

TELL ME, WHAT IS IT YOU PLAN TO DO WITH YOUR ONE WILD
AND PRECIOUS LIFE?: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
OF THE EFFICACY OF EXTENDED LEARNING
OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER
READINESS IN MAINE

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to my parents, Jeff Merrill, Jr. and Margo Truscott.

Without their unwavering support and encouragement, I would not have had the courage and perseverance to reach this goal. They both instilled in me the importance and value of education and to always strive to be the best student possible. Because of my parents, I grew up with a deep love of learning, reading, and writing. Completing a doctorate degree is a goal I have wanted to accomplish since I was young, but that desire is a result of my parents' influence. I hope you both know how much I love and appreciate you!

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ABSTRACT

Elizabeth A. Sanborn

Tell Me, What is it You Plan To Do With Your One Wild And Precious Life?: A
Phenomenological Analysis of the Efficacy of Extended Learning
Opportunities for Career Readiness in Maine
(Major Professor: Stacie Austin, Ed.D.)

In an effort to prepare American high school students for future careers, many states have implemented specific career readiness standards and programs. One such program is known as Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO), which are hands-on, credit-bearing experiences outside of the classroom with an emphasis on community-based career exploration. While there have been a handful of established career readiness programs in Maine high schools for over a decade, the state recently implemented the Maine Career Exploration Program in 2021 to build infrastructure to support statewide ELO expansion in the long term. Utilizing a phenomenological analysis approach, this qualitative study examined the efficacy of ELO programming to determine specific benefits to alumni and to examine how it has affected their future career decisions and outcomes five to ten years after graduation. In this study, public high school graduates who earned credit through an ELO shared their experiences through structured personal interviews. Participants graduated from one of three high schools in southern Maine which have all had existing ELO programming for at least ten years. Using Krumboltz's (1976, 1979, 1996) Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making and Learning Theory of Career

Counseling, this study aims to fill the current knowledge gap regarding ELO effectiveness and benefit to alumni and the ways in which it impacts future career choices. Given the current investment of implementing ELO programs in Maine, such effects should be studied and understood. Findings suggest the essence of ELO experiences are overwhelmingly positive, advantageous, and effective. Other findings show ELOs create important connections, provide early immersion in the professional realm, give exposure to new perspectives, increase confidence, and support autonomy over one's learning and future.

Keywords: Extended Learning Opportunities, career exploration, career readiness, future career decisions

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	xi
CHAPTER 1	
INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	2
Purpose Statement	5
Description of the Study	6
Theoretical Framework	7
Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making	7
Learning Theory of Career Counseling	9
Research Questions	10
Definitions of Key Terms	10
Significance of the Study	12
Assumptions	13
Delimitations	13
CHAPTER 2	
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	14
Introduction	14
Purpose	15
Literature Review	16

Career Development & Readiness	16
Types of ELO Programs	20
High Quality ELO Experiences	23
Benefits for Students	27
Summary	30

CHAPTER 3

METHODS	33
Research Questions	33
Methodology Selected	33
Study Participants	34
Data Procedures & Collection	35
Data Analysis	35
Credibility	37
Transferability	37
Dependability	37
Confirmability	38
Ethical Concerns & Risks to Participants	38

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS	40
Introduction	40
Preparation of Raw Data for Analysis	40
Descriptive Data	41

Data Analysis Procedures & Steps	43
Reflexivity Protocol	45
Findings	46
Building Connections and Relationships	46
Professional Immersion	50
Increased Confidence	55
New Perspectives	58
Autonomy over Learning	62
Summary	64

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, & CONCLUSIONS	66
Statement of the Problem	66
Purpose Statement	67
Review of the Methodology	68
Discussion of Research Questions	68
Research Question 1	69
Research Question 2	74
Implications for Practice	76
Recommendations for Future Research	77
Concluding Remarks	77

Appendix A: Interview Protocol	78
Appendix B: Invitation Letter to Potential Participants	79
Appendix C: Consent Form for Participants	80
Appendix D: Debriefing Form for Participants	81
Appendix E: Institutional Review Board Approval	82
REFERENCES	83
VITA	89

LIST OF TABLES

Tables	Page
1. Dataset Totals Summary	41
2. High School Career Interests, ELO Settings, & Current Careers	42

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the final lines of her poem *The Summer Day*, poet Mary Oliver (1990) implores the reader, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” While it is meant to encourage the reader to consider their own life among images of nature, grasshoppers, and grassy fields, it also echoes the timeless query “What do you want to be when you grow up?” This seemingly innocent question might elicit responses such as doctor, teacher, veterinarian, or firefighter. Throughout their lives, young men and women are reminded that every decision, whether academic or extracurricular, will affect their future. Eventually, in high school, the social expectation is for students to have a clear career path after graduation, which may include college or technical training, to lead to future success (Hutchins & Akos, 2013). But despite this fairly common expectation, many students still may not be able to make career choices after graduating from high school. YouScience, a college and career readiness program in the United States, surveyed students who graduated from high school between 2019 and 2022 and found 75% of high school graduates do not feel prepared to make college or career decisions (2022). Add to that Gallup's recent State of the Global Workplace Report which found 77% of the world's employees are not engaged or actively disengaged from their work and 51% are seeking new jobs (2023). The disconnect is a staggering problem between society's expectation to know what one wants to be when they grow up, today's young people who do not feel prepared, and employees who are not engaged in their jobs.

Statement of the Problem

Research suggests the best way to prepare students for future careers is through work based learning and job shadow type experiences (Arnold & Mihut, 2020; Atwell et al., 2022; Biddle & Mette, 2016; Brand, 2009; Callahan, Meehan, Kim, & Westmaas, 2016; Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Conference of State Legislatures, & the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010; Detgen et al., 2021; Field et al., 2010; Heyward, 2020; Hooley, Marriott, & Sampson, 2011; Hutchins & Akos, 2013; Jobs for the Future, 2022; Krumboltz, 1979; Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976; Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020; Mette, Biddle, & Fairman, 2016; Pathways to Prosperity Network, 2014; Princiotta & Fortune, 2009; Saenz, Johnson, & Pines, 2021; Solberg et al., 2022; Symonds, 2012; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011; Warren et al., 2017). In a recent national effort to help students feel more prepared to answer the “what do you want to be?” question, many states have started implementing specific career readiness standards and programs (Pathways to Prosperity Network, 2014). In the past twenty years, the federal government has passed the 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act, the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and the 2018 Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, also known as Perkins V, which reauthorized the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (Ohio State University Center for Sex Equity, 1996; Perkins Collaborative Resource Network, n.d.). While each state has approached these policies and used the funding in a variety of ways, the state of Maine has taken their commitment to creating career ready high school graduates to a different level.

In 2019, the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) released a strategic economic plan known as *Maine's 10 Year Economic*

Development Strategy 2020-2029: A Focus on Talent and Innovation. This plan to grow and diversify Maine's economy includes many specific actions, with the first to increase career exploration for all Maine's students through age appropriate workforce skill development. The plan calls for 100% of Maine students to participate in a six month paid internship at some point between junior year in high school and one year after graduation (Maine DECD, 2019). In 2020, the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) released Life and Career Ready standards, an update of the 2007 Career and Education Development standards, to reflect the progression from career awareness of younger students to exploration and planning in high school (MDOE, 2023). Schools are given a lot of freedom and creativity in how they implement the standards, but it does encourage close collaboration with community partners and mentors (Mette, Biddle, & Fairman, 2016; Saenz, Johnson, & Pines, 2021). The six Life and Career Ready standards include self-knowledge and life skills, future aspirations, and creating pathways for the future (Maine Department of Education, n.d.). However, this does present a challenge in that Maine, like the rest of the country, does not use any sort of standardized method of assessing students' life and career readiness (Heyward, 2020).

In early 2021, the Maine legislature earmarked \$25 million of American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds for the Maine Career Exploration Program as mentioned in the ten year economic plan, to be managed by the DECD (State of Maine Office of Governor Janet T. Mills, 2022). Both the MDOE and Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG), a statewide workforce readiness non-profit with programs in over 140 high schools, are sub-awardees of DECD's monies. Once the money was earmarked by the legislature, MDOE, JMG, DECD, Department of Labor (DOL), and Governor's Office of Policy and Innovation for the Future (GOPIF) worked together to define goals of the program and the specific

allocation of programmatic responsibilities and funds. In June 2021, Maine governor Janet Mills signed Public Law, Chapter 190, An Act To Support Life and Career Readiness Education in Maine. This law was designed to ensure all students in Maine are able to make knowledgeable career choices and enter the workforce in a multitude of ways, by giving local control to schools and supporting work based learning experiences. Together, MDOE & JMG decided MDOE would award grants directly to schools and JMG would build the infrastructure to support statewide ELO expansion in the long term.

In early 2022, MDOE solicited applications for a two year grant designed to expand Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) programs throughout public high schools (Maine Department of Education, 2022). The grant was funded through \$5.6 million of ARP monies as part of Governor Mills' Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan. Twenty six Maine high schools were awarded grants to create or expand an ELO program, joining approximately twenty already established programs. An ELO is a hands-on, credit-bearing experience outside of the classroom with an emphasis on community-based career exploration. An ELO might be an internship, mentorship, job shadow, apprenticeship, digital learning, community service, or an independent study; also, it could be a combination of those activities. Each ELO is personalized to the student, with a unique mix of academic assignments and experiential learning. Not only is this program designed to give students opportunities they may otherwise not have, but also to help retain young people in the state and to meet the updated Life and Career Ready Standards through the MDOE.

While career exploration programs are not new to Maine, the cohesive design and implementation of ELOs through the MDOE and JMG has allowed unprecedented growth (Jobs for Maine's Graduates, 2022). Therefore the goal of this research is to examine

the effectiveness of such ELO programming to determine whether or not it was beneficial to high school alumni and to examine how it has affected their future career decisions and outcomes. More research is needed to show how such programming affects students later in life, which in this case is five to ten years after their experience (Bell & O'Reilly, 2008; Brand, 2009; Hooley, Marriott, & Sampson, 2011).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the efficacy of ELO programs in three public high schools in southern Maine. The long term sustainment of such has not been widely investigated. This research focused on public high school graduates who earned credit through an ELO class or experience to determine the impact of the ELO program on their career choices five to ten years after graduation.

On average, a person spends 100,000 hours of their life working (Worline & Dutton, 2017). The quality of one's work experiences is related to one's quality of work life (Kermansaravi et al., 2014) and finding the right workplace to fit one's learning style and personality is crucial for job satisfaction (Warren et al., 2017). Without giving high school students the chance to explore and experience various careers to expand their aspirations, it is highly likely they will experience career dissatisfaction (Symonds, 2012). ELO programs build career readiness, which is a process that informs about career opportunities, helps identify one's talents, raises awareness of how talent transfers into a wide range of occupational opportunities, and enables effective decisions to help pursue career and life goals (Solberg et al., 2022).

Description of the Study

This study's design is phenomenological qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015), by examining public high school graduates who experienced an ELO to determine the impact of the program on their career choices five to ten years after graduation. A phenomenological qualitative study is most appropriate to study the essence and structure of a shared experience (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Collecting qualitative data through structured personal interviews provided answers to the research questions about which components of the ELO program were most beneficial to alumni and how the ELO experience influenced career decisions and outcomes. Using phenomenology to learn about unique individual ELO experiences helped identify the efficacy of such programming through identifying clusters and themes which arise (Bevan, 2014). Phenomenological studies make the assumption there is an essence, or basic structure, to a shared experience, such as an ELO. The techniques of bracketing and phenomenological reduction were utilized to help the researcher isolate biases and reflect on the participants' lived experiences (Bevan, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the researcher emailed approximately twenty alumni to invite them to participate in the study. Eleven agreed to participate and signed an informed consent form. The study participants all graduated from high school five to ten years ago, between the years of 2013-2018 and represent different genders and diverse outcomes. Interviews were conducted and recorded via Google Meet and subsequently transcribed. Participants were informed their participation was voluntary and they could opt out at any time. Each interview lasted approximately twenty three to fifty six minutes. The interview protocol is located in Appendix A. After

the interview, each participant was given the chance to read the transcript and results of the data analysis for verification and triangulation. All data is saved in the researcher's password protected laptop, and after three years all data will be deleted and destroyed. Risks to the participants are minimal and privacy and confidentiality is maintained through use of codes and pseudonyms. If there are any issues, the IRB will be contacted within 48 hours for adverse effects and within ten calendar days for all others. The responses of each participant were analyzed, coded, and tabulated in order to identify themes, categories, patterns, and answers to the research questions (Bevan, 2014).

This research study was conducted ethically, by protecting the privacy of the human participants and allowing them to participate voluntarily. Identities have not been revealed and all data will remain confidential. Further, the researcher established credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria for trustworthiness.

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks were used in this study. The first is Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making (SLTCD) by John Krumboltz (Krumboltz, 1979; Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976). The second theoretical framework is Learning Theory of Career Counseling (Krumboltz, 1996).

Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making

The overall model of the SLTCD is designed to explain an individual's career choices based on both internal and external influences. Krumboltz identified four factors that influence a person's career decisions: genetic endowment and special abilities, environmental conditions and events, task approach skills, and learning experience

(Krumboltz, 1979; Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976). The first influence, genetic endowment and special abilities are the qualities a person is born with, such as race, sex, and physical characteristics as well as any strengths like high intelligence, musical or artistic ability, or athleticism. Environmental conditions are factors out of one's control, which includes social, cultural, economic, political, and natural/weather events.

Krumboltz (1979) defines task approach skills as personal values, work ethic, and emotional responses. The final factor is learning experience, which is broken down into instrumental learning experiences (ILE), where a person responds to the environment in order to create certain consequences, and associative learning experiences, when a person recognizes connections between a previous stimuli and a positive or negative feeling (Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976; Krumboltz, 1979). Further, past learning experiences affect future career behavior due to a person's self-efficacy beliefs and positive outcome expectations (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994).

The complex combination of these four factors creates numerous interactions which positively or negatively affect the individual. The various learning experiences and environmental circumstances, combined with a person's personality, all play a part. As such, these factors are what causes the individual to decide how to respond and make appropriate decisions (Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976; Krumboltz, 1979). This is based on established preferences and causes a person to choose certain occupations, such as applying for a specific job or educational/training program (Krumboltz, 1979).

However, the SLTCD is a lifelong process of unique experiences and not based on a one time choice. ELO programming or any other type of career counseling should be designed to create new and recurring learning experiences (Krumboltz, Mitchell, &

Jones, 1976). Further, Krumboltz (1979) postulated that any career indecision is due to the result of not yet having certain career related learning experiences. This expanded into the idea that a person's career path cannot be predicted ahead of time due to planned and unplanned learning experiences throughout life, which Krumboltz called the Happenstance Learning Theory (Krumboltz, 2009b). This additional revision of the SLTCD gives a person permission to change their mind later about the desirability of specific careers and emphasizes the importance of flexibility (Krumboltz, 2009a).

Learning Theory of Career Counseling

Krumboltz (1996) learning theory of career counseling grew out of Frank Parsons' 1909 trait-and-factor theory, which matches workers to specific occupations. In order to meet the demand for skilled workers in the industrial labor force at the turn of the 19th century, individuals were matched to jobs based on their characteristics (Krumboltz, 1996). This led to the rise of various psychometric tests and interest inventories, which are often still in use today. However, Krumboltz felt the trait-and-factor theory was much too limiting when considering career selection as individuals need to expand their opportunities rather than only stay within their current interests. A person's interests continually evolve and may be limited by little to no opportunities for new experiences. Building on the SLTCD, career counselors must help individuals learn new skills, interests, beliefs, values, and work habits to define their own life satisfaction, which in turn helps lead to an appropriate career choice. Specific learning experiences may include career education, work based learning, internships, apprenticeships, and job shadows.

Research Questions

The overall goal of this research study was to examine how participation in an ELO program during high school affects an individual's future career plans. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, the study asked two overarching research questions:

RQ1: What components of the ELO program were most beneficial to alumni and why?

RQ2: In what ways has an ELO experience influenced alumni career decisions and outcomes?

Definitions of Key Terms

Apprenticeship: Registered Apprenticeship is an industry-driven, high-quality career pathway where employers can develop and prepare their future workforce, and individuals can obtain paid work experience, classroom instruction, mentorship, and a portable credential. Registered Apprentices must be at least 16 years of age (except when a higher minimum age standard of 18 years is otherwise fixed by law or sponsor) and employed to learn in an occupation approved by the Maine Department of Labor's Registered Apprenticeship Program.

Career alignment: When one's educational and training plans for the future align with one's career ambition (Covacevich et al., 2021).

Career ambition: An interest in seeking higher education and/or training for one's occupation (Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020).

Career aspiration: The act of having occupational ideas and thoughts which do not require any specific commitment or intentions and often do not factor in immediate reality (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994).

Career awareness: The act of understanding the benefits of a productive career and how it contributes to one's life success, setting specific and achievable career goals, learning about opportunities and variations in job opportunities (Warren et al., 2017).

Career exploration: The process of learning about careers through research, informational interviews, interest inventories/surveys, career fairs, career mapping, guest speakers, tours, job shadowing (Warren et al., 2017).

Career planning: The act of making specific education and career plans (Warren et al., 2017).

Career readiness: This includes both the developmental readiness level as well as the academic, technical, social, and emotional skills of a person to find, acquire, and keep an appropriate job, and manage transitions to new jobs (Solberg et al., 2022). Career readiness is not just about getting into a college and/or finding a job (Warren et al., 2017).

Career uncertainty: The act of a young person being unable to articulate a career expectation or choice for adult life (Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020). Also known as **career indecision** (Krumboltz, 1979).

Internship: A work based learning opportunity that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development directly related to the career field. Internships give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths. Internships are offered by an organization for a determined period-of-time. Internships may be paid or unpaid.

Job shadow: A work based learning opportunity to observe an employee performing their daily work routine in their work environment. It allows a student to explore specific

careers and to see a realistic picture of the tasks performed for that job. This experience is observational only (no work tasks are performed), is time limited (often a one-time experience), and has no expectation of pay.

Mentorship: A formal relationship with professional expectations where an experienced person provides a younger or less experienced person help and advice over a determined span of time, especially at work or school. Often, there is a guidance expectation, mentor to mentee, for a predetermined length of time.

Work based learning: A type of experiential experience where students learn technical, academic, and employability skills by working in a real work environment such as in an internship or apprenticeship (Alfeld et al., 2013).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it adds to the current knowledge gap of the efficacy of ELO programs for future career decisions and outcomes. Researchers have examined ELO programming to determine what makes a high quality program and how it affects academic behaviors such as college acceptance and SAT scores; however, there is insufficient research regarding the effectiveness and benefit to alumni and the ways in which ELOs impact future career choices (Burkey, 2019; Gibney & Rauner, 2021; Hooley, Marriott, & Sampson, 2011). Given the current effort and investment of developing and implementing ELO programs in Maine, such effects should be studied and understood how initial investment into such programs helps benefit students. Knowing the benefits can help districts make hiring and budgeting decisions, especially once the Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan two year grant expires in July 2024.

Assumptions

Assumptions of the study are:

1. The participants will respond to the best of their ability based on their recollections of the ELO experience.
2. The participants will remember their perceptions of the ELO program they participated in five to ten years ago.

Delimitations

Delimitations of the study are:

1. Only three ELO programs will be studied, based at three different public high schools in southern Maine.
2. The three ELO programs studied existed before the two year grant through the MDOE.
3. Only the point of view of the ELO alumni will be examined.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Over the last several decades in the United States, there have been reform attempts to integrate more career and work based learning into education (Alfeld et al., 2013). Much of the national focus on career readiness is from three major attributing factors: advancing technology displacing many from their jobs, “the great resignation” due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, and an overall aging workforce (Solberg, et al., 2022). Public high schools around the country have begun to implement career readiness state standards and programs. Such programs often include apprenticeships, job shadows, and career counseling, which can successfully transform how our schools function and provide for all students. Recently, there has been a national shift to calling such activities Extended Learning Opportunities or ELOs. For many researchers, the current growth of career readiness and training is a good sign to solving challenges faced by both students and employers (Jobs for the Future, 2022).

It is no secret the traditional model of classroom learning does not work for everyone (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). For decades, students have struggled with the transition from school to work (Covacevich et al., 2021). Therefore, combining real-world experiences outside of the classroom with traditional methods of academic documentation can help engage students in their academics, communities, and future careers, as well as teach technical and employable skills. Such a concept has existed for centuries and many industrialized countries other than the United States have more

sophisticated programs in place (Alfeld et al., 2013; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Awarding transcript credit for such experiences, rather than merely calling it enrichment or extracurricular, is important to increase equity in schools and foster lifelong learner mentalities in all students. It is not enough for young people to simply develop ambitions for the future, but they must also understand how to make their career goals happen and be given appropriate support to do so (Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020).

By definition, an ELO is a hands-on, credit-bearing experience outside of the classroom with an emphasis on community-based career exploration (Maine Department of Education, n.d.). Students can earn elective or core credit, depending on how the ELO is designed with help from the ELO coordinator and teacher. Each ELO is personalized to the student, with a unique mix of academic assignments and experiential learning. Not only is such a program designed to give students opportunities they may otherwise not have, but also to help raise career aspirations (Covacevich, Mann, Santos, & Champaud, 2021). An ELO can include a multitude of experiences including job shadows, internships, paid work experiences, and work skills development. In Maine, other benefits are to retain young people in the state by making meaningful connections with employers and to meet the updated Life and Career Ready Standards through the MDOE (Maine Department of Education, n.d.).

Purpose

The purpose of this literature review is to review existing research and knowledge, including gaps, on career development through ELO programming. Such existing knowledge includes career readiness experiences in the United States, what a high quality ELO looks like, and the benefits of ELO programming for high school students.

Literature Review

Career Development & Readiness

Analysis of national longitudinal data indicates that actively thinking about and exploring future career opportunities increases young adults' career readiness (Covacevich, Mann, Santos, & Champaud, 2021; Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020). As far back as 1909, American professor and social reformer Frank Parsons outlined in his book, *Choosing a Vocation*, a thorough plan to help young men and women choose a career. This landmark book is full of advice which still rings true over 100 years later. Parsons (1909) begins by examining the common and unfortunate experience of recent high school graduates aimlessly falling into employment which may or may not work out for them. This is not unlike the research and data we see in today's world, with 75% of high school graduates feeling uncertain and unprepared to make career decisions, yet 62% felt high school should prepare them for future careers (YouScience, 2022). It is no surprise to then learn more than three quarters of employees all over the world are not engaged or actively disengaged from their work and are seeking new jobs (Gallup, Inc., 2023). Parson's (1909) book asserts that instead of entering a career by chance or proximity, students need guidance in the selection and preparation for a suitable career, as well as the transition from school to work. His ideas even back then were that students should begin by developing an understanding of their interests, abilities, and ambitions and how they relate to various careers and industries. Students should research careers and participate in job shadows because any uncertainty is simply a lack of knowledge that can be remedied through observation and conversation. Parsons indicated career preparation was lacking in the United States at the turn of the 1900s and this sentiment is

still true today. He bemoaned the fact that our society does not do all it can to help young people flourish into careers through a solid school-to-work plan. He illustrated society's neglectfulness by claiming, "It trains its horses, as a rule, better than its men" (p. 160). Overall, Parsons developed a foundational theory of career counseling based on his ideas that humans work best in a job that is suited to their talents, skills, and personality.

Career development is about creating a work identity, which in America often becomes one's personal identity. This is a significant aspect of human development and socialization to be taken seriously, which led John Krumboltz to further expand Parsons' ideas with his own theories on the way career outcomes result from planned and unplanned events of which an individual is continuously learning and reflecting (1976). The four crucial factors which influence an individual's career decisions include genetic endowment and special abilities, environmental conditions and events, task approach skills, and learning experiences (Krumboltz, 1979; Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976). All play a part in affecting one's career aspirations and ambitions, both positively and negatively, as the feedback from each affects a person's decisions in the moment as well as throughout their life. Career guidance through ELO experiences and an ELO coordinator allows students to learn and reflect, with the idea that any career uncertainty indicates further career related learning experiences are necessary. What can often occur is a student will revise and hone their career awareness and planning the more planned and unplanned experiences they have (Krumboltz, 2009b). This is even more important as no longer are students preparing for one career for their entire working life as may have been the expectation in the past, but now they must be prepared for the complex changes and evolution of their vocational journey (Field et al., 2010; Warren et al., 2017).

Looking at national longitudinal data from The National Center for Education Statistics and Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, career uncertainty in young adults has increased 81% since 2000 (Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020). This statistic is surprising, given the number of federal educational reform efforts beginning with the 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act that purportedly aimed at increasing career readiness (Brand, 2009). Students who struggle with career uncertainty experience worse long term career outcomes regardless of social and academic backgrounds (Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020). Data from the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) analyzed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) linked career uncertainty with lower wages in the United States and overall challenging transitions into the workforce (Covacevich et al., 2021). The OECD is a collaboration of 38 market-based democratic countries which work to develop policy standards focused on economic growth. Every three years, the OECD administers the PISA to 15-year-olds to measure their ability to use reading, math, and science skills in solving authentic real world problems. Using ELOs for career development and readiness does not just give students the ability to choose future careers. It also pushes students to think critically about the job market and how they view themselves as future employees which decreases career uncertainty (Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020). Further, students learn valuable knowledge and skills of the workplace, as well as gain important social capital (Covacevich et al., 2021). Work based learning such as job shadows and internships shows students how classroom learning can be applied in the world, through authentic experiences (Alfeld et al., 2013).

Because ELO experiences are a driving force to creating career ready young people, it is clear why the Maine DECD chose career exploration and workforce skill development as the number one action item in the state's ten year strategic economic plan. Maine has one of the oldest populations in the nation, and as of 2019 it was estimated 65,000 workers would retire by 2029 (Maine DECD, 2019). Of course, this was sped up by the COVID-19 pandemic and which led to many older employees retiring earlier than expected. There are simply not enough workers in the state, which makes it even more imperative to connect young people with the state's economy and raise the talent of the upcoming workforce. By 2025, researchers predict Maine's workforce needs up to 65% of its workers to have credentials beyond a high school diploma (Maine DECD, 2019). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Economic Forum estimated over 50% of workers would need to learn additional skills for their current job or an entirely new set of skills for new jobs (Atwell et al., 2022).

This does not automatically mean a college degree is required, but rather some type of training and education beyond high school. A high school diploma alone is no longer sufficient preparation but a college degree is not mandatory either (Jobs for the Future, 2022; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011; Warren et al., 2017). Maine, and the United States as a whole, has been too focused on the idea of college for all, rather than the broader idea of the importance of training and education needed for success in a career (Hoffman, 2011). At some point, employers begin to view a college degree as supreme evidence of career readiness, despite the fact that many of the soft skills desperately needed in today's workforce are not learned through a college degree alone (Jobs for the Future, 2022). This led to degree inflation, where employers suddenly

required a college degree even for jobs that can be performed reasonably well without one (Jobs for the Future, 2022). Employers and educators alike must embrace the fact there are multiple pathways other than college and provide information on all options to students (ECMC Group, 2022; Jobs for the Future, 2022). Simply focusing on academic preparation for college does not prepare students for life and careers in the transition to adulthood (Hooley, Marriott, & Sampson, 2011), especially with only 30% of students successfully graduating from a four year college (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Plus, after spending four years in college waiting to find out what a career is really like outside the lecture halls and labs, young people often feel committed to staying with a career they may not end up liking simply because they spent a lot of time and money to earn a degree in that field (Hutchins & Akos, 2013; Jobs for the Future, 2022). Such failures above are due to the narrow focus on only one pathway to success.

This becomes clear in a recent report which interviewed over 5000 Generation Z high school students ranging in ages 14-18 in the United States and showed 63% are open to training other than college and wish their high school advertised multiple pathways (ECMC Group, 2022). Sadly, 85% of the students feel intense societal pressure to attend a four year college, with 40% choosing *not feeling prepared for the workforce* as one of their top three concerns. With 51% claiming to think about their career path on a daily basis, only 39% have taken a class or program specifically for career exploration.

Types of ELO Programs

With the increasingly diverse needs of young adults, schools must begin to explore the use of multiple pathways for student success (Brand, 2009; ECMC Group, 2022; Heyward, 2020; Jobs for the Future, 2022). School curricula and courses should be

aligned with employers' priorities and needs to not only help in career development and planning, but to also strengthen the country's workforce (Detgen et al., 2021). There are a multitude of ways ELOs exist throughout the country, despite being labeled with different terminology.

Brand (2009) examined "career academy" career readiness and exploration programming as similar to ELOs. These small learning communities within high schools were originally funded through the United States Department of Education between 2000 and 2007 and were first developed to keep students out of gangs; they can be considered a forerunner to the present ELOs (Brand, 2009). There are currently approximately 7000 career academies according to the National Career Academy Coalition, and they are focused on a mix of academic and career readiness curriculum. Much like ELOs, career academies work closely with community partners and provide opportunities for students to learn both life and career specific skills to prepare them for college and the workforce (Brand, 2009).

Another career readiness program is Bridge to Employment (BTE), which is a global initiative run and funded by Johnson & Johnson since 1992 (Detgen et al., 2021). There are usually 16-24 BTE sites in existence at any given time. Unlike an ELO, this is an industry driven grant program that works in partnership with high schools, however the basic model is identical to an ELO (Bridge to Employment. (n.d.). BTE programs offer high school students academic learning with real-world application, work-based learning activities with community mentors, and a solid connection between academics and career readiness (Detgen et al., 2021). Students are exposed to a multitude of careers

to ensure they are able to make informed decisions about their future pathway, as well as teach soft skills and provide connections with career professionals.

In New Hampshire, ELOs have been around since 2005 due to a change in state mandate for student achievement to be measured by performance and not simply seat time (Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Conference of State Legislatures, & the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). By allowing NH students multiple pathways for high school completion, struggling students were able to show what they know and earn credit through ELOs. By 2008, ELOs became a requirement to aid competency-based standards and assessments. New Hampshire has shown great success in implementing high quality ELOs and plentiful positive outcomes for all students in academic commitment, achievement, aspirations, and readiness (Callahan, Meehan, Kim, & Westmaas, 2016).

Many businesses are now getting on board with apprenticeship programs instead of requiring a college degree (Jobs for the Future, 2022). Companies such as Microsoft and IBM provide technology and industry specific training for new hires as a part of their onboarding process and are finding they are better able to create a workforce with the right skills for their company. Another similar program is a learn and earn situation for students to get on the job training while earning a wage, and the company gets to train their employees how they want to (Jobs for the Future, 2022).

In European nations such as Switzerland, Norway, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Finland, and Germany, high schools incorporate workplace learning and career exploration often after ninth grade. Students then graduate with marketable qualifications and credentials, giving them a jump start into the workforce (Symonds, Schwartz, &

Ferguson, 2011). The United States education system would benefit from adopting similar workplace learning programs as already in place in Europe.

In a perfect world, it would be expected and routine for ELOs and ELO type programming to be readily available to all to give students multiple pathways to enter the workforce, with customized learning and training opportunities. Career ambition and awareness would be viewed as lifelong processes, the economic gap could begin to dissipate, and massive college debt would be unheard of.

High Quality ELO Experiences

An important aspect of ELOs is the quality of the experiences offered to students. They must be of high quality to benefit students, including clear programming mission and objectives, qualified staff, and sufficient resources (Biddle & Mette, 2016; Mette, Biddle, & Fairman, 2016; Princiotta & Fortune, 2009). While each ELO is unique and tailored to the student, there are overarching components any good program should include. In Maine, ELO coordinators aim to establish six “pillars of quality”, which help ensure a program is of high quality (Jobs for Maine Graduates, n.d.). The first pillar is to create clear guidelines. From the expectations set at the initial meeting all the way through the finalization of credit, the ELO requirements should be consistent and clear. Every student, teacher, administrator, and parent should know exactly what the expectations are for them, and they should be consistent across the program. Secondly, students should be awarded credit for the hard work they put into their ELO. All ELOs should be designed to align with state standards and contain a level of rigor that meets all the requirements to give students the credit they have rightfully earned. It is also important to have district support. A sustainable program cannot be carried on the

shoulders of one individual, often the coordinator; the entire district needs to support the growth of the program. The development of district-wide policies and a program advisory committee are essential to any high-quality and sustainable program. The next pillar is providing equitable access to ELO programming. ELOs are not only for students who need credit recovery, the high achievers in the school, or the students who plan to go right into the workforce. ELOs are designed to be valuable and available to all students (Saenz, Johnson, & Pines, 2021). Quality programs ensure every student feels they have the opportunity to participate. Further, there must be strong community connections, as a quality program relies on the expertise and energy of local individuals. ELO programs must make use of local community partners in ways that encourage long-term relationships, sustainable growth, and quality experiences for both students and community partners (Mette, Biddle, & Fairman, 2016; Princiotta & Fortune, 2009). Lastly, a sufficient budget is imperative, though every district will have different resources available for ELO development and supervision. However, districts need to be careful that the budget matches the expectations. An ELO budget should also consider the financial constraints of the participants (especially related to transportation and time) to ensure equity.

Beyond the six pillars, a high quality ELO must also have several common tenets (Jobs for Maine Graduates, n.d.). Each student should create a learning plan known as a syllabus, complete with goals and essential questions, at the beginning of the ELO. Giving an opportunity to earn graduation credit, whether that is elective or core content credit depends on the ELO. However, awarding credit shows the student's ELO work is valued. Care should be taken to recruit and maintain a strong base of community partners

and mentors, as experiential learning is the basis for an ELO. Appropriate academic rigor is necessary for every ELO and each should be tied into state standards. Throughout the ELO experience, students should reflect on their learning to help them make changes or seek deeper understanding of careers. At the final project presentation, students must reflect on their ELO, to show what they learned and whether or not they met their goals from the beginning.

The research echoes what Maine has established as pillars of quality. Determining whether or not an ELO is effective can be examined by the length and frequency of student participation and the quality of the programming (Biddle & Mette, 2016). Ultimately, there needs to be a specific school employee who is in charge of the ELO (Alfeld et al., 2013; Arnold & Mihut, 2020). An ELO is an intentional learning experience to build connections between school and work, which requires ongoing reflection and a culminating demonstration of learning, as well as time during school for internships and reliable transportation so all can participate. Therefore, when an ELO program is run by a dedicated coordinator it is bound to be of higher quality (Covacevich et al., 2021; Covacevich, Mann, Santos, & Champaud, 2021; Saenz, Johnson, & Pines, 2021). This is because there is a specific person in charge of developing relationships with employers, matching students with employers, preparing students for the experiences, helping students develop a plan with measurable outcomes, and conducting site visits and check-ins (Alfeld et al., 2013). A survey by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation found that 44% of New Hampshire schools stated the absence of an ELO coordinator was a barrier to high quality ELO programming (Callahan, Meehan, Kim, & Westmaas, 2016). A coordinator helps students to develop their goals, essential questions,

site plan, and provides assessment at the end of the ELO. It takes time to promote, recruit, and assist community and business partners in providing ELOs to students through numerous emails, phone calls, and site visits. School to work connections do not happen automatically and there needs to be thoughtful planning and pedagogy in order to make such connections for students (Alfeld et al., 2013). Teachers who are already responsible for teaching numerous content other than career exploration cannot also adequately provide the type of support and effort an ELO coordinator is able to give (Field et al., 2010). However, effective career guidance from a coordinator is about more than simply providing students with information but about engaging students in thoughtful and informed reflection (Covacevich, Mann, Santos, & Champaud, 2021).

Beyond the details of running an ELO program, coordinators have the time to engage in career conversations with students that a school guidance counselor may not have (Field et al., 2010). This is especially true when the average ratio of high school students to guidance counselors in the United States is a staggering 500:1 (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). While parents are often the first adults to have such discussions, they are limited by their own experiences and networks (Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020). They may also unintentionally reinforce social disadvantages, which can hinder a student's career aspirations (Field et al., 2010). Instead, having career conversations with ELO coordinators and professionals in certain fields of interest lowers career uncertainty and raises career ambition. Sadly, in one study over a third of students report never having a conversation with anyone in their high school about their future vocational plans (YouScience, 2022) and in another study 56% reported having no support from an adult for career planning (Gibney & Rauner, 2021). Having such career

conversations, both formally as a part of a class discussion and informally in less structured environments, are shown to be fundamentally important for young people (Covacevich, Mann, Santos, & Champaud, 2021).

Coordinators also must navigate the typical challenges of ELOs, which can include the recruitment and maintenance of employer relationships, lack of student maturity, state labor laws, lack of parent and community support, and bad economy (Alfeld et al., 2013). In Maine, this can also include transportation difficulties, lack of staffing, and few local industries (Saenz, Johnson, & Pines, 2021). Most of rural Maine does not have public transit systems and obtaining a license and a reliable vehicle is linked with socioeconomic status. Second to staffing costs, ELO transportation can often be the largest expense to a school district (Mette, Biddle, & Fairman, 2016). Many schools do not have a specific ELO coordinator, though that has changed since the ELO grant; now the test will be if the twenty six districts awarded grants will choose to fund the ELO coordinator and program once the grant ends. Diversity of local industries in Maine varies widely due to the geographical location, which can severely limit in-person ELOs opportunities. While researchers often do not find any negative outcomes for students who participate in an ELO, it is clear that the positive effects are only as good as the programming quality and challenges must be dealt with head on (Biddle & Mette, 2016).

Benefits for Students

Much research supports the idea that secondary students who explore, experience, and think about their work futures often encounter many positives, such as lower levels of unemployment, higher wages, and happiness in their careers as adults (Covacevich et

al., 2021; Heyward, 2020; Hooley, Marriott, & Sampson, 2011; Hutchins & Akos, 2013). ELOs provide equity and opportunity to all students to engage in career exploration and not just those who have a supportive and encouraging home environment situation. For economically disadvantaged students, an ELO experience was significantly related to being on track to graduate from high school and an increased likelihood of taking the SAT exam (Callahan, Meehan, Kim, & Westmaas, 2016). ELOs give students a diversity of experiences for deeper learning, and most importantly, it addresses the shift in possibilities for post-graduate life (Saenz, Johnson, & Pines, 2021). No longer is college the only option for success in life and an ELO experience helps to illustrate just that. It can also help students understand the difference between a job and a career. A job is an activity that allows a person to make money while a career is a series of occupations with responsibilities and remuneration that increases over the years (Warren et al., 2017). A career requires training, experience, and education (that is not just college) but also provides more financial benefits, opportunities for advancement, job security, and higher satisfaction than a job (Warren et al., 2017).

ELOs boost student academic performance, increase engagement, and provide rich connections to the community (Princiotta, & Fortune, 2009). The research shows that students learn how to work in a professional environment with adults and how to be independent and responsible. Students also often discover their interests and start building a network of mentors (Arnold & Mihut, 2020). Positive mentor relationships are shown to be linked to higher career ambitions and better than expected outcomes as adults, including higher wages, less unemployment, and strong career satisfaction (Covacevich et al., 2021). ELO experiences also help to increase career alignment, which

is important when PISA 2018 data shows one in five 15 year old students is misaligned (Covacevich et al., 2021). Apprenticeships and internships help meet the developmental needs of high school students, especially as each are structured ways to transition to adulthood (Detgen et al, 2021; Hoffman, 2011; Hutchins & Akos, 2013; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Such skills include greater responsibilities, challenges, and life skill practice as well as adult mentoring and supervision. Internships and job shadows can also give students exposure to equipment, tools, facilities, and greater expertise than they could not receive in a school setting (Alfeld et al., 2013). Participating in an ELO and reflecting upon the experience develops a student's personal skills, such as public speaking, communication, interpersonal relationships (Arnold & Mihut, 2020; Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Conference of State Legislatures, & the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). There is also a connection to socioemotional learning, through working as a team and developing self-determination and self efficacy (Atwell, et al., 2022). ELO participation shows links to higher school attendance, retention, and course passing rates, along with a greater sense of belonging and purpose at school (Detgen et al, 2021; Hooley, Marriott, & Sampson, 2011).

ELO experiences can also help create career aspirations in high school students, by giving them the sense they can control their future by setting goals. Often, students are limited in their aspirations for the future due to their social background, which can include automatically expecting to not attend college when they are qualified or being forced into a family expectation to attend college or enter a certain career, to anything in between (Covacevich et al., 2021). Arjun Appadurai, an Indian sociologist, developed the

idea of the capacity to aspire, which relates to the way in which students are able to make informed decisions based on the amount of career readiness support and information they receive before they graduate (Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020). Giving all students access to high quality ELO experiences helps to boost their capacity to aspire, through social interactions focused on career conversations (Appadurai, 2004). Appadurai (2004) further asserted that for students to be able to set goals and possess career ambition, they must have aspirations to reach for, even if they seem too far-fetched. Overall, high school students with strong career awareness and readiness through participation in career exploration programs, become much more self-aware and are an asset to any workplace (Pathways to Prosperity Network, 2014). The experiences offered through ELOs of career conversations, engaging with adults in the workforce as mentors, and job shadowing/internships are confirmed indicators of career readiness (Covacevich, Mann, Santos, & Champaud, 2021).

Summary

In conclusion, ELO programming is necessary for students to learn about the world of work, gain maturity and soft skills, make informed career decisions, and ultimately succeed in life (Alfeld et al., 2013). No longer can America simply rely on traditional academic pedagogy and curricula, with millions of young adults in their twenties without a college degree or a viable job (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Furthermore, students simply will not be adequately prepared for the future by sitting in a classroom all day. Interestingly enough, according to Dell Technologies and the Institute for the Future, 85% of jobs in 2030 have not even been invented yet (2018).

In a recent report from the Coalition for Career Development Center in conjunction with Boston University, the authors insisted the United States become a “Career Ready Nation” (Solberg et al., 2022, p. 7). The idea is to create a country full of young people who are ready and able to contribute to the national economy through careers aligned with their skills and interests. The report highlights several next steps for the country, which starts with prioritizing career planning through use of Personalized Career and Academic Plans (PCAPs) (Solberg et al., 2022). Secondly, there must be expanding access to career advising through programs such as ELOs as well as more work-based learning opportunities including job shadows, internships, and apprenticeships (Solberg et al., 2022). Finally, there must be improved accountability systems.

Researchers urge the United States to focus less on preparing students for college and more on helping them find their vocation (ECMC Group, 2022; Hoffman, 2011; Symonds, 2012). In most other OECD countries, college is reserved for specific careers such as law and health care. It can be argued the reason the United States lags behind in high school and college completion rates compared to other industrialized countries is due to the lack of multiple pathways into careers (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). For example, adults who successfully completed a registered apprenticeship tend to have greater lifetime earnings as compared to those who only attended college (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Further, statistics show over 80% of German graduates secure a job within six months of graduation whereas only 48% of American students are able to do so (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Hoffman (2011) calls for an overall work-based learning program in the United States, much like European

countries already have in place. It is time to erase the demeaning American attitudes towards career preparation and work based learning as lesser than and instead embrace it as the imperative and necessary change in the country's education system (Symonds, 2012). Greater investment from local, state, and federal entities is needed to build and sustain high quality ELO programming (Alfeld et al., 2013; Covacevich, Mann, Santos, & Champaud, 2021; Princiotta & Fortune, 2009). Further, stronger buy-in and support is needed from employers to build a highly skilled workforce (Pathways to Prosperity Network, 2014; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011).

There are few studies which assess the long term impact of career exploration in high school (Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020; Saenz, Johnson, & Pines, 2021). Those studies that do exist only focus on wages (Kemple & Willner, 2008), employment rates, and college enrollment (Neumark, 2004) of students who participated in ELO type programming in high school. Other studies examine student academic achievement, advanced course enrollment, graduation rates, and standardized test scores such as the SAT and ACT (Detgen et al., 2021). Therefore, this study of the efficacy and impact of ELO programs in three public high schools in southern Maine is well supported by the literature and worth investigating.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This phenomenological qualitative research study allowed examination of the essence and structure of a shared experience of an ELO and a deeper understanding of public high school graduates who experienced an ELO to determine the impact of the program on their career choices five to ten years after graduation (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The applicability of a qualitative approach and phenomenological theory is discussed in this chapter. The research plan, including methodology, study participants, procedures, analysis method, and ethical concerns are included.

Research Questions

This research study examined how participation in an ELO program during high school affects an individual's future career plans study and asked two overarching research questions:

RQ1: What components of the ELO program were most beneficial to alumni and why?

RQ2: In what ways has an ELO experience influenced alumni career decisions and outcomes?

Methodology Selected

A qualitative approach is appropriate when the research goal is to explain an experience through learning the meaning the participants assign said experience (Creswell, 2013). When an issue or problem needs to be explored through the lived experience of the participants, who can provide a rich and detailed understanding. Allowing alumni to share their own voices and stories best fit the purpose of the study.

Using phenomenological theory is a way to explain the meaning of others' lived experiences and to find what they have in common when experiencing a specific phenomenon. The assumption is there is an essence, or basic structure, to the experience (Creswell, 2013). Collecting data from those who have experienced the same phenomenon shows what and how they experienced it through their personal anecdotes and insights (Patton, 2015). In this case the reflection was not introspective but retrospective, where participants recollected or reflected on an experience they lived through and continue to be affected by afterwards. In this study, using phenomenology to learn about unique ELO experiences identified the essence of a high school student experiencing an ELO and how it impacted the individual in later years.

Study Participants

The sample for this study was drawn from three high schools in a single geographical region of southern Maine, which have all had existing ELO programming for at least ten years. The study's target population were all graduates having earned credit through an ELO class or experience. All study participants were a part of this target population and graduated between five and ten years ago, which included the classes of 2018 through 2013.

Participants were recruited through current and/or past ELO coordinators at the three high schools using the invitation letter in Appendix B. This occurred mainly through phone calls and email, though social media was utilized when the former techniques did not yield results. The researcher expected approximately 10-20 participants would be interviewed, though the final number was ultimately determined by saturation (Creswell, 2013).

Data Procedures & Collection

Once approval was granted through the Institutional Review Board of the University of Louisiana, all possible participants were contacted. A signed informed consent form was required for all participants (Appendix C). Collecting qualitative data through structured, personal, and in-depth interviews provided answers to the research questions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed electronically using Google Meet. Asking open ended questions helped to gather data that provided clear descriptions of the experiences and an understanding of the common experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews followed Bevan's (2014) structure of contextualization, by apprehending and clarifying the phenomenon. It was expected each participant would only be interviewed once in a single session, unless further clarification was needed. Transcripts of the interview were emailed to each participant for review and any necessary edits for clarity and accuracy were made. A debriefing form, located in Appendix D, was also sent to all participants at the conclusion of the study. It included a summary of preliminary findings and themes to ensure they were able to see themselves and their story within the research.

Data Analysis

Once data was collected, the researcher reviewed the interview transcriptions multiple times to highlight any statements of significance and quotes that explain the experience, which is a technique defined as horizontalization by Moustakas (2014). The researcher also added detailed field notes to the transcript of observations and interpretations through multiple viewings of the recorded interviews, using a method called thick description to provide deeper social and cultural context (Lincoln and Guba,

1985). This inductive analysis technique provided elaborate observed detail of the participants' behaviors, affect, emotions, and body language within the context of the interview and beyond the words on the transcript page to explain the participants' views, circumstances, and meanings of the phenomenon; in this case, the shared experience of the ELO. Thick description also provided triangulation and helped to avoid potential researcher bias when analyzing the transcripts, as the added contextual detail ensured analysis was objective and grounded in evidence (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

This was then followed by identifying clusters of meaning into specific themes (Bevan, 2014). Using the statements and themes, the researcher wrote structural and textural descriptions of the experience to discover the essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 2014). However, the researcher was also sure to use the techniques of bracketing and phenomenological reduction to isolate biases and help reflect on the participants' lived experiences (Patton, 2015). Bracketing allowed the researcher to put aside what was already known about the phenomenon of ELO programming, while reduction necessitated putting aside all personal knowledge and experience (Bevan, 2014).

Further, this study used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria for trustworthiness, which includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This combination is important for credibility, which is confidence that the study's findings are truthful; transferability, when the findings are applicable to other contexts; dependability, which is consistent findings which could be repeated if the study were to occur again; and confirmability, which means the findings are neutral and created from the participants' responses and data without any type of researcher bias.

Credibility

In order to establish credibility, the researcher utilized a peer debriefing, or expert review, of the data collection procedures and interview protocol before interviews took place (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Further, the researcher spent an adequate amount of time interviewing and developing rapport with each participant. Known as prolonged engagement, this may mean the researcher may have needed to interview a participant a second time but in this study one interview was sufficient. Credibility was also maintained through allowing the participants to engage in member checking, by reviewing the transcripts of the interview to ensure correct interpretations (Creswell, 2023; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Transferability

To ensure transferability, the researcher used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) technique known as thick description. Such highly descriptive writing added to the raw data about the phenomenon allowed possible transfer of the conclusions to other settings and situations. Because the ELO phenomenon was described in extensive detail, others can draw conclusions about the suitability of the findings in other contexts.

Dependability

To emphasize dependability, the researcher maintained an audit trail including raw data, summaries, field and process notes, and coded transcripts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The entire research process was logical and precisely documented. Use of thick description helped define the research methods utilized so a separate researcher will come to similar findings by looking at the audit trail, as well as if the study was repeated.

Confirmability

To establish confirmability of neutral findings without bias, the researcher ensured triangulation of sources and theories (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Data source triangulation occurred by using three different high schools with their own unique ELO programming as well as multiple alumni from each setting. None of the alumni participants had the same ELO, which gave a broader source of data collection. Care was also taken to look for consistency among the various participants within the same interviewing method as well as use both the theoretical perspectives of Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making (Krumboltz, 1979; Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976) and Learning Theory of Career Counseling (Krumboltz, 1996) to interpret the data.

Ethical Concerns & Risks to Participants

This study was conducted ethically as defined by Patton (2015). Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted before any interviews or data collection began. Each participant signed an informed consent form outlining their participation as voluntary and they may opt out at any time. Risks to the participants such as psychological stress, legal liability, ostracism, and political repercussions were minimal; privacy and confidentiality was maintained through use of codes and pseudonyms. None of the participants' identities were revealed and all data remains confidential. After the interview, each participant was allowed the chance to read the transcript and results of the data analysis for verification and triangulation. All data is kept in the researcher's password protected laptop, and after three years all data will be deleted and destroyed. If there are any issues, the IRB will be contacted within forty-eight hours for adverse effects

and within ten calendar days for all others. Further, the researcher acted with trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the efficacy of ELO programs in three public high schools in southern Maine. The long term sustainment and outcomes of ELO programming in Maine has not been widely investigated. This research focused on the target population of public high school graduates who earned credit through an ELO class or experience to determine the impact of the ELO program on their career choices five to ten years after graduation. The following research questions were used for this study:

RQ1: What components of the ELO program were most beneficial to alumni and why?

RQ2: In what ways has an ELO experience influenced alumni career decisions and outcomes?

Chapter 4 explains how this study was conducted, data analysis procedures, and overall results. The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological design, based on Bevan's (2014) interview structure, Patton's (2015) bracketing and phenomenological reduction techniques, Moustakas' (1994) horizontalization, and Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness.

Preparation of Raw Data for Analysis

This study used a single data source collected through one-on-one interviews, which were structured, personal, and in-depth using the virtual platform Google Meets. The eleven participants were selected from a sample of the target population and signed

an informed consent form before interviews took place. Nine open ended questions helped to gather data to provide a clear description and understanding of the ELO experience. Each participant was interviewed once in a single session, which was both recorded and transcribed through Google Meet. All participants were asked for verbal consent to record and transcribe the interview and all gave permission. The recordings and transcriptions are saved automatically to the researcher's Google Drive, which is password protected.

Descriptive Data

Table 1 illustrates the final dataset summary of 11 participants, with an average of 17 pages of transcription and 37 minutes in length. Participants were interviewed over a six week period between February 18 and April 1, 2024. All participants are alumni who graduated from three high schools in a single geographical region of southern Maine which have all had existing ELO programs for at least 10 years. Study participants all earned credit through an ELO class between five and ten years ago, which includes the classes of 2018 through 2013. This study did not include demographic data beyond seven of the participants identified as female (64%) and four identified as male (36%). All participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Table 1

Dataset Totals Summary

Participant	Setting	Interview	Duration	# Transcript Pages
Thomas	Google Meet call	2/18/24	47 minutes	19
Hazel	Google Meet call	2/20/24	33 minutes	15
Delaney	Google Meet call	2/22/24	36 minutes	14
Josephine	Google Meet call	3/3/24	23 minutes	11

Adam	Google Meet call	3/5/24	48 minutes	24
Timothy	Google Meet call	3/6/24	45 minutes	20
Ellie	Google Meet call	3/6/24	47 minutes	19
Lidia	Google Meet call	3/7/24	56 minutes	27
Sophia	Google Meet call	3/13/24	27 minutes	14
Percy	Google Meet call	3/21/24	28 minutes	16
Grace	Google Meet call	4/1/24	27 minutes	12

To further protect the confidentiality of the high school from which they graduated as well as their personal identity, all raw data was scrubbed and sensitive information edited to protect all participants. No business names are used, but rather descriptive identifiers. Table 2 indicates each participants' career interest(s) during high school, the ELO setting(s) each were involved in, and what their current career is in order to provide background information to allow the reader to understand the research findings. As this study was general in nature to ELO experiences in Maine and did not require or collect any other specific participant demographics, data collection and analysis do not contain such information beyond what is in the table below.

Table 2

High School Career Interests, ELO Settings, & Current Careers

Participant	HS Career Interest(s)	ELO Setting(s)	Current Career
Thomas	entrepreneurship/ engineering	composites engineering research laboratory, aerospace company, & technology business incubator	self-employed oyster farmer
Hazel	veterinarian or family business	veterinary office & corporate office of major	financial advisor

	(finance)	outdoor retailer	
Delaney	teaching	3rd grade classroom	middle school educational technician
Josephine	no clear idea but wanted to work with people	costuming department of professional performing arts organization	costume design/stitcher with NYC costume company
Adam	computers/ technical theater	performing arts theater (technical director) & digital marketing and web development agency	cloud platform engineer
Timothy	something technical	performing arts theater (audio engineer), waste management plant (civil engineer), architectural, engineering, and design company (electrical engineer)	automation engineer
Ellie	healthcare	radiology office & ultrasound office	diagnostic medical sonographer
Lidia	chemical engineer/ lab science	science laboratory, research institute of major medical center, & feline rescue	associate scientist in water quality control
Sophia	healthcare	dental office	dental hygienist
Percy	teaching	2nd grade classroom	high school social studies teacher
Grace	work with kids/teaching	high school social studies classroom	working for father's restaurant and finishing teaching degree

Data Analysis Procedures & Steps

This study used the data analysis approach of qualitative descriptive phenomenology based on the methods of Moustakas (1994) and Bevan (2014). All interview data, including both interview videos and transcriptions, were read and viewed by the researcher multiple times, in order to highlight significant statements and quotes.

Known as horizontalization, every “horizon” and statement relevant to the topic was held in equal value, to help understand how each of the participants experienced their ELO (Moustakas, 1994). Once topics were identified, the researcher developed clusters of meaning. Detailed field notes of observations and interpretations allowed the researcher to create thick descriptions to provide deeper social and cultural context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Using this inductive analysis technique gave the researcher a much more detailed understanding of the participants’ behaviors, affect, emotions, and body language within the context of the interview and beyond the words on the transcript page to explain the participants’ views, circumstances, and meanings of the phenomenon; in this case, the shared experience of the ELO. Thick description allowed the researcher to really understand what each participant experienced and how they experienced it. This also provided triangulation and avoided potential researcher bias, to be sure analysis was objective and grounded in evidence.

Once clusters of meaning were identified, the researcher organized them into specific themes (Bevan, 2014). To further discover the essence of the phenomenon, the researcher used the themes to write structural and textural descriptions of the experience (Moustakas, 2014). This allowed the researcher to delve into and construct the meaning and essence of the ELO phenomenon. Using such data analysis procedures met Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) evaluative criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility was established using a peer debriefing of the data collection procedures and interview protocol before the interviews occurred. The researcher obtained this peer debrief from a high school principal who is highly experienced and invested in ELOs as well as a JMG employee who specializes in ELOs in Maine. Neither expert is currently or previously affiliated

with any of the three high schools featured in this study. Credibility was also maintained through member checking, where each participant was allowed to review the transcript to ensure accuracy (Creswell, 2023; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Transferability was maintained through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) technique known as thick description as described above. Using both such detailed field notes and the raw data of interviews about the phenomenon allows transfer of the conclusions to other settings and situations. Because the ELO phenomenon is described in extensive detail, others will be able to draw conclusions about the suitability of the findings in other contexts. To create dependability, a thorough audit trail has been maintained of raw data, summaries, field notes, and transcripts. Confirmability of neutral findings without bias occurred because the researcher ensured triangulation of sources and theories. The researcher maintained consistency among the various participants within the same interviewing method and used the theoretical perspectives of Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making (Krumboltz, 1979; Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976) and Learning Theory of Career Counseling (Krumboltz, 1996) to interpret the data.

Reflexivity Protocol

The study required a reflexivity protocol known as bracketing. Using Patton's (2015) techniques of bracketing and phenomenological reduction helped the researchers to isolate biases and previous experience and only reflect on the participants' lived experiences. Bracketing and reduction forced the researcher to put aside all prior knowledge about the phenomenon of ELO programming including all personal experience as an ELO coordinator (Bevan, 2014). The researcher has been employed as an ELO coordinator in Maine since 2022, having started a brand new ELO program in a

public high school that had never before had such programming. Because of the researcher's prior experience with ELOs, bracketing was used throughout the data collection, interviews, and data analysis process. To allow the topics, clusters of meaning, and themes to emerge strictly from objective data analysis, the researcher was persistently mindful of her own personal bias and prior experience. This involved continual self-reflection and open mindedness throughout the study.

Findings

Of all the topics derived through the data analysis procedures, five overall themes emerged to describe the participants' experiences while also addressing the two research questions.

1. Building connections and relationships
2. Professional immersion
3. Increased confidence
4. New perspectives
5. Autonomy over learning

The following is a detailed description of the thematic findings with in-depth analysis and direct quotes from interviews.

Building Connections and Relationships

The theme of building connections and relationships came up in all of the interviews. Each participant discussed a variety of ways in which they connected with the businesses they visited, the employees they job shadowed, and any college student interns they met in various placements. One participant, Thomas, even talked about how he has gone back to his high school to connect with students to recruit for shellfish ELOs.

Making such connections is not a surprise based on the research completed in the literature review of chapter 2. Developing connections within one's career field of interest is an important skill and one of the touted benefits of ELO programming. However, the breadth and depth of the connections the participants made during their ELO experiences are notable.

Being immersed in an ELO allows students to consider how they might fit into the workplace and gives employers a firsthand view of potential employees. For many participants, they were able to return to their ELO placement for a summer job or paid internship right after the experience or a few years later in college. They had created strong connections with industry professionals and could therefore see themselves in various career roles. Timothy's theater technician ELO experience led him to working as a supervisor in his college's performing arts center while he completed his degree and Josephine's ELO turned into a summer job before she left for college. As she happily remarked in her interview, "They ended up liking me so much they offered me a paid summer job!" Working in the costuming department also helped her figure out where she could attend college to earn a BFA in costume technology. She is grateful for her mentors making that connection for her and explained the following:

They also introduced me to the school that I ended up going to which is an arts school, [in North Carolina]. They said they get a lot of volunteers, a lot of people there that work at the school. So they said if you're really into this you should check out this school.

While Josephine may have discovered her future college by doing her own research, it was ultimately the connection she made with her ELO mentors which lead her to it.

Adam. Adam went back to the digital marketing and web development agency where he job shadowed to meet a requirement for his introduction to software engineering college class. He had to interview someone in his chosen field, so he was able to reconnect with the company, who were happy to have him back again. Thomas applied for an internship at the composites engineering research laboratory where he did his ELO, and while he called it “pretty basic”, it gave him something relevant on his résumé before entering college. He also learned a software he subsequently used in college called SolidWorks, which provided a meaningful connection for him between career and academics.

Delaney. For Delaney, one of the most important aspects of her teaching ELO was building relationships with the students in the classroom and with the teachers she worked with. It was exciting for her to try out the teacher role to see if she liked it. But the connections were what mattered to her, even more so than earning credit. She is also currently working in the same district where she completed her ELO because she had such a positive experience. Often, she is able to reconnect with the students she worked with in the past, which she really enjoys. Delaney recounted:

Being given that opportunity and have it count for something made it meaningful. And made it exciting to do something that I was like, I get to build relationships and I get high school credit for it and...the credit didn't really count as much as the relationships.

Ellie. Other students were able to connect with college students they met at their ELO, which gave them a glimpse into their future training. Ellie reminisced about a college student intern at her ultrasound ELO who she was able to chat with between patients. She found the conversations to be helpful and validating for her and remembers how the student “just beamed every time talking about stuff [in ultrasound]!” That

enthusiasm and excitement for the career positively affected Ellie. When asked about the most significant experiences and opportunities during her ELO, she continued by saying:

Honestly, meeting that student, seeing someone who was in college for it. Connections are everything! Just talking, communicating with different people. It's so big because I could have had a different experience with different technologists and I could have been like, okay, this is not for me. You know what I mean? If it was someone who didn't really love teaching or wasn't passionate about their jobs.

Further, Ellie now works in ultrasound for the same health care system where she spent her ELO experience. She knew she liked the environment enough to apply after she earned her college degree.

Lidia. This is true for five out of the eleven participants (45%) who are now employed in the same place they had their ELO. Lidia spent time during her ELO at a laboratory that develops, manufactures, and distributes products and services for the veterinary (companion animals and livestock), water testing, and dairy markets. When she returned home after graduating from college, she immediately put in an application. She remembered enjoying her time in the labs and how much they respected their employees. For her final in-person interview with the company, she went to the laboratory's campus and remembered going there for her ELO. She explained:

That made me feel a lot more confident as I was going in the same entrance, I was sitting in the same spot, and it was a level of comfort that I definitely wouldn't have had if I had not done my [ELO] experience. So that was extremely helpful and that's a very, very niche point because it's like a physical place thing. But I think that was super helpful for me in that process to know I've been here before. It also, once I was working there I would walk around the hallways. I'd be like, I feel like I can remember being in that hallway, like someone took me this direction.

Lidia's ELO allowed her to find a career she enjoys at a company she loves. While she has only been there a year, she feels it is a great fit because she is still happy and sees a future of upward movement and promotion when she is ready.

Thomas. A smaller but no less important connection for Thomas was exposure to funding sources at his aerospace company ELO, which gave him an opportunity to use such funding in his future endeavors. He recalled how that connection "set me up really well for some field research that I did at [college]. So it was just a cascading sort of effect that came from it."

Professional Immersion

Besides creating beneficial connections, another important theme that surfaced during interviews is the opportunity for early immersion in the professional world. This includes gaining hands-on experience in a workplace, seeing firsthand the work environment and interpersonal dynamics, and learning about all aspects of professionalism. For many of the participants, this was a critical component of their ELO experience, as it gave them a clear understanding of the day-to-day of the career rather than just relying on assumptions about what a job entailed. This also helped inform participants about whether they could see themselves working in such an environment. Several participants compared their ELO to a job interview without the job interview. Hazel called it "basically applying to a job without actually applying." Ellie called it similar to an interview and how she took the experience seriously. She shared, "I could very well end up at one of these places and I did, which still blows my mind, but it was fun because I worked with great healthcare workers."

Ellie. She further explained how she did more than just observe the sonographer, which is what really made her feel excited about her future career path. Ellie recounted:

So even though I was observing and I wasn't necessarily scanning every time, I did scan a couple of times and that was just wild to me. Because I remember it was an abdominal ultrasound and I was looking at the aorta and I was just like *I found it! How did I even do that?* And the puzzle of ultrasound itself, just it was fascinating.

This type of hands-on experience is much more powerful than reading about the career or even watching an online video. It allows the student to see themselves in the role and gives them a feeling of what it feels like to be a professional. Lidia remembers how it felt to get to wear a badge and how it felt fun to be professional in a workplace setting.

Adam. Other participants had similar experiences. Adam talked about his ELO with the digital marketing and web development agency:

So if there were meetings going on, we got an opportunity to go to the meetings and listen to what they're...the kind of things that they were talking about. We got a chance to talk to the owner...We got to interview her, her lead engineers, designers, the marketing teams and that kind of stuff. So we got a chance to talk to all different aspects of the process, which was cool, and which was also cool for me because I knew I didn't want to go into the design or the marketing and stuff, but it was really cool for me to see how it intertwined into what I wanted to do.

As Adam ended up pursuing software engineering, this initial glimpse during his ELO gave him a firsthand look into the interactions between a designer and software engineer.

He admits he had never really previously considered how much collaboration is needed.

But he enjoyed the environment and the work dynamics. He added:

I felt very comfortable there. It was like, I like what these people are doing. I like how they're doing it. I like them as people, they all seem very smart and it's like, okay I want to surround myself with people like this, kind of working all together on one thing, working with a little bit more intelligence and putting a lot of thought into something, which has been really, that was like, okay I really want to do that.

Sophia. Sophia had a similar experience to Adam, which prepared her for her dental hygiene clinicals in college. This helped her to feel much more prepared and ready when it was time for her to practice hygienist skills with patients of her own. She explained:

I think it was good to have had the ELO experience even prior to school [college] because I somewhat knew what to expect in terms of the dental office, how things were set up, how to greet a patient. Again, I was there, I didn't quite absorb everything obviously at the ELO, but it just kinda helped prepare me for the flow, I guess, of an appointment.

Timothy. Timothy was able to get a firsthand look into how unions operated in both of his ELO experiences. He did not realize at the time this was something he would also encounter in his career now as a nonunion worker who interacts daily with union workers, and his ELO allowed him to first begin to understand how to navigate this. He explained:

The exposure to union dynamics was good, too. Because you...I got, but this spring I worked at [a nuclear power plant]. And I was there for a month, working nights and...I got the lowdown the first night I got there, but you don't really, the unspoken rules of the guys and I'm well familiar with that already. I didn't have to misstep that to figure it out, which I've watched some of my co-workers get chastised for touching something. And the things that I see very directly now, when I'm on a site, you have multiple contractors and multiple disciplines all working together or against each other depending on the scenario. You've got guys that have been on site for six months and I show up for ten days. So, working those dynamics, and yeah definitely way more applicable to what I'm doing now than I would have ever anticipated.

Timothy's experience with unions during his ELO gave him a unique perspective and allowed him to be more prepared and cognizant of what he called "the unspoken rules".

He also discussed how he was able to get a feel of how the dynamics of a job site are handled, especially when something goes wrong. He remembered:

There was some exposure to working dynamics there. They had a trailer sitting outside and you had a bunch of gruff construction workers coming in and out of it and you know, the guy was just kind of telling them to keep it PG, which I thought was funny. But yeah, so...and I got a chance to see them work through some problems that had come up. I think some of the drawings didn't quite match what they were supposed to be doing so they were going through, figuring that out and he was able to bring me over and show me what they were doing and what the issue was.

Percy. Percy summed his ELO experience up as a launching point from being a high school student into a professional:

It [an ELO] really kind of takes you out of that student mindset into almost like *I'm kind of a young professional right now. I'm putting on my different hat, and I'm taking on all these new skills all at once, and I'm treated kind of like a grown-up. Here I am, here I go.*

Thomas. While Thomas' bachelor's degree is in engineering, his ELO experience helped give him a unique look into the entrepreneurial realm; this planted the seed for his eventual business venture of owning an oyster farm.

I think for me seeing the sort of startup incubation space was really important. So it really wasn't necessarily like engineering, but it was the entrepreneurial spirit and then seeing the support systems that Maine has in general. So these were incubated companies that received a lot of support and they were all in their pretty early stages and talking to... The companies were a handful of people or less and all the business owners were there. And I was talking with them and I could really see kind of their excitement and their spirit. That I think inspired me in a lot of ways...

Thomas went on to explain how speaking with business owners during his ELO affected him. He gained a realistic understanding of how to start a business and be successful.

Seeing what it took, kind of talking to the business owners about *what are you doing? How are you getting paid?* And they're like, *oh I don't get paid. I work 50-60 hours a week and it's actually really hard, but it's really rewarding.* Kind of seeing that example as, you know what to expect with starting my own business was important. Yeah, and so I think it gave me a more realistic view of what it would take to start the business and I think because I had that realistic view, I've been more successful. It's kind of weathered the storm of the first five years of a small business. Yeah.

Thomas admitted one of his ELO experiences seemed well set up and subsequently profitable while another was not well funded and took years to see any investment.

When I thought about how I wanted to set up my company, it's much more conservative. And we're not making these big leaps in terms of technology, but we're choosing a business model that's pretty well proven and something that we can get loans for and that we don't necessarily have to count on private equity for. So I think I saw a lot about businesses and what works, what doesn't just in those few days that I spent with...yeah, and...so I think that it was my first real introduction to entrepreneurs and I think that I was really impressed that everyone was so honest with me. I think that people didn't really feel, I don't know. Its competitive, it can be competitive. There's trade secrets involved with these startup companies and no one really cared with me being a high schooler and a student and they were just an open book. So it was really cool.

This also showed Thomas that he too could be successful in Maine as there is startup space and support and he did not have to leave the state to find it. He also attributed this early exposure as a part of why he joined one of the business incubation programs in college as well.

Lidia. Beyond the hands-on experiences and immersion into the world of professionals, several participants felt the ELO also allowed them to learn about other career skills such as building a résumé and writing a cover letter. It helped to lessen the anxiety of completing such tasks later in life for more high stakes experiences.

Lidia explained how helpful it was to learn how to write a résumé and cover early in high school:

Being able to have that experience was super helpful because I was able to take that with me. When I got to college I was able to be like, OK, so I have a starting off point. The format might be wrong, a lot of the information is outdated, but I have the idea of what it takes to do that. And the amount of times that I have had to write a résumé [beyond high school]! Being able to have that little jump start of not feeling like I'm in over my head was super helpful.

Hazel. Hazel felt one of the biggest takeaways from her ELO experience was learning about résumés and cover letters. When she was first applying for jobs and internships after graduating college, she knew how to do it and had a working draft of both. She explained, “I had all the pieces there already, which was fantastic.” This gave her a feeling of professionalism and competency she otherwise may not have felt.

Increased Confidence

Much of the connections and professional immersion the participants experienced during their ELOs led to increased confidence in themselves, in their career choices, and in their future encounters. For many, this increased confidence stemmed from being pushed out of their comfort zones and solidifying a clear career path for the future.

Delaney. For example, Delaney felt her ELO experience helped solidify her confidence in her choice to become a teacher. She spent three days a week in the third grade classroom doing everything from math problems, to fluency tests, to even teaching three students how to tie their shoes. At the end of her experience, she knew teaching was the right career for her. She explained about her final presentation:

I think I was the most enthusiastically excited person to give my presentation at the end of the semester, but she [advisor] was like, *I don't think we've had anyone that's ever been this excited about doing their internship presentation at the end of the semester!*

Sophia. Sophia's confidence came from working with the hygienist in her ELO.

She could feel how the experience made sense to her and it felt like the right path.

I guess just there wasn't a specific day that it clicked that I was like *this is what I want to do*. It was more like I would get really excited. I was really intrigued by everything she was doing, what the hygienist was doing. And I was learning about and she would tell me things along the way too. Yeah, and it was just really intriguing to me. I don't know, it just kind of clicked. I was like, this is definitely something I want to do.

Her excitement was validating for her as a young person, "learning new things and getting so excited to write it down. It just sounds so funny now, but I definitely would get excited about it." In her interview, Sophia brought up how her ELO gave her confidence in her career choice. In fact, she had originally thought she would explore more healthcare options beyond just dental. But she loved interning in the dental office so much she never did any other job shadows or internships. Sophia shared:

I probably would have gone [to college] undecided and I probably would have tried to somehow be like a CNA or a dental assistant or something. So I would say it gave me the confidence to know that this is what I want to do, like I'm gonna commit to this, boom.

Percy. Percy's confidence came from building relationships with his second graders in his ELO. It allowed him to understand his personal educational philosophy early on and gave him a jump start that many of his college peers did not have.

I learned a lot of things with that ELO that I took into my freshman year of college because freshman year of college for me was very reflective of my experience in high school and figuring out *what's the kind of teacher that you want to be? What do you think education ought to be?* And...so thinking of my high school experience compounded with my experience with kids already. I think that really helped me critically think about that, which I might have not been able to go that in depth because I know a lot of my peers obviously didn't have that experience. So I was going in with "teach to the whole child" rather than "teach to just the content and then move on with your day".

Percy also felt this helped to solidify that he had chosen the right career path. His interactions with the second graders helped him see how much he did enjoy working with students, and while he is now teaching high school, for him it is all about “the personal social aspect of getting to know these kids that's gonna help them on their educational journey.” In a full circle moment, Percy is now teaching in the same district where he completed his ELO. And those little second graders are now seniors in his history class! He enthusiastically shared how this impacted him:

That really solidified this impact of, one it reaffirmed my path and this is something I really want to do whether it is with elementary and whether it's higher level. But also it's an impact for them too. So a lot of them did remember. I actually kept their thank you cards from when they, you know I am a graduating senior and was like *goodbye!* And I broke those out and they were like, *No way! Yeah, this is me, this is my friend. He moved or whatever.* So yeah it was kinda cool for that full circle.

Lidia. In her interview, Lidia admitted “I'm very much a comfort zone kind of person.” She struggled with reaching out to companies and putting herself out there in a way “that's equivalent to applying to a job”. But she also recognized how much her ELO experience gave her:

You're being bold about it and having that experience so young gives you a level of confidence, especially because the school is helping you, and if you are struggling they will help you, and so even knowing that you are able to get through that I can envision that being super helpful. You're like, kind of, *been there, done that.*

Adam. Adam alluded to the same feeling. He explained while he felt prepared and supported by the school, there was still a certain amount of worry about finding a placement. “I really liked mine and I really liked doing it. I was so stressed out about it because I was at a point where I was like, I don't know anybody. I'm a high school kid. They're not gonna take me!” Of course, Adam ended up with two different ELO

placements after all and it boosted him as a young person to know he was welcomed into the professional world.

Josephine. For Josephine, her confidence blossomed because her ELO was really the first time she began to consider her future career path. Until then, she had no solid plan; she knew how to sew from working in her father's boat cushion company and she had worked in her high school's theater doing backstage work and costumes. But her ELO allowed her to see a clear path for her future. She remembers about her ELO: "I was having fun and I really enjoyed it. And from there, I just was kind of like, *You can make a career out of it? That's like a thing that people do?*" That realization was what propelled her into her college and career pathway and had led her to working for a major costuming company in New York City.

New Perspectives

Another important theme repeated by several participants was the idea that the ELO experience made them gain new perspectives and challenged their previously held beliefs about a career.

Adam. For Adam, seeing the front end work in the digital marketing and web development agency was important in that he knew quickly what he did want to do versus what he did not want to do. He did not want to do the designing or marketing aspect, which led him to take a college class in cloud platforms instead of pursuing web design. Adam remembered: "I was like, This is what I want to do. So I never actually did an internship or anything in what I'm doing now, but it was all the internships leading up to it that I was like, okay, this isn't quite it."

Thomas. Thomas' ELO experience occurred when he was first deciding what his future looked like, including where he wanted to live in the future. He had not necessarily considered Maine to be a top choice for his desire to become an entrepreneur. He shared:

It was at a time where I was kind of deciding where I wanted to go, and I think realizing that there were some interesting things going on in Maine, locally, made me want to stay local and go to [state university].

Knowing he could stay in his home state was a huge perspective change; it is what led Thomas to the college he attended and the unique oyster farming business he has created. Without seeing the innovative businesses and business incubators in his ELO, Thomas felt he would have used his engineering degree in a totally different way.

Timothy. Timothy initially wanted to work as an audio engineer in theater, which was why that was his first ELO setting. As much as he loved it, he learned there were not a lot of opportunities in Maine. He explained why he ended up changing his mind to a different career path:

I think the reason I didn't end up going that route is once I started looking into job availability and things along that line, I was like, *wow*. Basically it was, join that industry and get one of the niche jobs available in the area or move across the country to places where it's lucrative. And I love New England. So yeah. Here I am.

In another ELO with an electrical engineer, his perspective was challenged yet again, as the mentor told him to *not* choose the career. Timothy at the time thought it did seem tedious and boring, just sitting at a computer and drawing things all day. He admits:

That sounds terrible. But he did say, and that's what I'm doing now is, he said there's a lot of other things you could do in this field that don't involve gluing your eyes to a screen all day. So it didn't sway me, but it was good to see. There's portions of an industry that aren't necessarily as interesting as others and to put, putting a label on what you do for work doesn't necessarily give a full picture.

This made Timothy really think about what it was he wanted to do. Instead of just taking the advice and finding a different career, he shared:

But it did make me go home and look into what jobs exist in terms of, for electrical engineers because I think at that point I had started to think that that's what I wanted to do. And I went home and I did some research and really got me looking at what kind of opportunities exist in both fields. And from my perspective, and whether or not that's actually true or not, I don't know, but from my perspective at the time it seemed like it was easier to do more diverse jobs as an electrical engineer.

Lidia. Lidia knew she wanted to pursue a career working in a laboratory during her first ELO. She emphasized how she knew: “I want to be at a bench. I want to use a little pipette.” But her second ELO at the research institute of a major medical center quickly challenged her choice.

[The research institute] has some animals, and I understand that it's for cancer research and it's very important and... There's just something that really didn't sit right with me about that. And that is not something I was interested in, which was immediately something I learned from that experience because a lot of labs do use animal testing especially in research labs. So I was like, I don't want to be around that ever. So that was an immediate takeaway from that experience.

Not wanting to work with laboratory animals was an excellent thing to learn while she was young and it helped Lidia figure out the type of scientist she wanted to become.

While she was not unaware of using animals in research, actually seeing the mice in the lab was a huge shift in perspective for her. She went on to say, “I mean, I think I probably would have come around to that realization. But I would prefer that to be in high school in a two day long internship than in my first real job, so...”

Hazel. For Hazel, having spent most of her life as an equestrian, she naturally felt veterinary medicine was the perfect fit. Her ELO experience really shocked her though by giving her a completely realistic perspective that did not quite match what she initially

imagined. The first veterinarian she worked with told her flat out to not become a vet due to being overworked and underpaid. She admits, “that was something that really lingered in the back of my mind all up through the end of my first year of college when I pretty much decided veterinary medicine is not going to be a career path that I pursue.” Then she learned how difficult it was to find time to ride one’s horse through veterinary school and even after starting the career. In talking with veterinary students, she was warned:

Yeah, if you want to ride a lot don't become a vet because we're vet students, we don't ride. They didn't see a path in the next decade of their careers that they were gonna be riding a lot and really having their horses going. I know some vets do It, but it's something I've heard from my own equine vet; she's worked for decades and is just now at the point of retiring and she can ride now.

Beyond not having time to pursue her equine lifestyle, Hazel found she just did not have the same passion for veterinary medicine as the college students she talked with during her ELO. She went on to say:

They were so passionate about what they were doing. I think as I, a couple more years, and I was heading into undergrad I was like, I am not nearly as committed and passionate to veterinary medicine as I think you need to be to really get everything you want out of that career.

She did not want to end up in veterinary school and not want to be there. This led Hazel to pursue other STEM fields, such as biology and environmental science. But she could not see a clear path that would help her create what she wants out of life, which includes her horses and being financially stable enough to own and compete with them. To Hazel, “I liked the concrete path that finance offered me as far as a lot of certainty.” Her current career matches her work and life values, which was more important to her than pursuing a career in veterinary medicine simply because it involved horses. She went on to say:

And I think we tell kids a lot that you can be whatever you want to be and you can do whatever you want to do and you should do something that excites you. But just because of that it doesn't mean that your job... does not necessarily mean that's gonna be your end all be all passion in life and if it is that's phenomenal. I'm not going pro anytime soon for equestrian sports. That is not a secret (*laughs*) and even if I could, I don't know if I want to because I want to enjoy the things that I'm passionate about. I love what I do. I love a lot of aspects about it [finance]. It's not my passion in the same way horses are but that's okay.

Not all participants experienced the huge perspective shift that Hazel did, but it is important to note how she was able to work through all of this long before she had to choose a major in college or even graduate from college and find a job. Her ELO experience allowed her to find a fulfilling career instead of just blindly pursuing veterinary medicine because she loves horses, possibly even getting into veterinary school, and suddenly finding she is not happy. Towards the end of her interview, Hazel recognized how an ELO is important for all students:

And it seems like whether or not people kind of journeyed down the same career path that they went to investigate, they got something out of it. Whether it be cool stories about surgeons or just *I went and did this and I really don't want to do it anymore*.

Autonomy over Learning

The last overall theme from the interviews is how an ELO gives students autonomy over their learning. It helped participants feel in control of their future and gave them an opportunity to work through their ideas and interests long before committing to a chosen career. This type of educational autonomy also allowed the participants to tailor their learning and their ELO experience to what interests them, which leads to increased engagement in school and one's future.

Ellie. Ellie always felt her ideas and interests were honored, and her ELO coordinator helped her create meaningful experiences. When she did not enjoy her

radiology and MRI placement, she felt comfortable speaking up to try ultrasound instead.

Ellie explained:

I appreciated that she [ELO coordinator] always listened to me and that my ideas were always heard and it was happy and it was fun. It was never stressful as far as meeting deadlines or expectations because there's really no expectations. There's really your expectations and your goals.

Ellie affirmed how an ELO is really about the student's goals, which is what made it feel positive and enjoyable to her.

Sophia. Sophia thought autonomy was the most beneficial aspect of her ELO. It felt satisfying to make her own choices and make decisions on what she wanted for her career path. While she realizes we all have such a choice, the ELO experience especially emphasized her own empowerment. She shared:

I would say kind of having... Again, this might not be the right word, but the freedom or choice to kind of decide where I wanted to start and things that interested me. It just felt like it was my choice and that felt good to know that okay, I can pick what I'm most interested in and explore this avenue and if that doesn't work out then I have another option of something I can do. So it just felt like I was in control of my future.

Grace. Grace felt as though her ELO experience was tailored just to her. This gave her the confidence as she grew older to go after what she wanted for herself. Without her ELO experience, she may have just settled for earning a business degree and working for her father's restaurant business. While she did pause her teaching degree during the pandemic in 2020 to assist her father in his restaurant, she is now back in school to finish and pursue teaching. Grace explained:

I think my biggest takeaway, if you will, is just that I was able to have some autonomy over my own educational path. I saw a need for what I was lacking and was able to fill it and I think it taught me a huge lesson in advocating for myself.

She thinks ELO experiences in high school are important for all students and gives “kids more involved in their own learning path.” For her, it helped her grow as a person and realize there is more out there for her besides the restaurant. Grace admitted that business is “what I had been set up for my whole life. I'd been working there since I was eight.”

Lidia. Lidia acknowledged how the autonomy of the ELO pushed her to consider her future path beyond just college. Instead of just applying and picking a major, she really had to think about what she wanted to do beyond college. She said this about ELOs:

It makes you think about your future, which is not always something that people are doing in high school. You're thinking about your next step, which for a lot of people is college. You're not thinking about the step after that, which is your career. Or the, instead of college, you're thinking one step ahead. And for a lot of people that one step ahead is a step between your career and high school.

This thinking that Lidia discusses helps to increase career aspirations in high school students, teaching them they can control their future by setting goals. It can also help students who are limited in their aspirations for the future to recognize there are multiple pathways to a career besides just college.

Summary

This chapter provided detailed explanations of the major themes that arose from the participant interviews, allowing their voices and experiences to be heard and understood. Such thematic findings resulted from the data collection and analysis procedures outlined in chapter three and were supported by excerpts from the interviews. The five notable themes are building connections and relationships, professional immersion, increased confidence, new perspectives, and autonomy over learning.

Chapter five provides a discussion of these findings as it relates to the two research questions and the theoretical framework. In response to this study's finding, recommendations for the future of ELOs in Maine are offered as well as possibilities for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, & CONCLUSIONS

Years of knowing that public education needs to change and finally seeing ELOs as a way to improve and provide such necessary change is what encouraged the researcher to complete this study. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the impact of ELO programs in three public high schools in southern Maine. This research focuses on the target population of public high school graduates who earned credit through an ELO class or experience to determine the impact of the ELO program on their career choices five to ten years after graduation. This final chapter presents a summary of the study, including a discussion of the research questions and findings, recommendations and implications for practice, direction for future research, and overall conclusions drawn from the findings in chapter four.

Statement of the Problem

The current national effort to help students prepare for future careers has pushed many states to implement specific career readiness standards and programs using work based learning and job shadow type experiences (Pathways to Prosperity Network, 2014). Every state has autonomy over how they shape these policies and programs, however the state of Maine has embraced the expansion of ELO programming in public high schools in order to create career ready high school graduates.

Within the 2019 Maine DECD's strategic economic plan titled *Maine's 10 Year Economic Development Strategy 2020-2029: A Focus on Talent and Innovation* is specific language on how to increase career exploration for all Maine students through a newly

created Maine Career Exploration Program. One specific tenet of the plan is for 100% of Maine students to participate in a six month paid internship at some point between junior year in high school and one year after graduation (Maine DECD, 2019). Using \$5.6 million of the state's ARP funds as part of Governor Mills' Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan, the MDOE and JMG managed a two year ELO expansion grant. This allowed twenty six Maine high schools to create or expand an ELO program, adding to the twenty approximate already established programs.

Maine has taken huge steps in defining and expanding ELO experiences, as well as creating common language throughout the state. The cohesive design and implementation of ELOs through the MDOE and JMG has allowed remarkable growth in just a few years (Jobs for Maine's Graduates, 2022). Therefore the goal of this research study was to examine the effectiveness of such ELO programming to determine whether or not it was beneficial to high school alumni and to examine how it has affected their future career decisions and outcomes. There is insufficient research to illuminate how such programming affects students later in life, which in this study is five to ten years after their experience (Bell & O'Reilly, 2008; Brand, 2009; Hooley, Marriott, & Sampson, 2011).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the efficacy of ELO programs in three public high schools in southern Maine, which have had such programs for over ten years. The effect of ELO experiences on future career decisions and outcomes has not been widely investigated. This research focused on eleven public high school graduates who earned credit through an ELO class or experience to determine the impact it had on their career choices from between five to ten years after graduation.

A person spends approximately 100,000 hours of their life working (Worline & Dutton, 2017). Because so much of life is spent at work, it is important to find a career that fits one's learning style and personality to ensure job satisfaction (Warren et al., 2017). It is highly likely that exploring and experiencing various careers through ELO programs in high school will lessen career dissatisfaction in the future (Symonds, 2012).

Review of the Methodology

The researcher used a qualitative approach because the research goal is to explain an experience through learning the meaning the participants assign to said experience (Creswell, 2013). Allowing ELO alumni to share their own stories and using quotations to capture their voices gave a detailed, rich understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. Using phenomenological theory helps to explain the meaning of others' lived experiences and to find what they have in common when experiencing a specific phenomenon. The assumption is there is an essence, or basic structure, to the experience. Collecting data from those who have experienced the same phenomenon can show what and how they experienced it through their personal anecdotes and insights (Patton, 2015). In this study, using phenomenology to learn about unique individual ELO experiences helped to identify the efficacy of programming.

Discussion of Research Questions

This section provides an overview of the findings' relationship to the research questions which directed the focus of the study. Chapter 4 outlined the study's findings in five emergent themes derived from the data analysis process: building connections and relationships, professional immersion, increased confidence, new perspectives, and autonomy over learning. Excerpts and details from the participants' structured, personal,

and in-depth interviews helped to reveal the themes relevance and consistency. Here the themes are discussed in further detail as each relates to the research questions and connects to the literature review.

RQ1: What components of the ELO program were most beneficial to alumni and why?

The alumni who participated in this study conveyed the most beneficial components of their ELO programs through four emergent themes: building connections and relationships, professional immersion, new perspectives, and autonomy over learning.

Building connections was one of the most mentioned benefits of the ELO program. Participants connected with diverse people in their experiences, such as business owners, employees, and college student interns. Some participants also cited connections with their ELO coordinators and even with current ELO high school students who are interested in their current career. Making positive connections and cultivating relationships showed the participants how they might fit into the workplace; some employers even saw participants as potential new employees, with many participants returning to their ELO placement for a summer job, paid internship, or even an actual full time job. Beyond that, ELO mentors taught participants professional and technical skills which benefitted them in the future. This is especially relevant when such exposure could not have occurred in a school setting (Alfeld et al., 2013). Some mentors even gave participants ideas on where to attend college and how to apply for future funding for business startups! These types of positive mentor relationships are linked to high career ambitions and better than expected outcomes as adults, including higher wages, lower unemployment, and strong career satisfaction (Covacevich et al., 2021).

Participants also benefited from connecting with college students who were studying the career in an in-depth collegiate internship. Being able to talk with students who were just a bit older and already immersed in career training gave participants an opportunity to find out accurate details they may not glean from college admissions or tours. Seeing the college students' excitement helped participants to know if this was what they also wanted to pursue or not.

Such strong community connections are imperative to a quality ELO program, as enrolled students rely on the professional expertise and energy of local individuals. Positive connections are not only important to ELO students, but are also critical for local community partners to feel it is worthwhile to participate in ELOs and consider establishing continued long-term relationships with ELO programs (Mette, Biddle, & Fairman, 2016; Princiotta & Fortune, 2009).

Professional immersion was the second most mentioned benefit of ELO experiences. An incredible amount of research indicates students who explore, experience, and think about their future career often have lower levels of unemployment, higher wages, and happiness in their careers as adults (Covacevich et al., 2021; Heyward, 2020; Hooley, Marriott, & Sampson, 2011; Hutchins & Akos, 2013). Nothing can replace the hands-on experience participants had at each of their ELO placements, which is much more powerful than reading, hearing about, or watching career related videos. Often, a high school student might think they know what a career is like, perhaps because they know someone in that field or they have watched a television show that features the career. But that knowledge is limited and not always accurate, which is why hands-on experience and actually seeing the day-to-day in the field is so important. Participants felt

stepping into the professional role as a close observer was beneficial, as they could imagine themselves in the role and see what it felt like. Research shows that students who learn how to work in a professional environment with adults learn to be independent and responsible (Arnold & Mihut, 2020). This reflects Krumboltz's (1976, 1979) Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making (SLTCD), because the participants needed such learning experiences through ELOs to make sense of how to respond and make future career decisions.

Most participants had more than one ELO experience, which gave them a chance to explore more than one interest or change to a different placement if they did not end up liking a chosen career. For those participants who only had one placement, such as Josephine (costuming department), Sophia (dental office), and Delaney and Percy (public school classrooms), this was their personal choice; some loved their first choice career so much they did not want to go anywhere else or try anything different. Each of those four participants are still in the career years later. Being exposed to multiple careers to find the right fit is important for career alignment, especially when the PISA 2018 data shows one in five 15 year old students is misaligned (Covacevich et al., 2021).

Other beneficial professional immersion opportunities for participants included career research and projects, presentations, and creating a cover letter and résumé. The ELO experience oftentimes mimicked applying to a job about actually applying, and participants felt the connections they made between school and work gave them opportunity for reflection, new professional skills, and a demonstration of learning they otherwise would not have been able to experience. It also helped to develop their public speaking, communication, and interpersonal relationships, which is supported by the

current literature (Arnold & Mihut, 2020; Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Conference of State Legislatures, & the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010).

Another oft-mentioned beneficial component of the ELO experience was the significance of gaining new perspectives. This was generally surprising for the participants and challenged their previously held beliefs about a career. For some, this meant they were able to start identifying careers they no longer wanted to pursue after a hands-on job shadowing experience. Other participants, like Thomas, discovered how much opportunity was available in the state of Maine in careers that interested them, which led them to stay in the state for college and subsequent careers. Yet, sometimes the opposite occurred and participants realized that to find a position in a certain career meant they would more than likely need to leave the state; this was a deal breaker in some cases when the participant desired to stay in Maine, such as in Timothy's experience.

Another perspective challenge was when an ELO community partner told the participant to not choose the career they had, which occurred with both Hazel and Timothy. On the surface, this sounds like a terrible thing to tell a teenager who is interested in a career, but it was actually beneficial for participants. It led both of them to research more thoroughly and figure out if this was indeed a career that still interested them, whether it held more opportunities than at first glance or perhaps it really was not a smart choice. For others, like Lidia, they found certain parts of a career to be against their own personal ethical belief or the difficult parts of the job shocked them. The test of one's original mindset prompted the exploration of new perspectives, allowing participants to

envision their future path more clearly and accurately. This is a safe, honest, and structured way to transition into adulthood and aligns with the developmental needs of high school students (Detgen et al, 2021; Hoffman, 2011; Hutchins & Akos, 2013; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). The benefit of having the perspective shift while still in high school allowed the participants to make more thoughtful career and college decisions. This relates to the Learning Theory of Career Counseling (Krumboltz, 1996), where participants were able to continually expand and evolve their knowledge. Such changes to beliefs and values helped to define their own future life satisfaction and appropriate career choices.

The final benefit mentioned by participants was how ELOs provided autonomy over one's learning. Participants felt the sense of creating career aspirations and how they can control their own future by setting goals and working towards them. Such a capacity to aspire allowed participants to make informed decisions for their futures because they had career readiness support through their ELOs. Students are often limited in their aspirations for the future due to a variety of reasons, but the ELO experience eliminated those limitations (Covacevich et al., 2021). Being able to tailor their own learning created increased engagement and excitement for participants, especially Ellie, Sophia, Grace, and Lidia . While participants knew on a cerebral level that they could choose whatever path they wanted, being able to actually make decisions and change one's mind during the ELO experience was quite empowering. Even if the participants' first (or second) choice did not work out, they all felt good to know they had more options. This reflects Krumboltz's (2009b) SLTCD component of Happenstance Learning Theory as a learning process of multiple experiences and not just a one-time choice. Any career indecision

simply meant the participant needed to have more career related learning experiences. Participants felt having permission to change their mind and remain flexible to be quite beneficial. This is also a connection to socioemotional learning by developing self-determination and self efficacy through the ELO experience (Atwell, et al., 2022).

RQ2: In what ways has an ELO experience influenced alumni career decisions and outcomes?

The alumni in this study conveyed that the ELO experience highly influenced their career decisions and outcomes through the theme of confidence. Participants felt that the ELO gave them confidence in themselves and their choices. They knew what to expect from the career, what the day-to-day would be like, and how to make it a reality. Participants' strong feelings of career readiness from their career exploration is in line with national longitudinal data of such programs (Covacevich, Mann, Santos, & Champaud, 2021; Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020). Through the ELO research and reflection, participants had to look deeper into careers than they felt they would have done on their own, and many felt this contributed to their current job satisfaction. This is supported by research that indicates students are able to make informed decisions based on the amount of career readiness support and information they receive before they graduate (Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020).

Overwhelmingly, participants felt they would have not found their specific career without the chance to explore in their ELO. Perhaps they would have entered the same field or found their current career eventually, but it would not have happened as easily or quickly without the ELO experience. Some remarked they would have probably chosen a different career altogether had they not researched and experienced what they did during

their ELO, like Timothy and Thomas. Others felt they would have entered a different field and been unhappy, perhaps even earning a degree before realizing they did not enjoy the career, as Hazel explained in her interview. By discovering during the ELO experience that a certain career did not work for their personal values, it saved participants from wasting time or money pursuing a career they would not end up enjoying. It gave all participants a clear path and excellent support to become who they are now. Instead of just thinking of the future in general terms, they felt they had a way to make their career goals happen and the support to do so (Mann, Denis, & Percy, 2020).

Participants overwhelmingly felt the ELO experience led them to their current career. This belief is supported by Parsons' (1909) foundational theory and Krumboltz's (1976, 1979) Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making. Participants found ways to turn their interests into a fulfilling career or perhaps change their perspectives into something more aligned to their values and wants for the future. For some, they may not have applied to and attended the college they did, which in turn would not have led to the current career they enjoy, as with Josephine, Ellie, and Sophia. Those participants who are in the same career they explored in ELO all felt it solidified their choices going forward. They did not have to wonder or worry if they were doing the right thing, attending the right college, or choosing the right major. Several participants remarked how their peers changed majors because they had no prior exposure or experience with the field until they entered college. Overall, participants felt their eventual career outcomes may have been similar without participating in an ELO, but the chance for early career exploration during high school was integral to their success and career readiness.

Implications for Practice

This study highlighted the benefits and efficacy of ELO programs for a high school student's future career decisions and outcomes. Alumni interviewed overwhelmingly agreed on the direct effectiveness and advantages of the ELO to their future career choices. They benefited from building connections, immersion in the professional realm, and exposure to new perspectives. ELO programming also gave the participants increased confidence and valuable autonomy over their learning and future. Despite the variety of interests, choices and experiences among the participants, the overall essence of the shared experience of an ELO was positive, advantageous, and productive.

Another implication of this study is due to the importance of such programming for high school students, it must be made available to all. This validates the current efforts and investment in developing and implementing ELO programs throughout Maine. It is recommended all educational stakeholders support and fund ELO programs. School boards could consider making ELO experiences mandatory in their district to help create a clear path after graduation. High school principals, guidance counselors, and teachers can continue to promote and strengthen their existing ELO programs or create a plan on how to bring an ELO program to their school. Community partners and mentors can seek out ELO programs to work with; if none are operating in local schools, community members could initiate partnerships. Parents can advocate for their students to experience an ELO as well. There is so much to gain from an ELO experience that it makes sense for school districts to be eager to offer such programs.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study could easily be replicated with a larger sample and over a longer period of time rather than just a five to ten year window. It could also be conducted within other parts of the state of Maine or anywhere in the country for more diversity. Also, because the participants in this study all did attend (or are currently attending) college, it would be interesting to also study alumni who completed other types of training programs such as apprenticeships. As ELO programming continues to expand, it will be important for researchers to monitor the efficacy and benefits for alumni to help improve and validate such career and work based learning opportunities for students.

Concluding Remarks

Extended Learning Opportunities offer an excellent way to positively transform education, especially for public high school students. Work based learning through job shadows and internships prepare students for future careers, by increasing career awareness, readiness, and ambition. It is clear in capturing the voices and stories of the participants that ELO experiences are effective and beneficial well beyond the previously studied effects on academic behaviors such as college acceptance rates and SAT scores. ELOs are a vital component of a student's overall education and should be considered as a requirement for graduation at all high schools in the United States.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Name (pseudonym): High School Attended (used for my own purposes, not to be published): Year of Graduation: Current Occupation:
1. Tell me about your career interests as a high school student.
2. Tell me about what led you to your ELO experience in high school.
3. Describe your ELO experience and participation.
4. What types of activities did you participate in during your ELO?
5. Tell me about the most significant experiences and opportunities during your ELO.
6. What components of the ELO program were most beneficial to you and why?
7. Describe how your career path (decisions and outcomes) was affected by your ELO experience.
8. If you had not taken an ELO, would that change your current career/employment?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your ELO experience?

APPENDIX B: INVITATION LETTER TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

January 30, 2024

Dear _____,

As a doctoral student at the University of Louisiana Monroe, I am writing to ask for your assistance in my doctoral research study called “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?: A phenomenological analysis of the efficacy of Extended Learning Opportunities for career readiness in Maine”. Your perceptions and knowledge of Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) from your high school experience will greatly assist with this study, and I value your willingness to help.

This phenomenological study will use interviews to examine public high school graduates who experienced an ELO to determine the impact of the program on their career choices five to ten years after graduation. Such a study will give insight into which components of the ELO program were most beneficial to alumni and how the ELO experience influenced career decisions and outcomes. Given the current effort and investment of developing and implementing ELO programs in Maine, such effects should be studied and understood how initial investment into such programs helps benefit students. Knowing the benefits can help school districts make hiring and budgeting decisions on ELO programming, especially once the Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan two-year grant expires in July 2024.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. All names and identifying information will be kept confidential. If you agree to participate, interviews will take place during the spring 2024 semester.

If you have any questions now or in the future, you may contact me through my university email at sanbornea@warhawks.ulm.edu. If you want to know more about your rights as a study participant, you can call the ULM Office of Sponsored Programs & Research at (318) 342-1039 or email ospr@ulm.edu.

Thank you,



Elizabeth Sanborn
Graduate Student, University of Louisiana Monroe

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study called “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?: A phenomenological analysis of the efficacy of Extended Learning Opportunities for career readiness in Maine” with Elizabeth Sanborn, University of Louisiana Monroe (ULM) graduate student, about my perceptions and knowledge of the Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) programming I experienced as a high school student. The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of the program on alumni career choices five to ten years after graduation. Such a study will give insight into which components of the ELO program were most beneficial to alumni and how the ELO experience influenced career decisions and outcomes.

My participation will involve an interview with the researcher through Google Meet and answering any follow up or clarifying questions the researcher may have after the interview. I understand this study is completely voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice. I understand the data and results of this study may be submitted to a professional conference or scholarly journal for publication. I will not be reimbursed or paid for my time, nor will I incur any costs as a participant in this study. I understand my risks are minimal. I also understand all names and identifying information will be kept confidential, no one will be able to trace responses back to my computer or IP address, and only aggregate data will be used: My preferred pseudonym is _____.

If I have any questions regarding this study, I can contact the researcher at 207-468-1409 or email sanbornea@warhawks.ulm.edu. If I want to know more about my rights as a study participant, I can call the ULM Office of Sponsored Programs & Research at (318) 342-1039 or email ospr@ulm.edu. I understand this study was approved by the ULM Institutional Review Board and I can email irb@ulm.edu with any concerns or questions. If my participation elicits any emotional reactions or distress and I need further support at any time, I will reach out to the researcher for available counseling and support options.

My signature below signifies I have read the above information and I understand the study well enough to make an informed decision for myself.

Date _____ Name of participant _____

Signature of participant _____

APPENDIX D: DEBRIEFING FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

Dear _____,

Thank you for your participation in the study “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?: A phenomenological analysis of the efficacy of Extended Learning Opportunities for career readiness in Maine”. The purpose is to examine the efficacy of Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) programs in three public high schools in southern Maine. The goal of my research is to examine whether or not your ELO experience was beneficial and how it affected your future career decisions and outcomes. Your participation was valuable and appreciated. However, I do want to remind you of the following:

- You may decide you no longer want your data used in this research. If you want your data removed, please contact me as soon as possible at 207-468-1409 or email sanbornea@warhawks.ulm.edu.
- If you have any questions/concerns regarding your participation, the purpose or procedures, or any research related problems, please contact me.
- If you would like to receive a copy of the dissertation final draft once it is completed, please feel free to contact me as well.
- If you have any questions about your rights as a study participant, you can call the ULM Office of Sponsored Programs & Research at (318) 342-1039 or email ospr@ulm.edu.
- If your participation elicited any emotional reactions/distress and you need further support at any time, I encourage you to utilize the resources here. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of Maine offers free mental health resources and support. NAMI can be reached at 1-800-464-5767, Monday through Friday from 8:00 AM - 4:00 PM or by email helpline@namimaine.org. The Sweetser Peer Support Warm Line is available in Maine, 24 hours a day, seven days a week at 1-866-771-9276. In a crisis situation, you can call/text 988, the Nation’s Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. You can also call 911 for immediate assistance.

Please keep this information for your future reference. I thank you again for your participation and wish you well in your future career endeavors!

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Sanborn
Graduate Student, University of Louisiana Monroe

APPENDIX E: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION



The University of Louisiana at Monroe

Institutional Review Board

Notice of Determination for Projects using Human Subjects

Protocol ID#: 1332 - 2023
 Principal Investigator: Dr. Stacie Austin
 Collaborator(s): Elizabeth Sanborn
 Project Title: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?": A look at the efficacy of Extended Learning Opportunities for career readiness in Maine
 Date Approved: 2/8/2024
 Expiration Date: 2/7/2025

- ☒ 1) In accordance with the ULM Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, the ULM Institutional Review Board reviewed and APPROVED this project on the above date. Note: The project is subject to continuing review and any conditions listed in the comments section below.
- ☐ a. This project has received FULL COMMITTEE REVIEW.
- ☒ b. This project has received EXPEDITED REVIEW.
- ☐ c. This project is EXEMPT based on the following part and section(s) of the ULM Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects:

Exempt:

- ☐ 2) In accordance with the ULM Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, the ULM Institutional Review Board reviewed this project and has determined that this project does not meet IRB standards and is therefore DEFICIENT for the reasons listed in the comments section below.

Comments:

This project's "APPROVED" start date is determined according to the date listed above in this notification. Any research conducted, prior to this date, must cease and all data collected destroyed.

Thank you for your submission. Please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs and Research if you require any further assistance.

Robert Hanser, Ph.D.
 Chair, ULM's IRB

cc: PI's Department Head
 IRB protocol file

Thursday, February 8, 2024

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VITA

Elizabeth Sanborn grew up in southern Maine and graduated from Kennebunk High School in 1997. She earned both a Bachelor of Arts in English Teaching (2001) and Master of Arts in Teaching (2003) from the University of New Hampshire. Elizabeth began her doctoral journey at the University of Louisiana Monroe in the spring of 2020.

Elizabeth spent the first fifteen years of her career teaching high school English, including 9th grade, 12th grade, and AP Literature and Composition, and a subsequent six years as a middle school gifted and talented teacher. Since 2022, she has been an Extended Learning Opportunities program coordinator. This position is where she found her true calling, by facilitating hands-on, credit-bearing experiences outside of the traditional classroom with an emphasis on community-based career exploration for her high school students. Her chosen life's work is a messy, creative, and student-focused adventure. She sees herself as a guide and mentor, to help shape tomorrow's leaders to be effective communicators, thoughtful thinkers, and creative problem solvers. Further, Elizabeth is a National Board certified teacher in English Language Arts/early adolescence. She is a Yellow Tulip Project advisor, Civil Rights Team advisor, and Can We? Project liaison. Elizabeth has also served in other diverse capacities such as prom advisor, new teacher mentor, and English department chair.

Currently, Elizabeth lives on a small farm in rural Maine with her husband and two sons. She competes as an adult amateur in both dressage and three phase eventing with her Morgan horses and combined driving with her Shetland pony. If she is not at school or spending time with her family, she is probably in the barn or on the back of a horse!

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