from the system office in Raleigh, and that the LEIS computer-based data system were issues for her. One director reported two hampering

issues for her department: the basic skills distance learning policies, and auditors' interpretations of distance-learning policies. Lastly, one director mentioned that the Basic Skills Plus initiative was an issue for her.

Timely reports and LEIS computer system issues.

One director (participant #2) from a mid-sized program in the eastern region of the state mentioned two procedures controlled by the system office that need addressing: timely reporting from the system office, and the use of the computer-based LEIS data processing program, which is not designed for basic skills programs. In regards to the system office not getting her timely reports, she mentioned that someone in Raleigh must be trying to correct the issue, as she noticed the problem was getting better; however, she still had this to say:

We still have trouble getting reports that would help us to monitor our program and make adjustments on data. But it's better now than it's ever been so I'm not complaining. We used to have to wait until we got reports sent back to us after they were disaggregated at the system office level. Then it would get sent back to us with our real data, and by then it was three or four months old.

In reference to the LEIS computer-based data reporting system, she mentioned how the system was not designed with basic skills departments in mind:

Our LEIS, Literacy Educational Information System, it's not set up for basic skills. So everything is patched, everything is a work-around and that is very frustrating. It was designed for a four-year university. So that's very frustrating, and Colleague never seems to work right.

Colleague is the student data input and control system that the NCCCS uses in their basic skills programs.

Distance-learning and auditing.

One basic skills director (participant #1) from a low-performing program brought up two NCCCS policy or procedural issues that hamper her department's performance; the distance-learning policy, and distance-learning auditing procedures. Here, she described the issues she faces due to NCCCS policies or procedures:

I would say one of the challenges, and I know that they [the NCCCS] are working on it, they've been working on it for three years, is the distance learning policy. We are still waiting for a ruling on that because it just doesn't work too well. Most other problems we have relate to interpretation by the auditors of things that we're supposed to be doing. One of them is distance learning, how that's supposed to be, what documentation you have to have.

Basic skills plus initiative issues.

Participant #3, from the group of low-performing program directors, stated that the Basic Skills Plus initiative and the procedures guiding the program are issues for her basic skills department. Here is how she described the issues:

I would say with Basic Skills Plus, if you look at the statute from the general assembly, there's nothing that says you have to be at a ninth grade level in order to qualify for Basic Skills Plus. But if you look in the system's office interpretation and guidelines for Basic Skills Plus, it specifically says that they need to be at a ninth grade level. I have argued

for years (laughs) that it doesn't say that specifically *anywhere*, and even in the statutes it says that the whole purpose of it was to serve those most in need of entering into a credentialing program.

As this director pointed out, there is no NC General Assembly statute qualification regarding a student's specific grade-level placement into a basic skills program and the students' subsequent ability to enroll in a Basic Skills Plus curriculum class. However, the NCCCS policy mandates basic skills directors enroll only basic skills students into a Basic Skills Plus curriculum if the student's educational functioning level is at ASE-Low (9-10.9 grade level) or higher. This precludes lower level students who would benefit from the program, and who have more time to work on their GED diplomas and the Basic Skills Plus coursework simultaneously, from enrolling in Basic Skills Plus courses. This director explained more about the complications created by the NCCCS policy mandate regarding students' levels of EFL placements, and their enrollments into a Basic Skills Plus pathway:

We have not had a lot of success here with Basic Skills Plus because we have found when the student is at ASE-Low or ASE-High level, their only thought and goal in life is to finish the high school equivalency, and *then* they're more than happy to talk about and think about credential and career ideas. But their only focus is really trying to finish up that test. I've had so many students tell me "If I go home and tell my mom, or my spouse, or whoever, that now I'm going to take this other thing on and I didn't finish this GED yet, they're going to have a fit!" The whole reason they were motivated to come in the first place was they didn't finish high

school in the first place, and that is what they're focused on. I've talked to parents before too, and I've told them this is a great opportunity, and they're like "No. They need to finish the GED first".

Basic Skills Directors' Perceptions of High-Performing Programs

When asked to share their perceptions about any NCCCS system-wide procedures or policies that hamper basic skills directors in the execution of their duties, participant #7 declared "No. I can't think of any of those". Three out of the four directors in this group did however mention the above issues with the Basic Skills Plus initiative. Two directors related that there should be a more timely disbursement of information coming from the Raleigh offices of the NCCCS. Additionally, one director mentioned that the basic skills online learning component is in need of redesigning.

Basic skills plus initiative issues.

Three directors from the group of four basic skills directors of high-performing programs responded that the NCCCS policy that basic skills students must have either an ASE-Low or ASE-High grade-level placement to dual-enroll in basic skills classes and Basic Skills Plus curriculum pathways simultaneously, is a hindrance to their program. One director (participant #6) from a mid-sized college in the western region of the state explained:

The piece that is hampering us, [and] it's a good program, but often by the time our students get to that ASE-Low level, they're ready to finish up [the GED] pretty quick and they just don't want to hang out with us in order to get this [Basic Skills Plus]. So, really the program design would be better for students at a somewhat lower level.

A second director (participant #9) also related how his basic skills program dropped the Basic Skills Plus initiative because of complications inherent in the NCCCS policy guiding the initiative:

We did at one point have the Basic Skills Plus pathways and we may again. We are evaluating that right now. That presented some challenges for us, but in different ways for us in terms of needing to follow all the policies and accountability. We wanted to do all that right, and it was just problematic.

Timely information from system office issues.

Fifty percent of the basic skills directors from high-performing programs related how they would appreciate if the system office in Raleigh would send out important information in a timelier manner. One of these directors (participant #7) mentioned that the approval of Basic Skills Plus pathways courses was too slow in coming back from the NCCCS office to her office:

Those policies...are sometimes so slow to come that it hinders us quite a bit. For getting Basic Skills Plus Pathways approved, the process for that has been so slow that your labor market in your area might change and you're trying to get a new Pathway approved and that might take a year!

This director explained the urgency of timely approval of these Basic Skills Plus courses that the directors are trying to implement with the curriculum sides of their colleges, due to fluctuating local community and business needs:

It would be good if we had a more timely way to review that process.

Absolutely, the need may change because we have businesses moving into

this area, and we have some that used to have lots of jobs that we don't have any more. To try to get students into a limited number of Pathways to transfer is tough enough when you don't have exactly what they want. We are limited in the number of Pathways available, so if we continue with Basic Skills Plus, a revamp of that would be a good thing to do.

A second basic skills director (participant #8) who mentioned that his not receiving timely information from the Raleigh NCCCS office has become an issue, had this to say:

[T]here are a lot of things they send out to you. All these professional developments and webinars. Sometimes it comes out short-fuse. What I mean is...I know I really need to participate in this one, so how come I didn't know about this class about three months ago so I could've put this on my calendar and gone to it? But now I have something else on my calendar so I'm going to miss this! (laughs). I think they could be better at doing that!

Basic skills online learning issues.

One basic skills director (participant #7) stated that she has ongoing issues with the basic skills online study programs for her students. She related:

There are still issues with some of the online stuff. That's an area...that needs to bring back the planning group. There was one of those three or four years ago that had representation from Continuing Ed, non-credit, basic skills, and curriculum. Those policies from Raleigh are sometimes so slow to come that it hinders us quite a bit.

College-Level Procedures That Hamper Basic Skills Programmatic Success

Basic Skills Directors' Perceptions of Low-Performing Programs

When basic skills directors from low-performing programs were asked if there were any college-level procedures, policies, or mandates that hamper their basic skills programmatic success, two directors out of five in this group replied there were no college-level policies, procedures, or mandates that adversely affect their programs' success. Two directors stated that budgetary restraints affected their ability to offer the professional development they feel is necessary for their instructors. One director mentioned that there were not any college mandates that hindered her basic skills program, but that faster communication with the executive leadership team on important decisions would be a benefit to her program. One director (participant #1) mentioned "...a problem area that we run into on occasion...because CCR students don't pay student fees and activity fees" is that her basic skills students are denied access to some of the college's areas that are available for curriculum student use. One basic skills director replied that enrollment procedures for curriculum students, that her basic skills program is expected to also follow while enrolling basic skills students, is an issue for her department.

Two of five basic skills directors of low-performing programs specified the importance of professional development for instructors and staff. They also mentioned how budgetary means to offer professional development opportunities to their staff and instructors are not available to them, and they cannot afford to pay staff and instructors to attend the many productive professional development opportunities provided by the Appalachian State Basic Skills Professional Development Institute. A participant explains

why professional development opportunities for instructors are so important in this time of basic skills operational and departmental change:

If we don't do enough and on-going professional development, instructors who historically have taught in labs continue to teach the same way as if they're in a lab, even though now they're in a managed-enrolled class. So even though we changed the delivery structure, the teachers weren't prepared to teach and plan and provide really engaging instruction that we can do and should be doing in a managed-enrolled class.

In order to make the best use of limited basic skills budgetary disbursements, directors themselves are even stepping into the roles as professional development facilitators to their staff and instructional teams; one participant from a low-performing program described it thusly:

I took all kinds of workshops...every year there was a weeklong institute at Appalachian State University, which carried graduate credits and I took that class every year. I got what's called an Adult Basic Skills Certified Resource Specialist certificate. I also took classes for a general basic skills instructor credential. The North Carolina Community College System has a wonderful program of professional development for basic skills teachers and people, and I've been involved in all kinds of leadership institutes and things like that to stay up on Adult Basic Education and the trends and research. I do as much of the training now as I attend.

Both of these participants mentioned the importance and high quality of the basic skills professional development supplied by Appalachian State University and their Adult

Basic Skills Professional Development Institute with companion professional development sessions offered throughout the NCCCS network, held at different colleges during the year. Even though there are quality professional development sessions offered year-round for basic skills instructors and staff, 40% of study participants are concerned about, and hampered by, the lack of finances available to send employees to professional development sessions; a participant from a large community college basic skills program explained:

One of the other things that I'm frustrated with, is there's not as much money available for professional development. So, I think that's a big limitation. I'm hoping money will become available for more professional development. The state seems to be committed to providing the professional development on the training end, but I think there needs to be money to pay people to attend.

Both of these basic skills directors in the low-performing program group relate how they must decide which employees can attend certain professional development sessions, and when they can attend them, based on departmental need and perceived immediate importance of the particular session. One participant from a large community college basic skills program, located in a large metropolitan area, explained:

Professional development is that important and there needs to be money applied to it. If you think it's important and you're not providing money for it, then you might say it's important, but your priorities say otherwise if you're not putting budget in that direction. I have to decide which PD

sessions are the most important sessions for my staff and instructors, and who can attend and who can't.

Timely decisions from executive leadership hindrances.

One basic skills director (participant #4) from a low-performing program, who had only been in her position for one year as the interview session was conducted, stated:

Well, no mandates or policies (pause). There is just the regular red tape! Some folks just not wanting to make a decision. Sometimes I feel like if they were quicker to make some decisions on some things, then we could be a little further along than we are.

Basic skills following college curriculum procedures.

Participant #1 explained how college curriculum procedures at her individual college sometime override her department's preferred way of enrollment and registration of her department's basic skills students. This hinders her basic skills department's efficacy in regards to student enrollment and registration procedures:

But again, it's part of doing blanket procedures that sometimes don't exactly fit for College and Career Readiness. Another example: every year, they [curriculum] close registration for two weeks during the summer, from June 24 through July 7th, and we can't register any [basic skills] students into the system. Well, they don't view it as a big problem because most registration has already occurred for the summer sessions for curriculum students and CE (Continuing Education). For College and Career Readiness, we break the summer into two eight-week sessions, because of the June 30th deadline for the NRS (National Reporting

System) reporting. So what we're stuck with is a lot of students that we can't get registered into classes until July 7th, which is after the basic skills classes start! It's just one of those things where sometimes the college procedures don't quite fit the way basic skills is operated in the colleges.

Basic skills departments have their own budgets allotted to them from the community college system office, which is separate from the curriculum side of the college that hosts the basic skills department. While basic skills departmental budgets are separate from the curriculum-side budgets of the college, many North Carolina community colleges have in place procedures that tie the curriculum-side and basic skills departments together when it comes time for student registration and the collecting of tuition and student fees. This director, quoted immediately above, further explained how basic skills and curriculum differ regarding student registration policy. Even though the registration of basic skills and curriculum students differ because of fee collections, and course scheduling, she must follow her college's curriculum registration and enrollment policies, which are a hindrance to her program. This director explained how even though her basic skills department need not follow all of the NCCCS guidelines which are set for the curriculum side of the college, the executive leadership team of her particular college suggests that she follow the college's curriculum-side procedures and policies regarding some budgetary issues and staff professional development travel-times:

Well, where our budget is exclusive to basic skills, if there's a deadline set for when they can't spend money after this date for curriculum or Con Ed, we adhere to that too. There've been times when we say, well, we don't have to do that, but we do. And same thing with travel. If they

[executive leadership] tell other parts of the college that they can't travel, then we don't travel either, and we missed the IPS Conference this year.

At times a college's way of registering curriculum students conflicts adversely with how basic skills departments register their own students, because basic skills programs run year-round without the in-between semester breaks that community college curriculum programs have (participant #2 communication, July 8, 2015). This director at a low-performing program with a large basic skills program explained:

There are two particular procedural things here at [college name] that are a challenge. One, is the process that we use to put new courses into the system. For curriculum, they begin their registration early on. For Continuing Ed, they begin their registration very early, and so the entire college has to prepare the course schedules six months in advance of actually offering the classes. But...we operate on a demand-driven schedule. Because we offer managed-enrolled classes, it depends on how many students at a certain level will dictate how many sections of a level-four reading class we would need, or math, or sections of ESL. So, basic skills is...demand driven. Setting that expectation six months in advance was always a challenge, because we would do it, and then...two months before classes would begin we had to go in and change everything all over again to reflect what we really needed to offer.

In this above situation, basic skills staff found themselves prematurely announcing and advertising courses, which they understood would not be final course offerings, in order to coordinate with the college curriculum course-origination scheduling timetable.

Basic skills students denied access to college infrastructure.

One basic skills director (participant #1) from a low-performing program stated that her basic skills students are at times denied access to campus facilities, and that this makes her basic skills students think less of themselves as students. “It’s so important to find motivating factors for our students”: she added:

One area that we run into on occasion is because College and Career Readiness students don’t pay student fees [and] activity fees that sometimes our students run into problems if they go into the library. Our students can use the library, but there are some computer labs around campus and in the library, open computer labs, that sometimes they are not allowed to go into. They’re not allowed to go into the Academic Learning Center because they’re not curriculum paying students.

Basic Skills Directors’ Perceptions of High-Performing Programs

When asked to share their perceptions of any college-wide mandates, procedures, or policies that hamper them in the execution of their duties, all participating basic skills directors from high-performing programs responded they do not perceive any college-wide procedures, mandates, or policies that hamper them in the execution of their duties.

Participant #6 stated:

No. Space has been an issue for us here. So, some infrastructure issues, but not policy. I feel really good about the way that we are perceived and supported within this college at this time. It was a whole different story three years ago.

Participant #7 stated:

No, I can't think of any of those. The only thing I can think of is because our funding is down so much I have not been able to fill full time positions, so I'm having to fill those with part time people. It's really more due to funding issues than with any policy or procedural issues here at the college. My supervisor and the vice-president are in my office every week and I can just say this is what we're going to do, do you see any problem with that and they tell me "No. If you need help just let us know".

A third director (participant #9) in this group of basic skills directors of high-performing programs responded, "I don't really feel hampered by anything that the state or college requires".

The fourth director (participant #8) in this group also said he did not feel hampered by any college policies or procedures, but he did want to add to the conversation about a situation regarding the executive leadership at his college. He mentioned a chain-of-command situation that has at times hampered his productivity. He replied:

I do believe that for basic skills, that one thing that may have hampered some things I wanted to do in basic skills is the way the leadership has worked here over the years. If my boss doesn't know as much as another person [in executive leadership] knows about basic skills, I'm kind of caught between a rock and a hard place! Because my boss is not as familiar with basic skills, I can talk to this other person about something and it may take five or ten minutes, but it may be an hour-long conversation with my boss because she doesn't know as much about basic skills. So that hampers productivity sometimes.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study is twofold: one, to describe the successes and challenges of North Carolina community college basic skills educational programming, through face-to-face and phone call interview data gathered from North Carolina community college basic skills directors, and two, to discover to what basic skills directors at high and low-performing NC community college basic skills programs attribute the performance of their programs.

This chapter is a discussion of the findings presented in Chapter Four that include conceptualizations of the study findings and this study's connections to previous research. Additionally, specific information regarding the perceptions North Carolina community college basic skills directors have about their programs' successes and challenges are explored. The seven interview questions that directed the gathering of data and presentation of findings in Chapter Four also guide the concepts discussed in this chapter; the seven interview questions are:

1. Consider your formal duties as the director of a basic skills program and tell me about your ability to exercise autonomy in the execution of your work.
2. In contrast to the last question, think of a time when policies, rules and/or regulations, prevented you from exercising autonomy in the execution of your work.
3. Consider the NCCCS 2015 Student Performance Measures Report of Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Diploma Passing Rate. Describe two or three of the successes in your program that stand out for you.

4. Consider again the NCCCS 2015 Student Performance Measures Report of Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Diploma Passing Rate. Describe two or three of the challenges in your program that stand out for you.
5. Are the NCCCS performance measure goals realistic?
6. Are there NCCCS system-wide procedures, policies, and/or mandates that hamper your ability to improve your basic skills program?
7. Are there college-level procedures, policies, and/or mandates that hamper your ability to improve your basic skills program?

WIOA Legislation Affects North Carolina Basic Skills

Before I delve into the actual discussion of the findings presented in Chapter Four, I must address the issue that WIOA, or Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act, is changing the model of basic skills educational delivery in North Carolina community colleges. In the last chapter presenting the data distilled from personal interviews with this study's participants, the participants presented many references to WIOA. The importance of the implementation of the federally sponsored WIOA legislation with its immediate impact on the challenges and successes of our participants' basic skills programs cannot be understated. What is WIOA? How does the WIOA legislation affect North Carolina community college basic skills programs?

What is driving the statewide effort of basic skills departments restructuring their programs and traditional ways of offering educational opportunities to their students? The answer is WIOA: "WIOA, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act signed into law on July 22, 2014, is the driving force behind North Carolina community colleges' restructuring of their basic skills programs" (participant #1 communication, June 29,

2015). WIOA strives to facilitate states offering students the educational and employment opportunities that are necessary for their inclusion in our nation's future workforce.

Research conducted by Georgetown University researchers in 2012 discovered that:

By 2022 the United States will fall short by 11 million the necessary number of workers with postsecondary education, including 6.8 million workers with bachelor's degrees, and 4.3 million workers with a postsecondary vocational certificate, some college credits or an associate's degree. (House Education Workforce Committee, 2015, p. 1)

The House Education Workforce Committee (2015) stated:

WIOA...will improve our nation's workforce development system and help put Americans back to work. Effective education and workforce development opportunities are critical to a stronger middle class. We need a system that prepares workers for the 21st century workforce, while helping businesses find the skilled employees they need to compete and create jobs in America. (p. 1)

WIOA stipulates, "Governors must submit a Unified or Combined State Plan pertaining to workforce investment programs, adult education and vocational rehabilitation to the Secretary of Labor on March 1, 2016" (US Department of Education, 2015b, p. 1). In order to comply with the federal WIOA, while at the same time more closely aligning the North Carolina Community College System's student learning progress and outcome standards to the federal National Reporting System's (NRS) standards, North Carolina's governor tasked the NCCCS with the restructuring of the community colleges' old-model Basic Skills Division. The formerly named Basic Skills

Division of the NCCCS is currently named the College and Career Readiness Division (CCR) (North Carolina Community College System, 2016a).

North Carolina basic skills directors are no longer responsible for simply offering GED, HSE, AE, or ESL classes for their students; they are tasked with transitioning their students from the traditional basic skills classes through the GED and HSE components, and then into post-secondary education and/or meaningful employment opportunities. For a flowchart of the NCCCS College and Career Readiness Career Pathway Continuum, see Appendix A (North Carolina Community College System, 2016b).

The North Carolina Community College System no longer uses the term Basic Skills Division as a designation for Adult Basic Education, GED, HSE, Compensatory Education, and ESL programming; the former NCCCS Basic Skills Academic Division is now known as the NCCCS College and Career Readiness Division (North Carolina Community College System, 2015b). As such, community college basic skills departments across the state are in the midst of renaming themselves and restructuring their departmental components. The previous designation of NC community colleges' Basic Skills Department is currently giving way to individual college's Basic Skills Departments renaming themselves to College and Career Readiness Department (Central Piedmont Community College), Department of Transitional Studies (Asheville Buncombe Technical Community College), or designations such as Workforce Continuing Education (Wake Technical Institute) and Workforce Innovations (Southwestern Community College).

Beginning in 2015, basic skills programs in the North Carolina community colleges across the state began restructuring their departments away from being simply

GED, High School Equivalency (HSE), Adult High School (AHS), ESL, and Compensatory Education facilitators to becoming much more involved in, and accountable for, student transitions into post-secondary higher education and meaningful employment. Transitioning basic skills students into post-secondary educational opportunities requires helping them through the high school equivalency program and then giving them the “broader, soft-skills” (participant #6 communication, June 12, 2015) they will need in order to successfully navigate the curriculum college environment. Basic skills departments are now concentrating on teaching students skills such as good study habits, defining personal goals, evaluating personal motivations, taking personal responsibility, understanding what is expected of them scholastically in curriculum coursework, time-management skills, and navigating the college campus and all its facilities (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; participant #8 communication, July 10, 2015).

If a basic skills student’s goal is only to get a high school equivalency diploma and then enter the workforce, North Carolina basic skills departments are going to be held accountable as well, in helping the student find meaningful employment. What is meaningful employment? “Meaningful employment means getting our students the help and education they need in order to succeed at employment more meaningful than just flipping burgers”, as one participant explained (participant #1 communication, June 29, 2015). The statewide initiative of basic skills departmental restructuring has created new programmatic challenges and duties for North Carolina community college basic skills directors (participant #6 communication, June 12, 2015).

The Balance Between Autonomy and Duty.

Lipsky's (2010) "Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service" conceptual framework focuses on the autonomy that street-level bureaucrats are allowed to exercise in the execution of their duties as they disperse the services of their institution to the citizens of the state. However, Lipsky (2010, p. 19) reminds us also that "Street-level Bureaucrats have some claims to professional status, but they also have a bureaucratic status that requires compliance with superiors' directives".

Previous research supports that there are negative effects associated with high levels of personal autonomy. Possible negative effects associated with street-level bureaucrat employees' high levels of autonomy combined with low levels of supervision may cause professionalism and performance to suffer (Langfred, 2010), and may cause those in charge to make decisions "...without regard for what others may think" (Wagner & Hollenbeck, 2014, p. 194). As well, the situation of a leader with too much autonomy without oversight could possibly lead to "...an abdication of responsibility" (Wagner & Hollenbeck, 2014, p. 140). Additionally, research from Baucus, Norton, Baucus, and Human (2007, p. 97) reveal four ethical dilemmas that may occur when directors and supervisors are allowed high levels of professional autonomy, while simultaneously undergoing minimal oversight from executive leadership: (1) breaking rules and standard operating procedures; (2) challenging authority and avoiding tradition; (3) creating conflict, competition, and stress: and, (4) taking risks.

Director Autonomy

The data collected from North Carolina community college basic skills directors of low-performing programs demonstrated that 4 out of 5 of this group of directors feel their executive leadership teams allow them to implement a high-level of professional

autonomy in general during the execution of their work duties. When considering their ability to exercise professional and personal autonomy in the execution of their work, low-performing program basic skills directors related terms such as “freedom” and “full support”, when describing how their executive leadership teams facilitated their use of professional autonomy to direct and guide their basic skills programs during this time of basic skills programmatic reinvention. This finding aligns with Lipskey’s (2010) street-level bureaucracy framework which asserts that public sector directors “...expected to exercise discretion require some freedom from supervisory control” (p. 50). These findings also coincide with research conducted by Bush (2008), and his assertion that departmental directors should have support from their leaders when it comes to their roles “in leading educational change” (p. xi).

The group of low-performing program directors also related how their use of autonomy was important to them in negotiations with their colleges’ executive leadership while they navigated the myriad departmental and programmatic changes that are occurring statewide in North Carolina basic skills departments, reflecting the educationally related mandates in the WIOA legislation. These directors are leading educational change in the program area of basic skills education in North Carolina. This aligns with Lipsky’s (2010) street-level bureaucrat conceptual framework that describes how public-service workers will utilize high levels of autonomy as they improve the efficacy and efficiency of their programs and services.

Basic skill directors from low-performing programs recounted how their executive leadership teams have less knowledge about the ways in which basic skills functioned than they do. These directors also mentioned that basic skills was unique in

and of itself, as compared to the public school setting and community college curriculum classes, which precludes those without basic skills directorship experience completely understanding the idiosyncrasies of basic skills education policies and procedures. This finding aligns with Caffarella and Daffron's (2013) "interactive model of program planning" which states that basic skills and Adult Education programmatic directors manage and implement 11 components in planning, organizing, and delivering an effective educational program. These are: building a solid base of support; identifying program ideas; sorting and prioritizing program ideas; developing program objectives; designing instructional plans; devising transfer-of-learning plans; formulating evaluation plans; making recommendations and communicating results; selecting schedules, formats, and staff needs; preparing budgets and marketing plans; and coordinating facilities and on-site events. I would like to add that North Carolina basic skills directors, in many instances, also coordinate off-campus programmatic classroom sites and events.

As the basic skills directors in this study identified how they do indeed engage in the above 11 components of planning, these findings align with the NCCCS basic skills director job position and duties description as the directors assist in the development of policies, guidelines, and procedures for Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language. Furthermore these findings align with the NCCCS basic skills director job position and duties description as directors assist in the interpretation of standards, policies, rules and regulations affecting Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language.

The data reveal that directors also coordinate and monitor new program initiatives, and provide professional development training opportunities for their

instructors (North Carolina Community College System, 2012a). This explains why NC community colleges' executive leadership teams look to the basic skills directors for their experience and expertise in the ways in which basic skills adult education functions, how the NCCCS rules and regulations apply to and affect basic skills programs, and the ways in which the new WIOA legislation affects basic skills programs.

This provides evidence that this group of basic skills directors realize their autonomous decision-making processes are deemed essential when their colleges' executive leadership understands less about basic skills and Adult Education than they do. This finding also aligns with Lipsky's (2010), Begley's (2004) and Bush's (2008) research into educational administration which details how executive leadership teams expect departmental directors to effectively lead, expand, and improve their respective departments.

Similarly, basic skills directors of high-performing programs reported their use of autonomous decision-making being encouraged by their colleges' executive leadership teams. One hundred percent of the high-performing program directors reported that they were allowed a great deal of autonomy, and that they perceived no intentions of their executive leadership teams micromanaging their decisions regarding the WIOA-reflected redesigning and restructuring of their basic skills departments and program offerings to the public. In contrast to the low-performing directors' key terms regarding their perspectives of their uses of autonomy, terms such as support and freedom, one key word that all four directors from high-performing programs mentioned regarding their use of personal autonomy and the relationships they have with their executive leadership teams, was "trust".

High levels of trust from executive leaders shown to high-performing program departmental directors coincides with Tschannen-Moran's (2014) findings that when high-level educational leaders build and foster trusting relationships with their subordinates, the subordinates build confidence in their decision-making. High-performing program directors show a willingness to make confident and courageous decisions regarding important decisions, even if they have only 50% to 60% of the information they may need and a good instinct about their decision's outcome (participant #8 communication, July 10, 2015).

This also reflects Rego, Sousa, Marques, and Cunha's (2012) assertion that employees are most productive and creative when supervisors build a supportive atmosphere and are seen as trustworthy to their departmental directors. As community college executive leaders put their high levels of trust in their basic skills directors, street-level bureaucrat basic skills directors are allowed the freedom to make and follow through with effective autonomous decisions that improve their programs and services to the citizens of the state. As participant #6 stated regarding the use of her autonomy, "Nobody is trying to micromanage...I feel very empowered in that way that they [college executive leadership] trust my judgment" (participant interview, June 12, 2015). This aligns with Lipsky's (2010) framework that informs us "[w]e have some reason to believe that citizen trust in society is related to the effectiveness of street-level bureaucracy..." (p. 236).

Six of the nine study participants, from both the low-performing program directors and the high-performing program directors groups, stated that they were more knowledgeable about basic skills and Adult Education than some of their colleges'

executive leadership teams. This reveals that 67% of the participants in this study find it necessary to ultimately implement their own ideas for their departments, as often times executive leadership has no answers as to how to proceed in matters of basic skills' educational policies and procedures. This finding aligns with Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucrat conceptual framework, as participants in this study acting as "[s]treet-level bureaucrats...have an autonomous core [as] they are the authors of the policies that are finally delivered" (p. 212). This finding further aligns with Lipsky's (2010) framework that describes how public-service workers, while engaging with citizens in the line of their professional duties, necessarily utilize high levels of autonomy as they improve the efficacy and efficiency of their programs and services.

Directors from both groups of low and high-performing basic skills programs described how they implemented their autonomy while interpreting WIOA, redesigning their basic skills departments, and designing new basic skills pathways for student transitions in to post-secondary education or workplace settings. While doing so, they demonstrated that they are indeed adhering to the North Carolina Community College System's Basic Skills Director job descriptions of "[a]ssisting in the interpretation of standards, policies, rules, and regulations affecting Adult Basic Education..." (North Carolina Community College System, 2012a).

Directors Prevented From Using Their Autonomy

One of five directors from low-performing programs replied she could think of specific times when her use of professional autonomy was hindered by her executive leadership teams. Similarly, one of four basic skills directors from high-performing programs felt he had his autonomy stifled while trying to implement his ideas for his

department. Both of these participants had been in their directorship positions for just under one year at the time of the interview sessions. This leads to the conclusion that basic skills directors who have not been in their directorial duties for a significant amount of time have perhaps yet to build the trusting relationship with their executive leadership teams that foster a full and unquestioned use of their professional autonomy as they execute their duties.

When all basic skills directors from both groups of low and high-performing programs who gave interviews for this study are taken in to consideration, only two directors (22.2%) reported not being able to fully implement their use of professional autonomy. This further supports the assertion by the basic skills directors in this study that they are more knowledgeable in the policy and programmatic idiosyncrasies inherent with basic skills and Adult Education, and that their executive leaderships teams allow them the freedom to make important decisions when necessary. Seven out of nine North Carolina basic skills directors feel unhindered in their decision-making capabilities in the execution of their professional duties. This aligns with Rego et al. (2012) and their research which validates that the leadership of superiors who foster trusting relationships with employees create an atmosphere where their directors feel confident and empowered enough in their autonomous decision-making to maximize departmental efficacy and effectively face programmatic challenges.

Basic Skills Programmatic Successes

Basic skills directors from North Carolina community colleges were asked to describe to what they may attribute their programs' successes in meeting the NCCCS system-wide student performance measure goals. Basic skills directors from low-

performing colleges reported that implementing contextualized instruction in the classrooms, making sure their instructors receive professional development that enhances contextualized teaching strategies, and initiating managed-enrollments for their students' registration periods have been key in their programs' successes.

Basic skills directors from high-performing programs answered similarly. For them, programmatic success was attributed to instructor professional development in order to enhance contextualized teaching strategies, a move to a managed-enrollment student registration system, and placing key personnel in departmental positions dedicated to student success. The difference in the two groups' responses was that the high-performing program directors realize the importance of adding dedicated student success personnel in their departments; this was not mentioned by any of the low-performing program directors.

Contextualized Instruction

The research of Mazzeo, Rab, and Alssid (2003) detailed in their case studies that community college basic skills programs located in Oregon, California, Illinois, Michigan, and Colorado, as early as 2000, were implementing contextualized instruction in their programs in order to facilitate students' transitions to/for college and career readiness. North Carolina basic skills educational policy in this regards is behind these other states in implementing contextualized basic skills instruction for students. Additionally, Rab's (2007), along with Caffarella and Daffron's (2013) research states the importance of basic skills programs implementing contextualized instruction for students. Rab (2007) additionally denotes the importance of "quality factors" essential for

successful basic skills education of students and their eventual transitions into higher education or workplace settings:

“Quality” factors include the intensive monitoring of student participation, an ability to adapt program services to client needs, and the intensity and duration of the program. Links to further educational opportunities and to employers are also important aspects of program quality. (p.10)

The basic skills directors interviewed for this study indicate that they are confirming and implementing Rab’s (2007) designated quality factors by intensively monitoring students’ attendance and progress, increasing the rigors of the basic skills’ coursework, adapting program services to clients’ needs, and linking students to further educational and employment opportunities.

Instructor Professional Development

Both groups of low-performing and high-performing program basic skills directors stated that ongoing professional development for their instructors and staff has been an essential factor in their programs’ meeting the NCCCS performance measures goals. As basic skills and Adult Education programmatic delivery method shifts away from open enrollment and open-lab educational settings towards the delivery model of contextualized and direct instruction for students, professional development gives the employees classroom instructional skills and strategies needed to facilitate direct and contextualized instructional methods to their students. Eighty percent of the low-performing program group mentioned the importance of their instructors receiving professional development and credentialing from the Appalachian State Adult Basic Skills Professional Development Division. Seventy five percent of high-performing

program directors stated that they read the published scholarly literature regarding basic skills and instructional professional development theories.

Forty percent of the low-performing program directors in this study mentioned keeping abreast of the published research regarding basic skills teacher professional development. In contrast, 75% of the high-performing program directors stated that they follow the published research that demonstrates that credentialed and Adult Education-certified basic skills instructors have higher rates of student success and student EFL gains in their classrooms. The NCCCS, with their own study of credentialed versus non-credentialed North Carolina basic skills instructors "...found evidence to support that certified teachers have greater student outcomes as measured by educational gain compared to the student outcomes of non-certified teachers" (Corbell, 2015, p. 6).

As the new paradigm of basic skills programs are being implemented in departments across the state, more and more North Carolina basic skills instructors (who already must have an earned bachelor's degree in any discipline) are being asked to attend the Appalachian State Basic Skills Professional Development Institute to receive specific Adult Education certification. In the words of one high-performing program director, "As of now, I recommend all my teachers get the credentialing. I have not required teacher credentialing as of yet, but we may be heading in that direction at some point because research does support it" (participant #6 communication, June 12, 2015).

What is occurring in North Carolina basic skills education, as described by 40% of low-performing program directors and 75% of high-performing program director participants in this study, is the professionalization of the basic skills and Adult Education occupational field (Knox & Fleming, 2010). This finding also coincides with

previous research (Merriam & Brocket, 2011) which discovered that the occupational career-field of basic skills instruction is becoming professionalized as basic skills instructors nationwide take part in essential Adult Education and basic skills oriented credentialing sessions, while at the same time more graduate research and basic skills professional organizations inform practice.

North Carolina Community College System data (K. Corbell, personal communication, March 1, 2016) back up my assertion that the occupational field of North Carolina basic skills instruction is becoming professionalized. The community college system data from 2012-2013 revealed that 808/3613 basic skills instructors (22.3%) had obtained the North Carolina Adult Education certification. The data for 2013-2014 revealed that 944/3734 basic skills instructors (25.2%) had earned their Adult Education certification. Data for the program year 2014-2015 revealed that 1052/3769 basic skills instructors (28%) had earned their Adult Education certification. When all classifications of teacher certifications (K-12, Special Education, TESOL, and Adult Education) of North Carolina basic skills instructors are taken into consideration, during the 2012-2013 program year, 1736/3613 basic skills instructors (48%) became certified. For the program year 2013-2014, 1992/3734 (53%) of basic skills instructors were certified. The upward trend continued as NCCCS data for the 2014-2015 program year indicate that 2120/3769 (56.25%) of North Carolina basic skills instructors are certified instructors.

As North Carolina basic skills directors strongly encourage (and perhaps in the near future mandate) their instructors to attend the basic skills' credentialing professional development seminars, they are strengthening the connections "between scholarship and

practice in the field” (Knox & Fleming, 2010, p. 133), while creating a professionalized basic skills disciplinary field.

Managed-Enrollment

Traditionally, basic skills educational programs located within community colleges throughout the state of North Carolina had been operating with a year-round open-enrollment, come-as-you-can, student registration model. Along with the traditional open-enrollment model of student registration and intake, came the traditional basic skills instructional delivery model of open-lab settings filled with multi-subject, multi-grade-level students, with teachers performing as facilitators in helping individual students study their specific subject at their own specific grade-level. The answers from low-performing and high-performing basic skills program directors in this study were similar, with 60% and 75% respectively, mentioning that they had implemented managed-enrollment models in their departments in order to increase student retention, and that this decision was having positive results in helping their programs’ meeting of the performance measures goals set by the NCCCS. This finding is verified by the NCCCS data which shows that as basic skills student enrollment decreased from 106,337 to 73,905 students from 2013 through 2015, the number of average student contact hours increased from 132 hours in 2013, to 138 student contact hours in 2015 (North Carolina Community College System, 2016c).

As early as 2003, scholars were questioning the effectiveness of the open-enrollment model traditionally employed in basic skills education, and recommending that studies be conducted comparing the effectiveness of open-enrollment as compared to a managed-enrollment system for Adult Education and basic skills programs (Comings,

Beder, Bingham, Reder, & Smith, 2003). By 2013, research regarding basic skills and Adult Education programmatic enrollment models established that the traditional open-enrollment model employed in basic skills programs "...present[s] ongoing challenges to improving practice" (Belzer, 2013, p. 166).

In the words of the basic skills director from a high-performing basic skills program whose basic skills Student Progress and GED Pass Rate performance measures numbers increased dramatically from program year 2014 to program year 2015 with an increase of 7.5 points and 27.7 points respectively, "...managed-enrollment is a biggie" (participant interview, June 12, 2015). The directors in this study also outlined how managed-enrollment facilitates the placing of basic skills students into specific classes and specific educational functioning level cohorts, which start their instruction at the same time with one instructor. This facet of the managed-enrollment model is welcomed by basic skills instructors who can then design and follow their contiguous lesson plans in an orderly manner, without the continual interruptions of waves of new students enrolling at will, which the open-enrollment model encourages. Belzer (2013) denotes that the open-enrollment model for basic skills student registration and intake, an enrollment model that does not focus strongly on student assessment and does not focus on setting long-range student goals, as encouraging "enrollment turbulence" (p. 245).

Rutschow and Crary-Ross (2014) recommend that open-enrollment models for basic skills education be discarded in favor of a managed-enrollment model; "...open-enrollment systems allow...new students to enter classes on a weekly or even daily basis. This continual influx of new students tends to complicate teachers' efforts to develop more coherent sets of lessons that build from day to day" (p. 4). Enrollment turbulence

disrupts contiguous and effective teaching in Adult Education and basic skills classrooms, also described by Strucker (2006) as “attendance turbulence” (p. 1). Strucker describes the advantages to basic skills instructors and departments when open enrollment is shelved in favor of a managed-enrollment model, as teachers’ contiguous lesson plans are not continually interrupted and fractured as new students no longer enter the program at will, but enroll and start class during designated time periods.

An additional benefit to North Carolina basic skills directors implementing a managed-enrollment model for dedicated student registration periods is that the students themselves feel as if they are part of a specific cohort of students who all possess the relatively same levels of educational attainment and educational needs. Arranging students into cohorts, as opposed to placing students in an open-lab setting, results in students feeling more motivated and more like college-level students. In the words of a North Carolina basic skills director (participant #9) from a high performing-program located in the eastern part of the state:

...programs can take advantage of that community by teaching students in groups. Students can help each other and not give up. When they walk into the program and see other people who are struggling, there is a community that forms almost immediately.

This recognition of the benefits to basic skills students of managed-enrollment, and getting students out of the open-lab settings and into dedicated classrooms, aligns with classroom social-interaction research conducted by Hanushek et al. (2003).

Dedicated Student-Success Personnel

Three of the four directors from high-performing programs mentioned that adding new-hire personnel, or moving already employed departmental personnel into newly created positions of dedicated student-success advisors and student coaches was making a noticeable difference in their programs' performance measures' successes. At the time of this study, the NCCCS did not gather data about the effects of dedicated basic skills student personnel upon students' progress and transitions (K. Corbell, personal communication, February 26, 2016). However, the strategy of implementing dedicated student advisors to improve basic skills students' overall success is supported by research (Coffey & Smith, 2011; Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006).

Coffey and Smith's (2011) research identifies two "highly regarded" (p. 11) basic skills preparation programs for students: the GED Bridge to College and Careers Programs and the Gateway Adult Education Partnership/Advanced Adult Education Program. Both of these programs stress the importance of dedicated student success advisors to be placed in basic skills departments in order to better facilitate students' GED/High School Equivalency attainment, and students' transitions into post-secondary education and/or employment.

Based upon the anecdotal data provided by the high-performing program directors in this study, the recommendations of the GED Bridge to College and Careers Programs (Coffey & Smith, 2011; LaGuardia Community College, 2010), and the Gateway Adult Education Partnership/Advanced Adult Education Program (Coffey & Smith, 2011), the findings of this study suggest that North Carolina community college basic skills departments employ dedicated student success advisors.

Whereas 75% of the high-performing program director participants mentioned hiring dedicated basic skills student success advisors and councilors, none of the low-performing program directors mentioned that they had hired dedicated personnel for their departments in order to facilitate their students' programmatic successes and transitions into curriculum coursework or employment.

Student-success advisors, dedicated to individual basic skills students' progress and success are essential to basic skills programs as they necessarily "...raise students' awareness of postsecondary education options and admissions processes", disseminate information about post-secondary and employment opportunities available to students, and concentrate on individual student advising into future curriculum studies or employment opportunities (Zafft et al., 2006, p. 15). Research from Zafft et al. (2006) demonstrates that students succeed in transitioning from GED coursework to post-secondary educational enrollment when basic skills student success coaches make students aware of the curriculum opportunities offered at their colleges after GED completion, inform students of the basic skills and curriculum program connections, and encourage basic skills students to dual-enroll in GED and curriculum-oriented Basic Skills Pathways coursework.

These North Carolina basic skills directors from high-performing programs are facilitating student transitions while they simultaneously strengthen the connections between research and practice as they employ dedicated student success coaches and individual student advisors. This development in North Carolina basic skills education also aligns with Rutschow and Crary-Ross's (2014) research into the obstacles of basic skills students who obtain their GED and high school equivalency diplomas, and

subsequently move beyond basic skills into curriculum programs. Rutschow and Crary-Ross's study presents an overview of litigating issues basic skills students, nationwide, face today in their educational progress. They mention six GED to College Bridge studies that promote best practices for basic skills student success and transitions into curriculum programs. Additionally, Rutschow and Crary-Ross stress offering basic skills students "...supplemental supports for college entry, such as intensive advising on careers, college expectations, college-course taking, one-on-one case management, or success courses" (p. 11).

Basic Skills Programmatic Challenges

When asked to describe challenges that their programs face, 60% of directors from low-performing basic skills programs responded that student retention was their principal issue. In contrast to their answers, only one director (25%) from a high-performing program mentioned student retention as a challenging issue for his program. Additionally, sixty percent of basic skills director participants from low-performing programs also mentioned that student demographics was a challenge to their programs, while no directors from high-performing programs specifically mentioned student demographics as challenges to their programs' successes. Participants from high-performing programs mentioned two additional areas considered as challenges to their programs not mentioned by directors of low-performing programs: the way in which the performance measures' percentages were calculated (mentioned by 50% of high-performing program directors), and teacher-turnover/new teacher issues (mentioned by 50% of high-performing program directors).

Student Retention Challenges

Research as far back as the 1970s tied basic skills student retention issues to correct student grade-level placement into classes based upon student entry test scores, and to the overall quality of the basic skills educational program being offered to the public (Habley, 1981). Habley, Bloom, Robbins, and Robbins (2012, p. 237) tell us “[c]orrect placement in initial basic skills coursework begins a sequential process which, if effective, results in student academic success”. Prior research results describing how basic skills directors may implement best practices on how to solve the challenges of student retention is far from conclusive, but Habley et al. (2012) inform us that “..almost without exception, all successful retention programs fall into three clusters...transition programs, academic advising, and learning support informed by assessment” (p. 228), as these give basic skills students a sense of direction and of future educational possibilities.

Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2011) suggest that student retention improves with strong academic and social support systems that must necessarily be “...integral to the college community and are a shared responsibility of many different groups in the institution (p. 101). Habley, Bloom, Robbins, and Robbins (2012) sum up well what their research has discovered about basic skills best practices and which strategies help with student retention challenges:

[O]nly 16 methodologically sound studies provided documentation linking a program to increased retention. Their analyses concluded that the evidence in support of counseling and mentoring programs was weak. There was small to moderate level of evidence supporting learning communities and faculty-student interaction, and moderate to strong evidence in support of transition/orientation programs. (p. 95)

In attempts to enhance program quality and create an educational atmosphere which fosters increased student performance, low-performing and high-performing basic skills program directors for this study mentioned they were utilizing specific grade-level (Educational Functioning Level) class placements, counseling and mentoring programs, learning communities, Basic Skills Pathways to curriculum studies transitions, and enhanced student-faculty relationships. NCCCS data support the success basic skills directors are having in regards to student retention. Even though less students enrolled in basic skills programs in 2015 as did in 2014, average basic skills student contact hours increased from 128 hours in 2014, to 138 in 2015. These figures represent an increase of 7.8% in basic skills student contact hours across the state (North Carolina Community College System, 2016c).

Performance Measures Calculation Challenges

Research has been conducted about the necessity of, and the positive and negative issues surrounding, government educational agencies' adoption of performance measures in order to assure of their educational programs' continued accountability to the citizens of the nation and the states (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Muriel & Smith, 2011; Reuters, 2008; US Department of Education, 2016). As Lipsky (2010) also informs us, street-level bureaucrats must be held accountable to the state, as they dispense public services to the citizenry. One of Reuters' (2008) three problematic issues with educational performance measures (data are too general, benchmarks are needed for comparison, and the required extra staff-time and resources to interpret and manage data), was specified by high-performing programming directors in this study as being a problematic issue for their programs' success; this is the issue of data that are too general.

As this study was being designed and the research questions were being formulated, the NCCCS was still employing two basic skills performance measures. These two basic skills performance measures represented 25% of the performance measures (two performance measures out of eight total performance measures) that North Carolina community colleges had to address each program year (prior to 2015), in order to show accountability to the state and its citizens. Two basic skills director participants (both from high-performing programs) mentioned the fact that the previous two basic skills performance measures of Basic Skills Student Progress and GED Pass Rate, representing a full 25% of the colleges' total accountability measures, seemed "...very disproportionate" (participant #6 communication, June 12, 2015) to the total number of eight community college performance measures.

As the requests for interviews was undergoing its initial steps of identifying and contacting potential basic skills director participants for this study, the NCCCS let it be known to basic skills directors that the GED Pass Rate performance measure would be discontinued for the 2015-2016 program year and that the Student Progress performance measure was being redesigned. The redesigning of the Student Progress performance measure entailed dropping the qualification that all basic skills students who had 12 hours of instruction, but did not take a post-test, would nonetheless be entered in to the cohort and count against the program due to the lack of a student post-test. The redesigned Student Progress measure now only counts students who have 12 hours of instruction and a post-test, as being in the cohort. Therefore, if a student has 12 or more hours of instruction and leaves the program before she can post-test, there will be no penalty accredited to the basic skills program.

With these changes to the two NCCCS basic skills performance measures in mind during the preliminary stages of data gathering for this study, I decided to retain my initial research question about the directors' perceptions of the two basic skills performance measures previously employed. In this way, their answers would provide insight into the perceptions the basic skills directors had about the old performance measures, as well as their perceptions regarding the newly redefined and solitary performance measure of Basic Skills Student Progress. Additionally, as mentioned above by one director, there is a possibility of the basic skills GED Pass Rate performance measure being re-implemented by the NCCCS at some future date (participant #9 communication, August 27, 2015).

Two high-performing program directors (participants #6 & #9) also mentioned an issue in how the basic skills Student Progress performance measure is calculated. When a NCCCS basic skills Educational Functioning Level skips individual grade levels by two years (for example; ABE-Low specifies 4.0-5.9 and ASE-Low specifies 9.0-10.9 grade levels respectively), a struggling basic skills student who completes a single grade level jump from 9th grade to 10th grade, receives no credit for her achievement. This is what high-performing program basic skills directors in this study pointed out as not being a valid indicator of their programs' true successes and educational achievements.

Instructor Turnover and New Instructor Challenges

Two of four basic skills directors from high-performing programs stated that teacher-turnover and new teacher hires create challenges to their programmatic success. The way to minimize new teacher-hire challenges is to make sure that new teachers receive the professional and staff development opportunities that specifically address the

roles of basic skills instructors, as they are responsible for moving students through the EFLs, and how the instructors need to fill out correctly the basic skills LEIS paperwork requirements. Two directors from low-performing programs in this study mentioned that they do make sure their teachers receive this type of professional development, therefore minimizing the associated challenges.

Basic skills teacher turnover is another matter, as the words of one high-performing program basic skills director (participant #8) informed us, “The good-teacher retention problem, well, the pay is a factor. The hours are definitely a factor. If [teachers are] limited to 14 hours [a week] it’s not good!” Basic skills educators in North Carolina are becoming more qualified as they earn basic skills credentialing credits that further professionalize the basic skills teaching field. North Carolina basic skills instructors are being asked to leave the less stressful open-lab settings and teach in the newly designed specific class levels, with the direct instruction and content-based educational delivery model more suited to transition students into post-secondary and employment opportunity settings. Basic skills instructors are being asked to do more for the same amount of pay, and with currently reduced available working hours as compared to 2014 and before (participant #6 communication, June 12, 2015; participant #8 communication, July 10, 2015). This creates the situation in which qualified and experienced basic skills instructors are leaving the field, just when basic skills directors and students need them most. At the time of this study the NCCCS did not collect data on basic skills instructor attrition rates, so this study’s interview data linking basic skills instructor attrition with pay and the total hours instructors are allowed to teach in the classroom is anecdotal.

Are the Performance Measures Goals Realistic?

The responses from low-performing program directors and high-performing program directors to the question “Are the performance measures goals realistic?” were nearly identical. Four of five directors (80%) from low-performing programs and 100% of high-performing program directors said that the previous two performance measures were not realistic; the Student Progress measure did not realistically assess the incremental progress that basic skills students achieved, and the GED Pass Rate measure was not calculated fairly. However, all participants for this study were pleased with the new developments, beginning in 2015, of the GED Pass Rate performance measure being completely discontinued, along with the implementation of new calculation parameters of the basic skills Student Progress performance measure (as discussed in Chapter Four).

System-wide Procedures That Hamper Basic Skills Programmatic Success

The basic skills directors in this study identified specific system-wide procedures that hamper their ability to improve their programs’ successes. Low-performing program directors identified that a lack of timely reporting from the system office, Colleague student-data management software issues, the basic skills online-learning platform and auditors’ interpretations of online-learning policy, and the Basic Skills Plus initiative contain issues that hamper their abilities to improve their programs. With very similar responses, basic skills directors from high-performing programs identified Basic Skills Plus, timely disbursement of information from the system offices, and the basic skills online-learning platform as having inherent and policy issues that hampered their programs’ productivity and successes. These are programmatic and policy issues that can be, and should be, addressed and corrected by the NCCCS office as soon as possible.

Timely Reporting and Information Dissemination

Lunenburg & Ornstein (2012) state, “[c]ommunication, the lifeblood of every school organization, is the process that links the individual, the group, and the organization” (p.158). There is a wealth of research conducted on communication issues inside of educational organizations (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2010; Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Schrum & Levin, 2009). One low-performing program director mentioned that after she sends her reports into the system office, it may be three to four months before she gets feedback on her reports; by then it is too late for her to make the necessary programmatic adjustments she needs to make in order to improve her program’s effectiveness. A second director mentioned that at times a year goes by before NCCCS approval, or disapproval, for a Basic Skills Plus pathway she requested. The effectiveness of basic skills directors’ leadership is disrupted when they do not receive timely feedback on issues from the system office.

Brundrett and Rhode’s (2010) research tells us that timely communication and feedback to educational directors are essential for creating an atmosphere in which educational leaders can properly analyze, reflect upon and evaluate important issues, which then lead to successful collaboration with others in order to solve problems. This finding also aligns with Lipsky’s (2010) framework that tells us that timely and accurate feedback from bureaucratic leadership is essential for increasing the overall efficiency and efficacy of street-level bureaucrats who are responsible for dispersing services to the public.

Basic Skills Colleague Student-Data Management Software

One basic skills director mentioned that the Colleague student-data management system software used by the basic skills departments in North Carolina community

colleges is not designed for basic skills department applications. This director stated it would benefit the NCCCS and its basic skills departments if a suitable, specific to basic skills, student-data management software application was employed. In response to the criticism of the Colleague system not being designed for, but being employed in North Carolina community college basic skills departments, the Director of Program Evaluation/Research and Performance Management for the North Carolina Community College System responded:

Colleague is the MIS that is used for all of NCCCS. This has many benefits on integrating across programs. We have customized the literacy screens to gather the data needed...we must all be on one MIS system with NCCCS. [If basic skills departments are having issues with Colleague,] sometimes it's a training issue and not an MIS issue. (K. Corbell, personal communication, February 25, 2016)

Basic Skills Online-Learning

Two of the nine total basic skills directors, one low-performing program director and one high-performing program director, interviewed for this study mentioned that inconsistencies in system-wide policies regarding their online educational delivery services to students was hampering their programs' successes. Both of these directors expressed frustration over issues with the necessary online delivery system paperwork and inconsistent auditing procedures that accompany the operations of the basic skills online delivery of courses. One director summed up the complaints of both, as she mentioned:

...with the distance learning system, what documentation are we supposed to have? ...it just doesn't work too well. Most of the other problems we have with it relate to interpretation by the auditors of the things we are supposed to be doing.

Higher education facilities across the country are improving their online learning services as a major function of reaching the geographically challenged, physically handicapped, and other students facing barriers to education who wish to enroll and study (Archer & Garrison, 2010). A successful and competent online-learning delivery service for basic skills students allows 24-hour, seven-days-a-week educational access to students who also have work schedules that make it impossible for them to attend structured daytime or evening classes in basic skills programs (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010).

Basic Skills Plus Issues

When asked if there are any system-wide procedures that hamper basic skills programmatic success, four directors out of nine (44.5%) stated that the Basic Skills Plus pathways initiative has a specific NCCCS policy provision that hampered their programs' successes. According to one of these basic skills directors, the NCCCS stipulates more stringent student enrollment parameters of basic skills students' entrance into the Basic Skills Plus programs than is originally outlined by the 2010 North Carolina General Assembly guidelines for the program (North Carolina Community College System, 2016b). Three basic skills directors (two high-performing program directors and one low-performing program director) interviewed for this study specifically pointed out that the stringent NCCCS enrollment requirements of basic skills students excludes lower-grade

level basic skills students from enrolling in the program. The lower grade-level basic skills students are the ones who may benefit from the program the most (participant #6 communication, June 12, 2015; participant #2 communication, July 8, 2015; participant #3 communication, July 20, 2015).

Additionally, two other high-performing program directors who did not specifically mention (in relation to question #6) that Basic Skills Plus had any issues that hampered their programs' success, did mention elsewhere in their interviews that only basic skills students who placement-test into the ASE-Low and/or ASE-High levels (9-10.9 and 11-12.9 grade-levels respectively) are eligible for Basic Skills Plus pathways programs. These two directors believe this is a situation that needs to be addressed and corrected by the system office; the correction would permit lower grade-level students to enroll in Basic Skills Plus coursework.

The policies that guide the NCCCS Basic Skills Plus program, stipulated in the Basic Skills Plus Legislation and Guidelines, has been published by the North Carolina Community College System (2016b). The official NCCCS policy regarding student enrollment into the Basic Skills Plus program states:

The Basic Skills component includes courses in Adult High School and General Educational Development (GED®) which lead to a high school diploma or equivalent. Students who are seeking a high school diploma or equivalent and are enrolled in a Basic Skills course are eligible for Basic Skills Plus. Colleges will set an eligibility score and determine their targeted audience for Basic Skills Plus.

Correctly stated by one of the basic skills director participants, there is no stipulation in the official NC General Assembly guidelines that preclude any basic skills student from enrolling in Basic Skills Plus coursework. However, basic skills directors statewide are confronted with a NCCCS mandate from the system office that does indeed preclude students who have not yet gained an ASE-Low or ASE-High grade level from enrolling in Basic Skills Plus.

The language in the above NCCCS guidelines states, “Colleges will set an eligibility score and determine their targeted audience for Basic Skills Plus”. However, this does not seem to be the actual case. I contacted one of the participant directors from a high-performing program for clarification; she replied:

[The] NCCCS has always indicated that all students must be at the ASE Low level to qualify for BSP. It has not been a local college decision.

There is widespread frustration that we are not able to utilize this tuition waiver for lower level students. (participant #6 email, January 22, 2016)

College-Level Procedures That Hamper Basic Skills Programmatic Success

When asked to describe any college-level procedures or policies that hamper their departments’ successes, there was no real consensus on any negative issues perceived by directors of low-performing basic skills programs. Two of the five directors in this group mentioned that there were no college initiated policies or procedures that hampered their programs’ successes. Two directors from this group mentioned that college budgetary restraints were hindrances to their departments being able to offer more professional development opportunities to their instructors. One director mentioned that her basic skills program at times follows curriculum-side policy guidelines that hinder her

program's efficiency, and one director mentioned that her basic skills students are not allowed to use some of the college's facilities that curriculum students have access to. In the group of high-performing basic skills program directors interviewed for this study, five of five responded that there were no college procedures or mandates that negatively affected their programs' successes.

Budgetary Constraints

Roueche and Jones (2005) assert that "community college budgets are not growing at a rate commensurate with enrollment growth" (p. vii). There is little that North Carolina basic skills directors can do about the budget shortfalls that their departments are experiencing. Budgetary constraints are unavoidable in educational settings. Justice (2013, p. 1) tells us:

A global recession of large scale proportion, skyrocketing energy costs, and other economic and social issues have had a significant impact on America. As a result of these and other factors, a new learning climate is emerging that places demands on all levels of education. Educators must consider how practical solutions that address these changes can and should be included in both secondary and higher education curricula.

One of the high-performing program directors mentioned that she facilitates more professional development sessions for her department's employees, than she receives herself from outside providers. This director is making the best of the budgetary constraints her basic skills department faces, and is implementing a practical solution. Two of the high-performing program directors mentioned in their interviews how they were active in researching and applying for grant money that they could use for

professional development activities for their departmental personnel. In times of budgetary constraints that basic skills departments are facing, directors providing more in-house professional development sessions along with directors finding grant money are two resourceful ideas that may mitigate the effects of fewer budgetary resources provided to basic skills directors. As community college basic skills directors begin and continue to design content-based and contextualized courses, professional development for basic skills instructors is crucial for the programs' and the students' successes.

In North Carolina, basic skills programs and departments are funded as a separate entity from the curriculum side of the community college in which they are a part of. In this scenario, the community colleges' overall budgets do not include funding and resources for basic skills staff and instructors' specific professional development needs and trainings. However, before the recession that began in 2007 and caused community college budgets to shrink, many community colleges had funds for professional development for all of their staff and instructors set aside, including basic skills instructors (participant #2 communication, July 8, 2015). While budgetary constraints were less on community colleges during those days, many NC community colleges helped their basic skills departments by covering professional developments costs for basic skills instructors and staff, which allowed basic skills departments to use these subsequent fiscal savings for departmental instructor and staff hires and for instructional material purchases.

Since 2007 community colleges have had to cut back on the extra budgetary aid they had previously allowed their basic skills programs. This forced the basic skills directors to cut back on professional development opportunities for instructors and staff

they can finance out of their own departmental budgets (participant #2 communication, July 8, 2015). Just as basics skills students and curriculum students have different educational and instructional needs, basic skills instructors and their curriculum counterparts have different methods of operation when it comes to classroom interactions and instructional strategies geared to help students succeed. Basic skills administrative staff also have different enrollment, reporting, and accountability standards to follow as compared to the curriculum programs-based staff of the college (participant #2 communication, July 8, 2015).

Basic Skills Departments Following Curriculum Guidelines

One of the issues that one basic skills director mentioned is that at times her department is asked by the college's executive leadership to follow student registration and course development time-lines that the curriculum side of the college utilizes. Since basic skills courses operate on a year-round schedule, and do not have the in-between semester breaks that curriculum classes traditionally follow, it would be a help to basic skills directors if they were allowed to implement basic skills department-specific student registration time-frames and course origination procedures that more readily reflect their operating schedules.

Basic Skills Students and College Facilities Access

One other issue mentioned by a basic skills director, that she feels hampers her departmental success, is the situation in which basic skills students are not allowed to use certain learning labs, computer labs, writing centers, and sections of the campus library that curriculum students are allowed to access. Three of nine basic skills directors interviewed for this study mentioned how basic skills must overcome the perception that

basic skills students are “less than curriculum students” (participant #7 communication, June 26, 2015; participant #1 communication, June 29, 2015; participant #9 communication, August 27, 2015). One way North Carolina community colleges could facilitate a welcoming atmosphere for basic skills students would be to allow basic skills students to access all areas of the college that are open to curriculum students. One director from a high-performing basic skills program mentioned that she talked her executive leadership team into allowing her basic skills students to obtain a college ID, just like the ones administered to the curriculum students. According to this director’s anecdotal evidence, this in itself elevates basic skills students’ perceptions of themselves, as they feel included as a full-fledged member of the community college student body.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study reveal practical implications that community college basic skills directors, community college executive leadership teams, and NCCCS basic skills policy-makers may consider for improving community college basic skills programs.

Implications for Basic Skills Directors

1. It is recommended that new basic skills teachers are immediately informed of how student EFLs, post-testing, and the LEIS reporting work in tandem to promote the departments’ successes, as part of their initial new-teacher orientation sessions.
2. Basic skills directors for this study mentioned how a managed-enrollment system for their programs had two positive affects; it increased student retention, and it increased FTE hours per student. Therefore, it is recommended that basic skills

directors move away from the traditional open-registration model, and initiate a program-wide managed-enrollment model.

3. Basic skills directors in this study mentioned the positive effects of experienced teachers mentoring new instructors. Therefore, it is recommended that basic skills directors take advantage of the knowledge and skills experienced basic skills instructors possess, and pair them with new instructors as mentors.

Implications for NC Community College Executive Leadership Teams

1. To help facilitate basic skills directors' success, it is recommended that community college executive leadership teams recognize: the importance of basic skills directors sitting at their policy tables, basic skills directors' professional autonomy, the importance of building trusting relationships with basic skills directors, and that basic skills departmental schedules for course originations and student registration periods may need to be tailored to the specific basic skills' programmatic academic calendar schedules.
2. In order to help facilitate basic skills student success, it is recommended that community college executive leadership teams include basic skills students into the broader community college culture by offering basic skills students college IDs, and allowing basic skills students access to the facilities and services that are offered to curriculum students.

Implications for NCCCS College and Career Readiness Division

1. It is recommended that the administrators of the NCCCS College and Career Readiness Division reduce their turn-around time in getting the basic skills

directors feedback on reports that basic skills directors have sent to the system office.

2. It is recommended that the College and Career Readiness Division announce basic skills director professional development training sessions in a more timely fashion.
3. It is recommended that the College and Career Readiness Division solidify the policies and procedures regarding basic skills distance-learning, inform all basic skills auditors of the official online-learning policies, and effectively train the auditors in consistent application of official policies and procedures regarding basic skills distance-learning operation.
4. It is recommended that administrators in the College and Career Readiness Division of the NCCCS reevaluate their decisions on the student enrollment standards into the Basic Skills Plus programs offered by the community colleges statewide, to reflect the ability of lower than ASE-Low EFL students to enroll in Basic Skills Plus coursework.
5. For some basic skills students, a one-grade Educational Functioning Level progression within a program year is a true achievement and should be counted as such. The NCCCS should look at the Student Progress performance measure in such light, and further re-define the calculation parameters of the basic skills Student Progress performance measure.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The strengths of this study are that it contributes to the body of existing research and knowledge about basic skills education in the state of North Carolina.

1. This study addresses a significant gap in the existing research by giving voice to basic skills directors. Basic skills education is a principal route to post-secondary education and meaningful employment to traditionally underserved, minority, low-income, and nontraditional students (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Levin, 2007). With the passing of the WIOA legislation, states and the federal government are demanding and expecting more from basic skills and College and Career Readiness departments. It is valuable to obtain and explore the lived professional experiences and perceptions of basic skills directors about the idiosyncrasies of their profession. To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first study to collect qualitative interview data from basic skills directors, thereby documenting their perceptions on the challenges and successes within their programs.
2. The use of interviews to gather data provides this study with the first-person accounts of basic skills directors in the field. Their words and rich descriptions of their personal perspectives and perceptions regarding what works and what does not work in basic skills educational delivery give the findings of this study a relevancy to basic skills' best practices in instructional methods, procedures, and policies that are transferable to other NC basic skills directors and departments.
3. At the time of the interview sessions and data gathering, there were 44 women basic skills directors and 14 men basic skills directors in the North Carolina Community College System. Six of the participants in this study were female and three were male, which very closely reflects the gender distribution of the total population of North Carolina basic skills directors at 58 NC community colleges.

The nine-participant sample for this study reflects 15.5% of all North Carolina basic skills directors.

4. This study corroborates previous research findings regarding basic skills best practices in instructional delivery, issues surrounding basic skills student retention, success with basic skills contextualized and direct instruction, the success of Basic Skills Plus/Pathways offerings, and in the ongoing trend of basic skills programs nationwide with their development of programs that facilitate more strident student transitions into post-secondary education and/or meaningful employment.
5. This study provides new information and knowledge to add to the scholarly research. Data provided by the participants with their perspectives of their programs' successes and challenges which affect basic skills and College and Career Readiness programs provided practical applications for basic skills directors, community college executive leadership teams, and NC community college system administrators.

It is applicable to address the limitations of this study as well.

1. The participant group for this study consisted of nine basic skills directors. A larger sample would be preferable in order to better substantiate the validity and trustworthiness of the findings.
2. Other limitations include the methodological, geographic, and administrative limits of this study. This qualitative study was based solely on interview data from participants in a single state, in a single community college system. The results

may not be directly transferable to other states' basic skills directors and other states' basic skills educational programs.

Recommendations for Future Study

1. Further study needs to be conducted in the methods and models of merging basic skills and College and Career Readiness programs with the curriculum programs of community colleges. The federal WIOA legislation ties states' basic skills and College and Career Readiness programs to students' basic skills' educational progression achievements and transitions into post-secondary and employment opportunities. As such, basic skills departments in North Carolina are reforming as College and Career Readiness departments and will necessarily become more integrated with their college's curriculum programs.
2. Basic skills directors in this study reported that they were finding it necessary and constructive to hire dedicated student success coaches and advisors, in order to facilitate one-on-one advising and personal goal setting for students as they enter basic skills programs. As well, the dedicated student success coaches are (in several instances mentioned in the interview data) responsible also for advising students and monitoring students' progress throughout their basic skills educational journey. The evidence that specially dedicated basic skills student success personnel are positively affecting NC basic skills students' progress is anecdotal. At the time of this study, the NCCCS did not collect data on the effects that dedicated basic skills student advisors and coaches are having on basic skills students' progress, so it is recommended that future studies be conducted in this area.

3. Anecdotal evidence gathered in this study suggests that some qualified adjunct basic skills instructors, who initially desire to make a career in the basic skills teaching field, eventually leave the teaching positions in North Carolina basic skills departments. Reported reasons are that adjunct instructor pay may not reflect their educational attainment levels and that the hours they are allowed to teach in the classrooms have been reduced beginning in 2015. At the time of this study, no NCCCS data was available regarding basic skills instructor attrition rates, nor why qualified basic skills instructors leave the occupational field of basic skills instruction. Further research in this area is recommended.
4. Further research is recommended in basic skills students' perceptions of self-worth and inclusiveness as relates to them being allowed to have access to curriculum-side facilities and obtaining community college ID cards, just as curriculum community college students have access to.

Conclusion

North Carolina community college basic skills directors, acting as street-level bureaucrats while they equitably and effectively dispense educational services to the public, navigate demanding occupational positions as they encounter a variety of challenges to their programs' successes. Basic skills education in North Carolina is no longer just simply teaching secondary education level reading, math, and writing skills to students. This study reveals that a new paradigm in North Carolina basic skills education is emerging. Emerging is a basic skills educational paradigm that goes beyond simply teaching high school level subjects to students, to a paradigm of basic skills education that promotes expectations of secondary education completion along with students'

transitions into post-secondary educational settings or meaningful employment. This new paradigm of basic skills education in North Carolina holds basic skills directors accountable for students' secondary education completion *and* the subsequent student transitions into post-secondary education and/or employment.

This study serves several valuable purposes. First, it fills a large gap in the current literature about basic skills program directors and their perceptions of their programs' challenges and successes. Second, it verifies and validates existing knowledge and literature about basic skills educational programs in general. Third, it gives voice specifically to North Carolina community college basic skills directors, so that we may learn through their words and lived experiences what educational policies and strategies work, and which educational policies and strategies do not work, in the successful education of their students.

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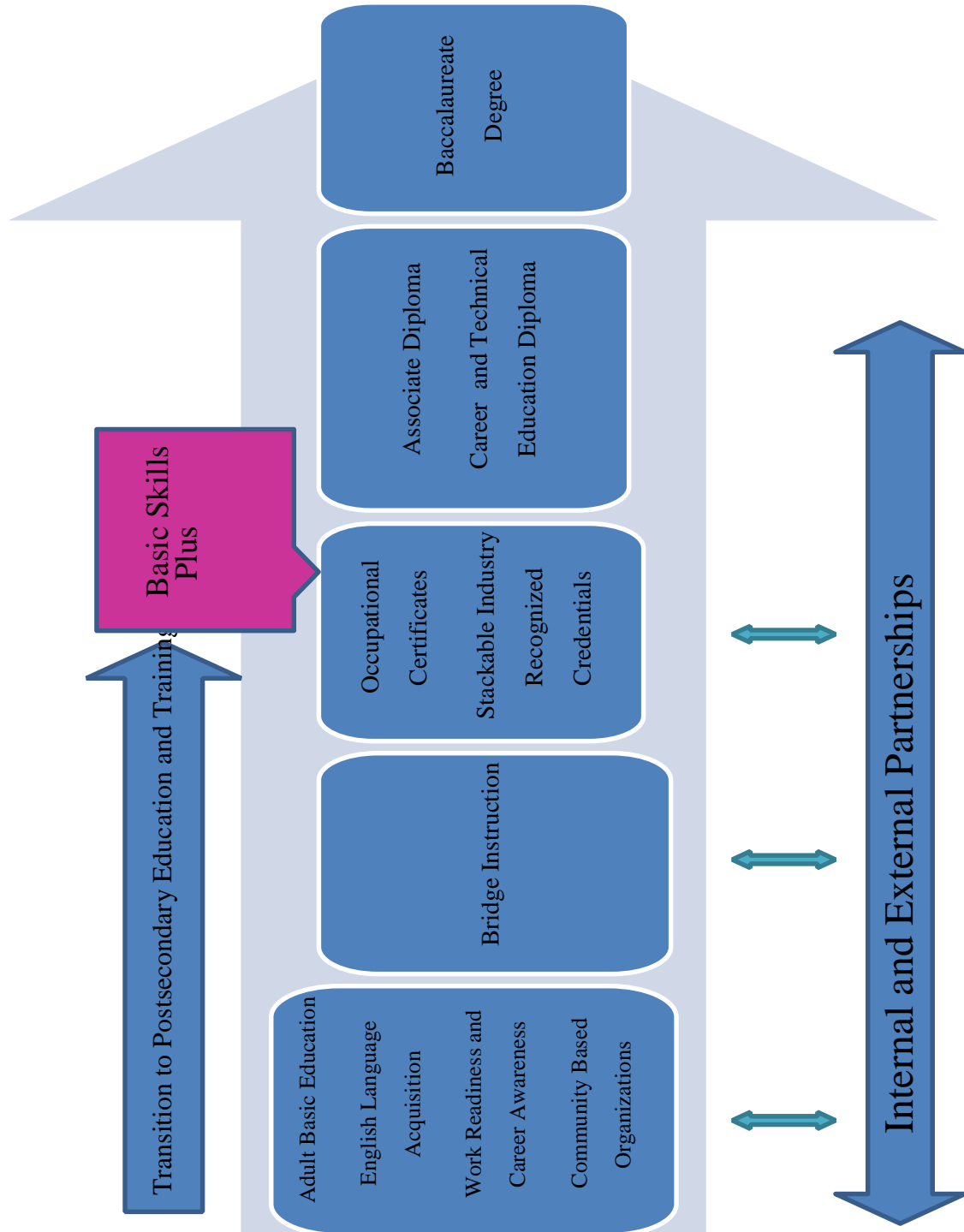
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Appendix A

NCCCS College and Career Readiness Career Pathway Continuum



Literacy Networks - Local Workforce Development Boards - LEAs - Nonprofit/State Organizations - Employers