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Life After Graduation: Exploring The Utility Of A College And Career Research Project In Defining Students' Post-High School Goals

Ashley E. Bowers
University of South Carolina

LIFE AFTER GRADUATION:
EXPLORING THE UTILITY OF A COLLEGE AND CAREER RESEARCH PROJECT IN DEFINING STUDENTS' POST-HIGH SCHOOL GOALS

by

Ashley E. Bowers

Bachelor of Arts
North Greenville University, 2006

Master of Arts in Teaching
Converse College, 2008

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Accepted by:

Toby Jenkins, Major Professor

Yasha Becton, Committee Member

Rhonda Jeffries, Committee Member

C. Spencer Platt, Committee Member

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

DEDICATION

To my husband, Shane: Thank you for giving me the support, space, and pep-talks necessary to achieve my goal.

To my mom: Thank you for instilling in me from an early age a love for reading and learning.

To my former, current, and future students: May you be well-prepared to live out your passion and calling each and every day.

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ABSTRACT

In order to assist students with their digital research skills while simultaneously allowing them to research and explore college and career options, a Project-Based Learning (PBL) assignment was incorporated into the secondary English classroom. This served multiple purposes: providing students guidance and support as they determine their future college and career goals, meeting several of the South Carolina 9-12 English/Language Arts standards, and increasing students' College and Career Readiness. The site for this quantitative action research study was English 3 classes in a large, rural high school in the Charleston, South Carolina area. Quantitative, statistical data was collected from a pre-and post-intervention survey and analyzed to determine what effect the intervention had on students' knowledge of the following: non-four-year college education options, financial literacy, and which careers would be a possible match for their personality and life-style goals.

Keywords: College and Career Readiness, high school, secondary English, research, PBL, financial literacy, quantitative research, action research, South Carolina

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AP .....Advanced Placement

CP..... College Placement

GPA.....Grade Point Average

HSFPP.....High School Financial Planning Program

IEP.....Individualized Education Plan for students with special needs.

POP .....Problem of Practice

PBL .....Project-Based Learning

ROI.....Return on Investment

SES.....Socio-economic Status

SC..... South Carolina

SCOIS .....South Carolina Career and Occupational Information System

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In the 10 years that I have been teaching high school English classes, I noticed a growing problem: students need help defining their post-high school goals. Throughout secondary education, students are encouraged to go to college and are placed in College Preparatory (CP) classes, but they are provided little guidance on how to reach that goal. This is a particular problem for underrepresented college students (first-generation, low socioeconomic status, ethnic minority) because they often have limited familial and community support in realizing their college dream. While the task of assisting students in researching careers, colleges, training options, and the application process was traditionally the responsibility of high school guidance counselors, recent changes in education such as the incorporation of required Individual Graduation Plan (IGP) meetings as well as the increase in volume of high-stakes testing, left guidance counselors lacking the time necessary to provide classroom or one-on-one guidance.

Many future underrepresented college students live in areas where the majority of citizens do not possess a bachelor's degree (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). Therefore, they often do not have a mentor to guide them through the college-preparation process with advice or assistance on issues such as the following: taking Honors or Advanced Placement (AP) classes to boost Grade Point Average (GPA), applying for scholarships, and completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This puts them at

a disadvantage when competing with their non-underrepresented peers for admissions to select universities and scholarships.

This emphasis on students attending a four-year college also excludes a subsection of high school graduates who desire to head straight into the workforce. These vocation-oriented students are often able to receive the training necessary to enter their skilled-trade career at little or no cost by attending vocational or technical school or taking Career and Technical Education (CATE) courses during their high school tenure. These students need as much guidance and support in reaching their post-high school career goals as underrepresented college students.

In order to provide assistance to students and supplement the work of school guidance counselors, teachers in applicable content areas can incorporate elements of researching college and careers into the curriculum. A content area that can provide a seamless transition into this type of research is English. At my school, teachers in the English department are expected to assign at least one research project per year. Typically, English 3 (junior) students complete a persuasive essay in the fall of each year. Methods of research, development of content, organization, and Modern Language Association (MLA) formatting requirements are taught, reviewed, and applied. Persuasive writing is an excellent skill for students to use on standardized tests such as the ACT, the SAT, or Advanced Placement (AP) exams. It is also a useful skill for college and beyond. To write persuasively, students must utilize their critical thinking skills, which is one of the most requested skills of employers and potential employers. However, a persuasive research essay assignment will not help students create a plan for after high school graduation.

Therefore, this action research project measured the ways that a college and career research project incorporated into the secondary English curriculum assisted students in defining their post-high school goals. This project was assigned to students in April of 2017 and was in addition to the persuasive research essay that students completed in the fall of 2016. The college and career research project reinforced digital research skills, organization, and correct MLA formatting but also contained the additional element of creating a multimedia presentation and sharing it with the class. Communication and presentation skills were incorporated into the state English-Language Arts standards at all levels and are valuable to both students' current and future lives.

These two non-fiction-based projects align well with the current English 3 curriculum because of the emphasis on informational texts beginning in 2010 when the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) incorporation in English/Language Arts classes began. Since that time, the focus shifted from a curriculum composed of almost exclusively literature-based fictional texts to a curriculum that is composed of about half literature texts and about half informational texts (South Carolina Department of Education, 2015). The shift was a result of a growing concern that students are not prepared to read college-level academic textbooks or technical job-related material when they graduate from high school (Hooley, Tysseling, & Ray, 2013). One of the goals of the CCSS was to increase College and Career Readiness (CCR) among high school students.

One way to increase student interest and provide opportunities to practice reading informational texts is to expose them to pieces that are relevant to their lives. This need

creates a perfect opportunity for secondary English teachers to fill the void by designing a Project-Based Learning research assignment that gives students the chance to inform themselves of their post-high school options and create a plan for reaching their future goals. Kist (2013) noted the importance of incorporating electronic informational texts into the English classroom and allowing students to create written works digitally. Through this college and career research project, students interacted with informational texts that contained writing, figures, and tables; additionally, they were required to analyze and compare the information as they determined their future goals.

Several theories were used to support the incorporation of a college and career research project into the secondary English curriculum as the basis of this action research study. The first theory applied to this study was the essentialist theory. Bagley's theory (1939) is that education should focus on teaching the basic subjects (one of which is English/Language Arts) thoroughly. Bagley supported traditional education where knowledge is passed from the teacher to the students. Finally, the goal of Essentialism is to train minds, promote reasoning, and create a common culture that will ensure productive citizens. This essentialist theory can be applied to this action research study because the project students created was intended to utilize research and reading informational texts to guide students into educational and career opportunities that will allow them to function as an informed and productive member of society.

The social construction theory was also used to ground this action research study. As Danes, Rodriguez, and Brewton (2013) explained, "Social construction theory posits that content alone in learning is not sufficient to create behavior change, but that content application through instructional activities and classroom practices creating student

interaction establishes a deeper integration of learning" (p.22). As a result, after I taught students (essentialist theory) the information they needed to complete their research and create their project, they took that learning and applied it through researching and creating the projects (social construction theory). Throughout the research project, students were asked to demonstrate competency when applying concepts learned during the intervention; they were also asked to discuss their current and previous assumptions with their classmates and me as well as complete several reflection activities in their High School Financial Planning Program (HSFPP) (2013) booklets as they learned and processed new information.

The Project-Based Learning (PBL) portion of the action research study included curriculum and hands-on learning that reflected David Kolb's model of the learning process, which "relies on the concurrent roles of education, observational, and experiential components of knowledge acquisition" (Tang & Peter, 2015, p.134). Students participated in self-guided learning when they read informational texts, researched schools and careers, and created a multimedia presentation.

Additionally, the self-efficacy (one's belief in his/her ability to succeed) portion of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory was used to support the action research study because students have to be willing to gain the confidence necessary to put their college and career plan into action. Another part of Bandura's theory that was used to ground the research study was the Social Cognitive Career Theory, which asserted that students could be assisted in developing "career-life preparedness' skills necessary to minimize barriers and strengthen supports for educational and career attainment" (Poynton, Lapan, & Marcotte, p. 58). Many students lack the support and/or resources necessary to make

well-informed decisions regarding college and/or career training payment options, and this project assisted with informing them.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Research showed that without a clearly-defined college or career goal, students have difficulty in motivating themselves to succeed in high school and beyond. Royster, Gross, and Hochbein (2015) found that students' desire to enroll in college directly affects the amount of effort they dedicate to their high school coursework. They also discovered that first-generation college-bound students are at a greater disadvantage because their parents lack personal experience with applying to and attending college (Royster et al., 2015). Positioning this project at the end of students' junior year provided a catalyst for students motivating themselves to succeed during their senior year and beyond. For example, some students realized they needed to take Honors, Dual Enrollment, or AP classes to increase their GPA to meet the requirements of certain colleges or for certain scholarship opportunities. Perhaps a clearly defined college and/or career plan motivated some to graduate from high school when they otherwise would not have done so. Many students who struggled to stay focused in traditional classroom settings succeeded with hands-on vocational training; they learned about their options as part of this intervention.

High school guidance counselors usually held the responsibility for helping students define a college and/or career goal and walking them through the process of realizing that goal. Stone-Johnson (2015) published a study in which she detailed the reasons why guidance counselors alone could no longer assume the duty of preparing students for college and/or career alone: increased caseload and additional

responsibilities. With more students on their caseload and extra responsibilities such as conducting annual Individual Graduation Plan (IGP) meetings, serving as high-stakes testing coordinators, and managing students' 504 plans, guidance counselors were essentially too busy with other duties to spend the time necessary to assist each student in finding his/her career and training path. In the study, Stone-Johnson (2015) reported: "Counselors noted that they were not as involved as they believed they should be in the college and career support of students" (34). A way to meet the need for college and career preparation support apart from guidance counselors must be examined in high schools across the United States.

One solution is for academic departments to design content-specific projects that serve the dual purpose of fulfilling state standards requirements while at the same time allowing students to explore their college and career options. The English department is an excellent option for the incorporation of such projects because a research project is traditionally part of students' high school curriculum. Since the introduction of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010, the secondary English curriculum shifted from a literature-text emphasis to an informational-text emphasis. However, the CCSS English/Language Arts implementation in South Carolina only lasted one year (2013-2014) before it was repealed and replaced with the 2015 South Carolina College-and Career-Ready Standards for English Language Arts. When the 2015 version of the South Carolina English Language Arts (ELA) standards are compared to the Common Core State Standards and the previous version of the South Carolina standards, it is obvious that the CCSS had a lot of influence on the new standards. When revising, the committee

that produced the new ELA standards opted to keep both the emphasis on informational texts and the phrase "College and Career Readiness" from the CCSS.

The following are the six components of the 2015 South Carolina College-and Career-Ready Standards for English Language Arts (English 1-English 4) standards:

1. Inquiry-Based Literacy,
2. Reading—Literacy Text,
3. Reading—Informational Text,
4. Writing,
5. Communication, and
6. Disciplinary Literacy.

Each standard contains indicators that provide an explanation for how the standard is met, and the following words and/or phrases appear multiple times: *relevant, real-world, practical, interdisciplinary, and College and Career Readiness* (South Carolina Department of Education, 2015). The project that students completed for my action research study covers five of the six standards listed above.

In this action research study, a solution to the problem of practice was to incorporate a research project into the secondary English classroom that contained three college and career focuses: (a) Potential future career, (b) Training/College options for future career, and (c) Information regarding post-high school finances. The research project students completed met the following standards:

> *Inquiry-Based Literacy* 1: Formulate relevant, self-generated questions based on interests and/or needs that can be investigated; 3: Construct knowledge, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, to build deeper understanding of the

world through exploration, collaboration, and analysis; 4: Synthesize information to share learning and/or take action; 5: Reflect through the inquiry process to access metacognition, broaden understanding, and guide actions, both individually and collaboratively.

Reading—Informational Text 7: Research events, topics, ideas, or concepts through multiple media formats; 9: Apply a range of strategies to determine the meaning of known, unknown, and multiple meaning words, phrases, and jargon; acquire and use general academic and domain-specific vocabulary.

Writing 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Communication 2: Articulate ideas, claims, and perspectives in a logical sequence using information, findings, and credible evidence from sources.

Disciplinary Literacy 3: Extend and deepen understanding of content through purposeful, authentic, real-world tasks to show understanding and integration of content within and across disciplines (South Carolina Department of Education, 2015).

This interdisciplinary, research-based project not only provided students the opportunity to read and write informational texts, but because most of the research was completed electronically, students also had the opportunity to practice reading and writing digitally, which Kist (2013) asserted is an important skill for College and Career Readiness.

This problem of practice is salient because many students are graduating from high school without a clear idea of their post-high school goals. This action research

study measured the results of a research project that allowed students the opportunity to set goals and create a plan for reaching them. The college and career research project covered the following elements:

1. Matching personality to potential careers,
2. Necessary qualifications for chosen career,
3. Training/education options for chosen career,
4. Sample budget using starting salary of chosen career, and
5. Future lifestyle goals (see Appendix A and B for project specifics).

This project also bridged a gap between information and application in South Carolina's education system. With the current College and Career Readiness emphasis, students repeatedly hear the message that they need to go to college, but how to research, select, apply to, and pay for college has not been a part of the message transmitted. Therefore, when students plan to attend or enroll in school and discover there is a gap in the aid they are offered and the cost to attend, many rely on student loans to close the shortage. Studies such as Ishitani & DesJardins (2002) as cited in Poynton et al. (2015) have noted that "a lack of financial planning and preparedness has been linked to greater rates of dropping out of college" (p. 58). One portion of the project entailed students researching and comparing costs of their intended training/college options.

The results of the above-mentioned study also included a positive correlation between career researching and college success. Poynton et al. (2015) found that when students were exposed to career planning education, it helped them understand concepts such as how the cost of college compares to anticipated future salaries. Then, they could eliminate school options that they could not afford instead of accumulating high rates of

student loans to attend those schools. Their study revealed that career planning education provides students with information necessary to select college majors that align with their intended career options; students were given the necessary tools to determine future careers based on the anticipated salaries needed to maintain the post-college lifestyle they desire (Poynton et al., 2015). This was one of the elements of the research project students completed for my action research study.

Not all students are headed to college; many plan to enter the workforce directly after high school graduation, and a study published by the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond (2015) noted that one of the main concern of adults in the Fifth District was that "middle and high school students are not provided sufficient information on career paths that are alternatives to a college education" (p. 5). Along with the focus on four-year college education for all students came the underlying assumption that attending a two-year or technical school was less than ideal. Soon after beginning her role as South Carolina Superintendent of Education, Molly Spearman announced a plan to "align education and industry needs" to "[increase] economic opportunity for young people by strengthening career-focused education, beginning in high school and ending with postsecondary degrees or credentials aligned with business needs" (Spearman, 2016). The state-wide emphasis on alternative training options may help to alleviate the negative stigma that vocational training and technical schools have received in recent years while also creating opportunities for students who do not meet the qualifications for enrolling directly in a four-year college or university.

Providing students with information about training options that are alternatives to the traditional four-year college route may be especially important for students attending

the school where I teach. The Lowcountry area of South Carolina has experienced rapid growth in the past 10-20 years. The three high schools in the district where I am employed educate more than 10,000 students per year, and the district is facing overcrowding in schools at every level. One reason for the recent population expansion is the growth of the manufacturing industry in the Charleston area. In February of 2016, The Dorchester County Economic Development Council released a report indicating that manufacturing was the second largest employment sector in the area, and the average wage for jobs in that sector is $62,192. Those manufacturing jobs often require a two-year, specialized degree instead of a four-year bachelor's degree, and the sectors with the most projected growth were as follows: aviation/aerospace, software and IT, biosciences, and automotive. Due to the importance of manufacturing to the economy of this area, students who plan to live and work in the Charleston area as adults must be provided with information relevant to the types of education and training they will need to compete for jobs.

When students exit high school without being prepared for college and/or careers, it is difficult for them to succeed to their highest level of potential. Royster et al. (2015) published a study that reported that, based on the ACT, only 20% of the class of 2011 were ready for college, and white students were much more likely to be considered college ready than minorities. The study concluded that "students who are not college ready are less likely to attend college and, for those that do enroll, they are less likely to earn a degree" (Royster et al., 2015). Along with encouraging students of all races to enroll in challenging college-preparatory and Advanced Placement courses, educators can increase the amount of practical, relevant informational text material that is covered by

incorporating a college and career research project into their secondary English curriculum. Together, these strategies can possibly assist in increasing College and Career Readiness for all students.

The problem of students graduating from high school without a clear plan for their future is a multi-faceted problem. Recent emphasis on data from high-stakes tests blinded many educational policymakers to macro-level student needs. As previously noted, school counselors are too overburdened with caseloads and administrative tasks to spend much time in one-on-one or classroom guidance situations to lead students through the process of matching their personality to potential future careers, help them research and apply for schools that met the qualifications of their intended future career, and assist them in realizing how concepts such as Return on Investment (ROI) should be applied when comparing the cost of education and anticipated salaries of future careers (Stone-Johnson, 2015). Finally, underrepresented (first-generation, minority, low socio-economic status) college-bound students often do not have familial or community support in the arduous process of researching college and career options and applying to schools, training centers, and/or jobs (Gibbons &Woodside, 2014). English teachers can help fill this void by assigning and facilitating a college and career research project.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

The overarching question for this action research study was: How will incorporating a college and career research project into the secondary English curriculum assist students in defining their post-high school goals? The level of assistance that this project provided students was determined based on the quantitative results of the statistical data derived from students' pre-and post-intervention survey responses.

1.4 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this action research study was to familiarize high school juniors with the multiplicity of post-high school options available to them. Students were active participants in this Project-Based Learning assignment as they worked with digital informational texts to compare and evaluate information for the purpose of creating a multimedia presentation that outlined the following regarding their intended future career: (a) ways it matched their personality, (b) the qualifications required, (c) education/training options, and (d) how their lifestyle goals matched their intended future salary.

1.5 METHODOLOGY

As explained by Mertler (2014), action research is a way for classroom teachers to systematically implement focused instruction, collect and analyze data, and develop subsequent plans of action to improve or modify educational outcomes. Throughout the 2015-2016 school year, I conducted informal exploratory research that assisted me in developing the research study that I implemented in my English 3 classes during the 2016-2017 school year. This action research study focused on collecting quantitative data to answer the following research question: How can incorporating a college and career research project into the secondary English curriculum assist students in defining their post-high school goals? Students were asked to complete a Likert-scale survey (see Appendix G) with questions pertaining to their educational, career, and lifestyle aspirations after high school. They then participated in an intervention of guest speakers, mini-lessons, and self-guided research that culminated in a multimedia project that

displayed their college and career goals. Lastly, students completed the same survey again, and the pre-and post-intervention quantitative data were compared and analyzed. The findings from the study were utilized to make decisions regarding subsequent instructional practices and student assignments.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Inquiry-Based Literacy is one of the components in the 2015 South Carolina College and Career Readiness English Language Arts Standards. Students applied research skills such as analysis, constructing knowledge, exploration, collaboration, and organization to their project. Through the process of researching, they also practiced reading and evaluating informational texts. Their finished product was essentially a long-range plan that detailed students' personal and professional goals and the steps needed to achieve those goals.

1.7 POSITIONALITY

My education and professional experience qualify me to guide students through a research project. First, I took applicable courses such as Technical Writing and Senior Seminar while obtaining my bachelor's degree in English in 2006. Second, I earned my South Carolina 9-12 English teaching certification through a Master's degree program in 2008. Third, from 2008-2015, I taught a variety of introductory-level college English courses including Professional Research and Report Writing, Argumentative Research, Writing for Adults, and Exploratory Writing. Finally, I added the Advanced Placement Literature and Composition teaching endorsement to my certificate in 2013 and have been teaching the course since. The 2016-2017 school year was my third year teaching English 3 and my second year incorporating this college and career research project into

the curriculum. I attended professional development training sessions on two of the three curriculums/programs that were utilized to facilitate this project: High School Financial Planning Program in November of 2015 and SCOIS in August of 2016. The third curriculum is self-explanatory, and training is not necessary.

My desire to provide students with classroom guidance concerning a college and career research project stems partly from my personal experience as a first-generation college student. As noted previously, first generation college students, and the other two subgroups of underrepresented college students, often struggle with completing a college degree due to lack of a clear goal, lack of a clear plan on how to overcome educational obstacles, and lack of familial support. For the past seven years, I have tried to help my students overcome these potential impediments by focusing on incorporating informational texts into the English curriculum, as well as assisting students in making real-world connections to what they are learning in school. A proponent of job shadowing, internships, vocational training, and career exploration, I invited several speaker to my English 3 classes for the past three years to share their expertise. My goal has been to help students obtain all the information necessary for them to make wise, goal-orientated, affordable decisions regarding their career, education, and training options. This action research study provided a methodical means for collecting and analyzing the data related to these efforts in order to determine the project's effects on students' College and Career Readiness.

1.8 LIMITATIONS OR POTENTIAL WEAKNESSES OF THE STUDY

A limitation to this research study was the lack of a qualitative component that would have been useful in the gathering of information in relation to the exact impact that

the intervention had on students' College and Career Readiness. This limitation could have been overcome by utilizing a mixed-methods approach if time had allowed. One potential weakness of this study is in relation to the sample. The participants in this study were 62 consenting students in my English 3 classes; therefore, a convenience sample was utilized, and sample size is a potential concern. It is also possible that I demonstrated one or more subconscious biases when developing the study, survey instrument, interventions, and/or project as well as during the completion of the data analysis.

1.9 DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

The subsequent chapters provide information regarding the grounding, development, implementation, and analysis of the research study. Chapter Two contains literature-supported background information on as well as possible solutions to the Problem of Practice. Chapter Three details the action research methodology used to conduct the study in the spring of 2017. Chapter Four includes findings from the data analysis as well as an interpretation of these findings. Chapter Five provides a discussion of the implications and recommendations related to the findings as well as suggestions for future research.

1.10 DEFINITION OF TERMS

College Preparatory (CP)—courses originally intended to prepare students for college; today, most college-bound students take Honors or Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

First-generation college students—students whose parent(s) did not graduate from a four-year college.

Action research study—the study regarding the implementation of a college and career research project into the secondary English curriculum that Ashley Bowers is conducting to complete her dissertation at the University of South Carolina.

Return on Investment (ROI)—the amount that will be gained from an initial investment. In the action research study, it is applied to students' financial investment in their education.

SCOIS—South Carolina Career and Occupational Information System, a comprehensive website that contains college and career information specific to South Carolina as well as nationwide data. This resource is provided free of charge to South Carolina students and teachers.

Underrepresented college student(s)—defined as first-generation, racial and ethnic minority, and low socio-economic status students by research cited in this action research study.

Vocational training—education that occurs in high school or after to prepare students to go straight into a skilled-trade job/career.

CHAPTER TWO: Review of Literature

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The overarching question for the quantitative study was: How did incorporating a college and career research project into the secondary English curriculum assist students in defining their post-high school goals? Due to the multi-faceted nature of the research question, it is essential to cover the following elements in this literature review:

- Project Overview,
- College and Career Readiness,
- Project-Based Learning,
- South Carolina Secondary English Curriculum,
- Goal Setting, and
- Financial Education.

2.2 PROJECT OVERVIEW

After it was established that an action research study involving an intervention of a college and career research project was viable, the literature was examined to see if such a study correlated with national and state educational goals. The ACT's WorkKeys assessment is a job skills test for employers and job seekers. It is currently the federal accountability assessment that juniors throughout the United States take each spring. Score results are reported as a certificate level ranging from the lowest level of Bronze to the highest level of Platinum. At my high school, it is the responsibility of the English and math teachers with classes of mostly junior to prepare students by reviewing and/or

teaching pertinent material. Since the participants in this study were juniors in an English 3 (junior-level) course, any proposed additions to the curriculum must be examined in light of this requirement to prepare students for the ACT WorkKeys assessment. Schultz and Stern (2013) conducted a study that reveals that the majority of junior-level students need remediation in the three main skills assessed on the ACT WorkKeys test: reading for information, locating information, and applied mathematics. The project included in this study provided students the opportunity to practice all of those skills. While researching and gathering data for their project, students read for and located information. Through the creation of a budget and discussion of student loans as a method of financing education/training, students increased their knowledge and practice of applied mathematics.

Because the site for this action research study was English 3 classes in a high school in South Carolina, state educational objectives and standards had to be examined to see if the study conformed to the state's goals for these junior students. The following South Carolina 9-12 English/Language Arts standards were covered via the students' college and career research project: Inquiry-Based Literacy; Reading—Informational Text, Writing, and Communication; and Disciplinary Literacy (South Carolina Department of Education, 2015). Furthermore, Transform SC, an organization that works closely with the South Carolina Department of Education to ensure graduates of South Carolina schools are prepared for college and career success, published a Profile of the SC High School Graduate in 2016. This profile included the following World-Class Knowledge assumption: "Rigorous standards in language arts and math for career and

college readiness." Per the profile, SC high school graduates are also expected to possess the following world-class skills:

- Creativity and innovation;
- Critical thinking and problem solving;
- Collaboration and teamwork;
- Communication, information, media, and technology; and
- Knowing how to learn.

Finally, the profile included the following life and career characteristics that colleges and employers are expecting SC graduates to display: "integrity, self-direction, global perspective, perseverance, work ethic, and interpersonal skills" (Profile of the South Carolina Graduate, 2016). A comprehensive college and career research project assisted in this goal by helping students become ready for life after high school; promoting critical thinking and problem solving skills; promoting collaboration and teamwork; and focusing on communication, information, media, and technology. The creation and implementation of a clear college and career plan also supported students in obtaining many desirable life and workforce traits: self-direction, global perspective, perseverance, work ethic, and interpersonal skills.

South Carolina leaders fully supported initiatives that encourage high school students to explore their various post-graduation options and commit to a plan for success. The South Carolina Department of Education posted an article in May of 2016 titled "More than 90 percent of Powdersville High seniors sign pledges to go to college." The article, published in *The Greenville News*, quoted state Superintendent of Education Molly Spearman: "I was very excited to see this senior pledge in person, which allows

students, parents, and school staff to celebrate seniors being ready for college, career[s], the military, and citizenship" (Barnett, 2016). In July of 2016, it was announced that South Carolina (SC) was the first state in the nation to be fully certified as "work ready." That means that all 46 counties in SC met or exceeded goals in National Career Readiness Certificates, improved graduation rates, and engaged community business support (Moore, 2016, July 11). Supported by Superintendent Spearman and former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, these achievements would make it easier for graduates to go straight into the workforce after high school.

Due to the increase in the manufacturing industry throughout South Carolina, state business and educational leaders collaborated to promote avenues for graduates to obtain the skills and education necessary to qualify for in-demand jobs without a four-year college degree. In March of 2016, Superintendent Spearman announced a grant for an apprenticeship initiative that could help ensure SC graduates are prepared for careers. She stated: "This funding will enable us to develop an action plan to better align education and industry needs, so students can make a smooth transition from the classroom into the workforce and achieve success" (Spearman, 2016). In March of 2017, Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen praised South Carolina's Apprenticeship Carolina efforts and encouraged additional states to implement similar job-training programs (Moore, 2017, March 28).

The site for this action research study was a high school located in the Tri-county region of the Lowcountry that is comprised of Berkeley, Charleston, and Dorchester counties. This area has seen exponential manufacturing growth over the last 15 years with the additions of the Boeing South Carolina, Mercedes-Benz, and Volvo Cars plants, and

this industry is one of the largest employers in the region. As of April 2016, around 27,000 workers in the area had manufacturing jobs. Recognizing that apprenticeships are important avenues to prepare potential employees for jobs in these industries, the SC Technical College System applied for a grant through the U.S. Department of Labor, and it was awarded $200,000 to expand these apprenticeships opportunities (Moore, 2016, July 11). However, without a concentrated effort to make high school students aware of these options, they may graduate from high school without this information that could be vital to their career success.

2.3 COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

Nationwide statistics show that students are graduating from high school without being college and career ready. Royster, Gross, and Hochbein (2015) published a study that contains the following information:

> According to the ACT report on College and Career Readiness (2014), 49% of White students met three or more college readiness benchmarks as compared to 11% of Black students and 23% of Hispanic/Latino students. Students who are not college ready are less likely to attend college, and, for those that do enroll, they are less likely to earn a degree. (p. 208)

It is a professional responsibility of educators to find ways to eliminate this racial achievement gap. Although all of my English 3 students increased their likelihood of being college and career ready due to the additional exposure to informational texts that this college and career research project provided (Kist, 2013), two groups especially benefited from researching post-high school options and creating a plan: underrepresented college-bound students and students heading straight to the workforce.

Dockery and McKelvey (2013) explained that underrepresented college-bound students need targeted assistance to remove barriers to higher education. These researchers subdivided underrepresented college students into the following general categories: first-generation college-bound students, ethnic minority students, and students classified as low socioeconomic status (SES). They elaborated by purporting that while all students need some level of support from their high school counselors, students who are in one or more of the subgroups listed above may need extra support and guidance to close the post-high school achievement gap. One reason for this is the reality that many of their parents and family members do not have their own college application, admittance, or matriculation experience that they can use to advise their student. Academically successful students who are in one or more of the underrepresented subcategories might often be overlooked for intensive counseling because on paper, it looks like they are doing well (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013). This is what makes meaningful student-teacher interaction during the Project-Based Learning research so important; students need the support of an adult who has completed college to walk them through the many steps of college acceptance and financing options. Also, if necessary, the teacher can refer the student to a school counselor or have a counselor facilitate a classroom guidance session on college application, acceptance, and tuition-payment options.

Blackwell and Pinder (2014) suggested that teachers become mentors for underrepresented college-bound students and assist them in the process of pursuing higher education. They explained that first-generation college students often lack family and community encouragement to pursue postsecondary education but often do so anyway because they are intrinsically motivated to succeed, and their self-efficacy leads

them to attain the education necessary to make a better life from themselves. The researchers concluded by stating that high school teacher-mentors are necessary to encourage students to attend college. The findings of Blackwell and Pinder (2014) demonstrated that teacher-mentors can be effective catalysts for student success, which was an anticipated byproduct of this action research study. Finally, their study also showed a link between motivation to succeed and college graduation; if students have a clear picture of their post-educational lifestyle goals, they are more motivated to achieve success. The college and career research project that students completed as part of this action research study included the elements of a teacher-mentor relationship with students while they conducted their research. The teacher-mentor has the opportunity to work with students' parents or guardians as well as school guidance counselors to facilitate increased student motivation through the creation of clear goals.

Although there are three subgroups (first-generation, ethnic minority, and low socio-economic status) of underrepresented college-bound students (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013), the subgroups are often interrelated. According to Gibbons and Woodside (2014), first-generation college students "tend to be from lower income households (Horn & Nunez, 2000) and are more likely to represent an ethnic minority (Bui, 2002) than their peers" (21). These researchers emphasized the role that family plays in providing support and guidance for students who are making important college and career decisions. They found that because the parents (mother and/or father) lacked a first-hand college education experience, they were likely to subconsciously limit their children's post-high school possibilities (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). The college and career research project implemented as part of the intervention in this action research

study provided students with exposure to educational and career possibilities that may not discussed in their homes.

It is important to note the way students' geographic location may influence decisions about their futures. The research site was a large, rural high school with a student population of about 2,400. The school is one of three secondary schools in the district, which is the largest employer in the county. Hedrick, Light, and Dick (2013) published a study that revealed rural communities have fewer residents with college degrees. Marcus and Krupnick (2017) confirmed this finding; they concluded that "fewer than one in five rural adults aged 25 and older have college degrees" (p. 7). Therefore, students from rural communities have an increased likelihood of being first-generation college students. Hedrick et al. (2013) found that rural youth struggle with creating and achieving post-high school goals. They suggested that high schools in rural communities implement a type of "bridge program that gives youth the opportunity to explore college attainability, admissions, financial aid, and application process [information]" before graduation (p. 31). The college and career research project that was incorporated into my English 3 curriculum provided this exact support for students.

Because rural communities have fewer residents with college degrees than non-rural communities, it can be deduced that many of my students will go directly into the workforce. As noted before, manufacturing is the largest employer in the tri-county area where I live and teach. Boeing, Mercedes, and Volvo are manufacturing companies that can provide lucrative opportunities for students whose post-high school plans do not include attending a four-year college. South Carolina community colleges, the South Carolina Department of Education, and industry leaders collaborate to provide

apprenticeship and training opportunities for these students. This is particularly applicable for my students since Moore (2016, June 12) noted that the Lowcountry has the largest concentration of available youth apprenticeships in South Carolina, and the track offerings are continuing to grow. He noted that "apprenticeships—both for students and for workers later in their careers—have grown in popularity in recent years as an alternative to four-year college degrees as student debt has swelled across the country" (Moore, 2016, June 12). On April 25, 2016, the South Carolina Department of Education posted an article from the *New York Times* on their website's main page; this article highlighted the need for "middle skill" jobs such as "electricians, pipe fitters, advanced manufacturing machinists, brick masons and radiology technicians" that have hundreds of thousands of immediate openings (Newman & Winston, 2016). Apprenticeships and vocational education can provide students not interested in attending college with the skills necessary to fill these positions while earning a middle-class wage.

For students in my classes who are not interested in attending a four-year college, receiving vocational and/or technical training before heading into the workforce may determine whether the rest of their post-high school lives are spent as part of the lower class or the middle class. Stringfield, Shumer, Stipanovic, and Murphy (2013) noted that "America has shortages in key career and technical areas. Some of these areas require 2- or 4-year college degrees; others simply require industry certifications and can be acquired through carefully designed career and technical education (CATE) programs in high school" (p. 313). They also pointed out that students often discover their interest in these fields during career exploration activities completed in middle or high school (Stringfield et al., 2013). Petrilli (2016) asserted that for students from a low socio-

economic status household looking to increase their class standing, technical education can provide a low-cost pathway for reaching that goal. A carefully-implemented college and career research project could assist students in matching their personality to career options that they can afford, both in terms of time they are willing to commit to education as well as cost of that education.

As explained above, there is not a one-size-fits all solution to increasing students' College and Career Readiness. However, having students research their options and the cost of training/education associated with those options as well as create a clear plan that supports their future lifestyle goals can help. Based on my 10 years of experience as a high school teacher, I know that many students aspire to live a middle-class lifestyle as adults. This lifestyle applies to their choices of housing, transportation, entertainment, and food, but many college students end up accumulating so much student loan debt that they are forced to delay the implementation of their desired lifestyle. And that is assuming that they do, in fact, graduate from college. Petrilli (2016) elaborated:

> The common outcome of our current strategy—"bachelor's degree or bust"—is that a young person drops out of college at age 20 with no post-secondary credential, no skills, and no work experience, but a fair amount of debt. That's a terrible way to begin adult life, and it's even worse if the young adult aims to escape poverty. (p. 2)

Furthermore, Petrilli (2016) noted that it is unrealistic to believe that the majority of students from a low socio-economic status backgrounds will complete college since statistics showed that "just 14 percent of children from the bottom third of the income distribution will complete four-year degrees" (p. 1). When educators and policy makers

assume that all students in College Preparatory (CP) classes are headed to and will be successful in college, disadvantaged students are only further disadvantaged.

Because the cost of a four-year college education has skyrocketed in recent years, students must be exposed to financial concepts in high school to increase their College and Career Readiness. Ways to pay for college, budgeting, and Return on Investment (ROI) are concepts that are essential for students to understand and apply in their post-high school lives. In South Carolina, even the four-year cost (tuition, room and board, and books) of attending a state college borders on $100,000 (SCOIS). Due to the large amount that is necessary to cover the full cost of attending a state school, there is often a significant difference in the amount a student owes and the amount covered by scholarships and grants.

For the past 20 years, there has been a national push to supplement the difference using student loans; most students and parents do not object to accumulating student debt because they view it as an investment (Choi, 2014). However, this is an alarming trend for students from a low socio-economic status or ethnic minority background because research showed that as their student debt amount increased, so did their likelihood of dropping out of college. A research study (as cited in Elliott, 2014) provided the following supporting statement: "higher student-loan debt in the first year of college is associated with lower probabilities of graduating from college among low-income and black students but not high-income and white students" (p. 30). Elliott (2014) also warned against steering students from low socio-economic status and racial or ethnic minority background away from attending selective colleges because they often qualify for more grants than their higher-economic status and white peers.

However, students who are likely to be accepted into selective colleges based on their academic performance are rarely in College Preparatory (CP) classes; they are often enrolled in Honors and/or Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Therefore, it was useful for all students in my English 3 CP class to complete a college and career research project that required them to examine and analyze the costs associated with their selected educational/training institution as well as options for covering those costs. Finally, giving students the opportunity to learn the ROI concept and apply it to the anticipated cost of their education and anticipated future salary may prove to be an exercise that helped some make decisions that can better support their desired lifestyle goals.

2.4 PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

A Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach was utilized for this classroom action research study because of the numerous benefits this type of instruction provided for students. Liu (2003) explained that PBL was derived from Dewey's educational philosophy and focuses on organizing learning around a specific project. PBL can be designed to simulate real-life situations, and it engages students cognitively through their active role in learning. In order to create a PBL product, students must problem solve, make decisions, and design their project (Liu, 2003).

"The project method," first made popular in 1918 by William Heard Kilpatrick, has evolved into Project-Based Learning (Kliebard, 2004, p.135). Borrowing from Franklin Bobbitt's theory that education is preparation for adulthood, teachers today are often encouraged to implement Project-Based Learning assignments that will yield graduates who possess the skills necessary to excel in college and/or careers (Kliebard, 2013). The following is a list of these world-class skills found in the Profile of the SC Graduate:

- Creativity and innovation;
- Critical thinking and problem solving;
- Collaboration and teamwork;
- Communication, information, media, and technology; and
- Knowing how to learn (Profile, 2016).

Several of these skills such as critical thinking, communication, information, media, and technology were reinforced through the college and career research project that students completed as part of my action research study.

Two critical components of PBL are (a) the driving question and (b) the production of an artifact that represents the learning that was achieved (Grant, 2011). For this action research study, the driving question for students was: what are my post-high school college and career plans and goals? The artifact was a multimedia presentation that documented and explained the student's research results regarding each of the following: personality type, intended career, education options, estimated cost of education, expected future salary, and monthly budget based on lifestyle goals and expected future salary.

Many education scholars believe that giving students the autonomy to guide their own research results in a much more genuine interest in the process. Popular in the 1980s, I-Search papers allowed students to conduct searches to discover things that they needed to know for their own lives. These research-based projects encouraged students to "associate inquiry with problem solving and question posing in a variety of disciplines—literature, art, math, science, and business" (Luther, 2006, p. 68-69). The ability of

students to self-discover, connect disciplines, think critically, and problem solve are important traits for the 21st century South Carolina high school graduate.

Researchers agree that Project-Based Learning (PBL) can provide excellent opportunities for preparing students for life after high school. Radcliffe and Bos (2013) found that facilitating a College and Career Readiness project for students and guiding them through the self-discovery process resulted in the following: "improvements in their academic-related perceptions, beliefs, and strategies; positive personal achievement and goal orientation; rising perceptions of college; improving trends in academic performance; and stronger perseverance in high school when compared to a control group" (p. 136). Students benefit not only from the college and career information they unveiled while researching but also the relationship that is developed with the teacher through the PBL facilitation process.

Cooke and Weaver (2015) offered the following 10 instructional guidelines for teachers implementing a Project-Based Learning assignment:

1. Student-driven and student-centered instruction: Students are responsible for making decisions about how to address the challenges presented in the PBL unit.
2. Content in context: PBL uses authentic, real-life topics to provide context for content learning, which makes learning disciplinary concepts relevant and engaging for students.
3. Use of the driving question: PBL uses an ill-structured, open-ended driving question or problem that allows students to create their own solutions or final products in response to it.

4. Student collaboration: PBL allows students to collaborate and interact with their peers in order to successfully complete the unit.
5. Substance and rigor: PBL engages students in extended investigations where they can pose questions, gather information, and evaluate their findings as they develop solutions to the problems or driving question.
6. Multiple products and opportunities for feedback: Through PBL students generate multiple products and have multiple opportunities to receive feedback as they work.
7. Other characteristics: PBL allows students to develop their skills in areas such as technology, critical thinking, self-assessment, and problem-solving.
8. Teacher as facilitator: In PBL, the teacher acts as a facilitator who enables students to find their own solution to the driving question or problem.
9. Assessments: PBL incorporates assessment that is performance-based and encompasses both skills and content.
10. Final products: In PBL, students give a public presentation of their final products or solutions. (Cook & Weaver, 2015, p. 3-4)

All 10 of these guidelines were implemented in the college and career research project that students completed as part of the intervention of my action research study. The 10 guidelines of Cook and Weaver (2015) were implemented in the following ways: students completed self-directed research to discover how their personality type matched potential future careers, researched the qualifications and salary of their intended future career, and researched training/education options for that career. Throughout the research portion of the project, students worked in an on-campus computer lab, and I circulated the room to

answer questions and guide students along, but students were responsible for the creation of their final product (a multimedia presentation) as well as solving any issues that arose during their research. Students sometimes collaborated with peers to find solutions to problems and issues as well as to discuss their discoveries regarding potential future careers, educational aspirations, and lifestyle goals. Students utilized the SCOIS website to interact with digital informational texts that contained real-life information as they sought to provide solutions to the questions that plague most high school students: *What are my plans after graduation? What will my life be like as an adult?* To the extent possible, students developed a plan of action that answered these questions, and they shared their performance-based final product with the class.

Given the emphasis on critical thinking skills in both the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate (2016) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) research, it was important to design a PBL assignment that required a great deal of critical thinking from students. Liu (2003) noted that "research shows that technology facilitated project-based learning has great potential to enhance students' motivation and support information gathering and presentation (Blumenfeld et al., 1991)" (p. 25). In the college and career research project that my English 3 students completed, they were required to read digital informational documents, research digitally, and design a digital multimedia presentation using either Microsoft PowerPoint or Prezi. Liu (2003) cited a study by Carver et al. (1992) in which the researchers identified 16 major thinking skills used by multimedia designers. These skills are "related to cognitive development and success in the workplace" and "form five categories: (1) project management, (2) research, (3) organization and representation, (4) presentation, and (5) reflection" (Liu, 2003, p. 25). All of these skills were reinforced by

the implementation of the college and career research project. The reflection piece occurred when students analyzed how much the college and career research project intervention assisted them in defining their post-high school goals.

The practice utilizing critical thinking skills as well as the additional exposure to utilizing digital literacy skills was useful to all students regardless of whether they will ultimately elect to enroll in college after high school graduation or go straight into the workforce. All students will need to take initiative for their self-direction, and Kivunja (2015) asserted that projects that emphasize digital literacy assisted students in learning and working well with 21st century skills such as managing goals and time, working independently, and becoming self-directed learners. Finally, Corcoran and Silander (2009) promoted PBL as a form of "adaptive instruction" that reaches learners of today. They provided findings that suggest that "participating in PBL increases student motivation and engagement, reduces absenteeism, strengthens cooperative behavior, and improves higher-order thinking skills," all positive outcomes that would ultimately increase students' College and Career Readiness (Corcoran & Silander, 2009, p. 167).

For numerous reasons, a Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach to having students research their college and career options worked best for the intervention portion of my action research study. Due to the changes in secondary English curriculum, there is now an emphasis on informational texts. Research showed that one of the most effective ways for students to interact with informational texts is electronically. The Profile of the South Carolina Graduate (2016) emphasized the need for student to be able to think critically, use technology effectively, communicate with others, and self-direct. And

finally, research showed that PBL assignments increase student motivation and interest in the topic, as well as allow them an opportunity for self-discovery and goal-setting.

2.5 SOUTH CAROLINA SECONDARY ENGLISH CURRICULUM

The 2015 version of the South Carolina 9-12 College- and Career-Ready Standards for English-Language Arts included the following six foci (in order of appearance): inquiry-based literacy, reading-literary text, reading-informational text, writing, communication, and disciplinary literacy. My action research project met five of those six standards, which are listed below:

1. *Inquiry-Based Literacy* 1: Formulate relevant, self-generated questions based on interests and/or needs that can be investigated; 3: Construct knowledge, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, to build deeper understanding of the world through exploration, collaboration, and analysis; 4: Synthesize information to share learning and/or take action; 5: Reflect through the inquiry process to access metacognition, broaden understanding, and guide actions, both individually and collaboratively.
2. *Reading—Informational Text* 7: Research events, topics, ideas, or concepts through multiple media formats; 9: Apply a range of strategies to determine the meaning of known, unknown, and multiple meaning words, phrases, and jargon; acquire and use general academic and domain-specific vocabulary.
3. *Writing* 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

4. *Communication* 2: Articulate ideas, claims, and perspectives in a logical sequence using information, findings, and credible evidence from sources.
5. *Disciplinary Literacy* 3: Extend and deepen understanding of content through purposeful, authentic, real-world tasks to show understanding and integration of content within and across disciplines. (South Carolina Department of Education, 2015)

A research project is an excellent way for English teachers to cover multiple standards with the incorporation of one extended assignment.

The standards that were covered with this research project revolved around informational texts. Hooley et al. (2013) published a study noting that the shift to Common Core-based standards also produced an emphasis on students' ability to critically read and analyze informational texts. The researchers cited Coleman's (2011) study that indicated educators need to focus more on teaching students the skills necessary to read informational texts in order to improve test proficiency (Hooley et al., 2013). While I worked with students throughout the 2016-2017 school year to increase their exposure to and ability to read and analyze informational texts, the college and career research project served as the culminating performance assessment. Hooley et al. (2013) suggested that teachers implement informational texts that provide students opportunities to practice and demonstrate proficiency with the following expository skills: comparing and contrasting; definition and example; problem and solution; and reading maps, charts, graphs, and illustrations. While students completed their college and career research project, they utilized expository reading skills as they compared and contrasted college and career options, analyzed charts of tuition and fees information,

defined their personality type and gave an example of how it matches their chosen career, and provided a plan, or solution, for reaching their post-high school goals. These expository skills are necessary for student achievement on standardized assessments such as the ACT and WorkKeys tests as well as essential to students' success in college and/or careers.

Conley (2015) noted that with the incorporation of new standards, traditional methods of assessment must be re-examined and analyzed. He reported that multiple-choice assessments alone do not measure the skills students needed to possess in order to be considered college and career ready and suggested the usage of performance tasks as a better alternative. Conley (2015) defined performance assessments as "activities that allow students to show what they can *do* with what they've learned" and noted this was a popular instructional approach in the early 1900s (p. 7). He purported that performance assessments facilitate four main factors of college readiness:

- Key cognitive strategies: the thinking skills students need to learn material at a deeper level and to make connections among subjects.
- Key content knowledge: the big ideas and organizing concepts of the academic disciplines that help organize all the detailed information.
- Key learning skills and techniques: the student's ownership of learning that connects motivation, goal setting, self-regulation, metacognition, and persistence combined with specific techniques such as study skills, note taking, and technology capabilities.
- Key transition knowledge and skills: the aspiration to attend college, the ability to choose the right college and to apply and secure the necessary

> resources, an understanding of the expectations and norms of postsecondary education, and the capacity to advocate for oneself in a complex institutional context. (Conley, 2015, p. 12)

The college and career research project required students to complete a multimedia presentation, which was a performance assessment used to determine if students were able to apply their inquiry, reading, communication, writing, and literacy skills to a PBL situation.

Research showed that to provide students with maximum opportunities to practice and utilize their 21st century skills, the research projects should be completed electronically. Focus on real-world application, originally emphasized with the Common Core State Standards, remains in the current SC standards. Kist (2013) asserted that to prepare students for College and Career Readiness in a 24-hour-a-day wired world, teachers need to tailor assignments to meet the following goals: (a) "give students practice reading screen-based texts," (b) "give students practice in digital writing," and (c) "give students practice working with informational texts" (p. 39-42). The secondary English college and career research project contained in this action research study met the goals Kist suggested. Since students conducted digital research, they practiced and strengthened both their screen-based and informational text reading skills. Also, because the project required them to create and share a multimedia presentation (PowerPoint or Prezi) as an artifact that documented their learning, they practiced their digital writing and oral presentation skills.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) and digital research can strengthen other 21st century skills that are desirable to employers while simultaneously assisting students in

their College and Career Readiness. When students were assigned a project, expected to perform research, and tasked with creating an artifact, the following skills were being tested and reinforced: creating goals, managing time, working independently, and becoming self-directed learners (Kivunja, 2015). For students who are going directly into the workforce, these skills will allow them to demonstrate their advanced productivity capabilities to potential employers. For students who are pursuing higher education after graduation, these skills will prove personally valuable as they matriculate through their programs of study and explore career options.

2.6 GOAL SETTING

The problem of practice for this action research study was that although high school students in this state are encouraged to attend a four-year college, they are not receiving enough assistance in researching options, costs, and alternatives. Also, not all students are planning to head straight to a four-year college. Many students discover that the best option for them is to attend a two-year or technical school, and still others go directly into the workforce. Assistance creating these post-high school goals has been traditionally the responsibility of the school counselors; however, in recent years their caseloads have continued to grow, resulting in a situation where they do not have the time to facilitate such as process of self-discovery for students (Stone-Johnson, 2015). This lack of college and career guidance could be corrected in English classroom through the implementation of a college and career research project, which allows students to practice and reinforce skills emphasized in the 9-12 English standards while also creating a plan for researching their post-high school goals.

Radcliffe and Bos (2013) found that implementing a Project-Based Learning assignment that exposes students to potential future options helps underrepresented college-bound students in the following ways:

- [Understanding] the nature of college,
- [Recognizing] that a college education may be important to his or her future success,
- [Gaining] positive perceptions and aspirations about college,
- [Preparing] academically for college admissions, and
- [Setting] short- and long-term goals that support becoming college-ready. (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013, p. 137)

Additionally, Stipanovic and Stringfield (2013) found that formal efforts to provide information to vocational students on career pathways, career information, and the type of training or degree needed for particular jobs had a positive effect on student engagement and motivation. Therefore, this college and career research project possibly served an instrumental purpose for the futures of all students in my English 3 classroom.

Radcliffe and Bos (2013) also found that the implementation of a college and career research project could increase students' self-efficacy, a concept that is extremely important to reaching goals. Erlich and Russ-Eft (2011) cited Bandura (1997) when providing the following definition for self-efficacy beliefs: "one's confidence in engaging in specific activities that contribute towards progress to one's goals" (p. 5). Through researching requirements for specific careers and schools, students can use the information they have regarding their current Grade Point Average (GPA), financial options for training, and educational objectives to create attainable goals for themselves.

The attainability factor is what would allow students to have confidence that their goals can be reached.

One potential outcome of the college and career research project was that it may prove to be a catalyst for students to make positive academic changes for their remaining high school years. For example, when students learn through individual research that a school such as Clemson University requires a minimum 4.2 GPA for admittance, their self-efficacy may propel them to upgrade from College Preparatory (CP) classes to Honors or Advanced Placement (AP) classes with the goal of increasing their GPA (SCOIS, 2016). Student-initiated course upgrades such as these could help to narrow the achievement gap that exists between white and minority students. Williams (2011) cited a study published by Cohen et al. (2006) that explained that the achievement gap is sometimes an effect that racial stereotypes have on black students. However, "the researchers discovered that when black students are able to affirm their sense of themselves and feel valued, their achievement increases in school" (Williams, 2011, p. 67). An increase in self-efficacy due to the creation of clear college and career goals may have motivated some students to take on a more difficult course load to increase their chances of acceptance of certain colleges.

Another possible result of the implementation of a college and career research project in the secondary English classroom was an increase in students' motivation to perform well on the ACT WorkKeys assessment. This is a state and federal accountability data piece that, according to the South Carolina Department of Education, all eleventh graders in South Carolina take in the spring of their junior year (2015). Schultz and Stern (2013) explained that "a growing number of states have begun using

the ACT WorkKeys Reading for Information, Locating Information, and Applied Mathematics assessments as a measure of College and Career Readiness (ACT Inc., 2011)" (p. 158). Students can also use their ACT WorkKeys scores to secure employment with manufacturing companies in the Charleston area and/or to gain internship or apprenticeship opportunities. The college and career research project allowed students to make connections between qualifications of their chosen career and scores on assessments such as the ACT WorkKeys test. Finally, the PBL assignment provided students with additional opportunities to practice skills such as Reading for Information, Locating Information (both via the informational text portions of the project), and Applied Mathematics (via the budgeting portion of the project) that will be assessed on the ACT WorkKeys test.

2.7 FINANCIAL EDUCATION

After 10 years of conversations with students about their futures, I have gathered that most students' goals are financially-based, but financial education information is rarely incorporated into their four-year high school curriculum. However, it was part of the intervention portion of this action research study. Students were taught how to create an income-based budget as well as loan basics such as interest rates and repayment schedules. Information regarding student loans was emphasized since this is an area of national concern and relevant to many students' futures (Choi, 2014). Finally, since many students and parents consider student loans as a long-term investment, students were taught how to apply the Return on Investment (ROI) concept to tuition/education costs and future salary information. For example, students analyzed whether a $100,000 tuition investment is a good investment when the starting salary of their intended future career is

$35,000. This financial education information was delivered in mini-lessons as part of the pre-research phase of the intervention, and it contained concepts that were applicable to students regardless of their post-high school goals.

Research showed a positive correlation among financial education, career planning, and students' College and Career Readiness. Poynton et al. (2015) found that when students were exposed to career planning, it helped them understand concepts such as how the cost of college compared to anticipated future salaries. Then, they could eliminate school options that they could not afford instead of accumulating high rates of student loans to attend those schools. Their study also revealed that career planning education provided students with information necessary to select college majors that align with their intended career options; students were given the necessary tools to determine future careers based on the anticipated salaries needed to maintain the post-college lifestyle they desired (Poynton et al., 2015). Finally, a study by Mandell and Klein (2009) reported that, one to four years after receiving financial planning education in a high school course, respondents had lower levels of debt (including student loans) and higher proportions of savings than adults who did not receive personal finance education before graduating from high school.

Therefore, financial planning education is an essential component of students' post-high school lives. Ensuring students have a clear understanding of the future implications and repayment requirements of student loans is particularly important because educational debt can decrease future social equity. Citing Heller's (2008) study, Choi (2014) warned that educators "need to pay attention to the possibility that minorities, students from lower income families, and women are more vulnerable to the

negative effect of debt on post-higher education"…specifically, "African-American and Hispanic students tend to be more indebted than their White peers" (p. 31). Choi (2014) continued by explaining that a higher debt load for these three groups (ethnic minorities, students from a low socio-economic status background, and women) adversely affects their options for attending graduate school, which may prevent social equity. However, if students have a clear understanding of student debt and have researched the most cost-effective education options, as well as scholarship and grant opportunities, before beginning college, the potential social equity issue could be eliminated.

The literature review revealed that there is a direct correlation among the three potentially vulnerable groups (minorities, low socio-economic background, and women, according to Choi, 2014) with racial and ethnic minorities having the highest amount of undergraduate student loan debt and lack of financial knowledge. Researchers such as Mandell (2012) showed that race accounts for more of the discrepancies in financial knowledge than any other variable and concluded that "the difference of more than 10 points in financial literacy scores between whites and African Americans represents a 20% differential" (Mandell, 2012, p. 12). Results from the Jump$tart national financial literacy surveys that were conducted with high school seniors in the years 1997, 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2006 demonstrated each year that, when compared, the average score of Caucasians' tests were significantly higher than the non-Caucasians (Peng, 2008). However, minorities are not the only group whose level of financial knowledge is concerning; females are also at a disadvantage.

Females are another group that tends to be underserved when it comes to financial knowledge. Peng (2008) analyzed the same results from the Jump$tart national surveys

mentioned above in relation to gender and found that in 1997, the financial knowledge levels of males and females were similarly high, but the scores of females were slightly higher at 57% against the males' 56.2%. However, by the 2004 and 2006 studies, there was a shift, and the males' scores were higher than the females' by about two percentage points each year (Peng, 2008). Danes et al. (2013) concurred that the financial knowledge level of males is higher than that of females in recent years. They reported the following study outcome after a financial education instruction intervention: "Males reinforced their existing knowledge whereas female teens learned significantly more about finances in areas in which they were unfamiliar" (Danes et al., 2013, p. 24). We must work to ensure that female high school graduates have equal financial knowledge as male high school graduates so that they are not economically disadvantaged in the future.

Because racial and ethnic minorities and females are both underserved regarding financial education, minority females are the most economically disadvantaged sector of American society. Unfortunately, their lack of knowledge on financial matters may affect them in some or all of the following ways: (a) not currently trained or employed to their fullest potential; (b) unable to independently support themselves or their children; or (c) the inability to teach their children how to properly earn, manage, and invest money. Recognizing the need for specialized attention to this matter, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau created an Office of Minority and Women Inclusion (OMWI) that offers devoted support and education for women and minorities (Office, 2014). Financial education for all is necessary so that racial and gender diversity can be achieved among those considered financially knowledgeable.

In addition to women and minorities, students who are in the low socio-economic category benefit exponentially from financial education. Alan Greenspan (2002), former Chairman of the Federal Reserve, noted it is in society's best interest to provide education that allows students to rise above generational poverty, because when adults are able to earn and manage their finances in such ways that allow them to participate in home ownership, communities experience the following benefits: "increased neighborhood stability, more civic-minded residents, better school systems, and reduced crime rates" (p. 37). He also stated that "education and training programs may be the most critical service offered by community-based organizations to enhance the ability of lower-income households to accumulate assets" (Greenspan, 2002, p. 40). Financial education is especially useful for students at the high school where I teach since around 30% of them receive free or reduced lunch.

The final group that benefits from financial education is students in rural communities. The research site was located outside of a growing urban area, but it is classified as rural, and many of the students live in rural communities. According to a study conducted by Hedrick, Light, and Dick (2013), securing the financial resources to attend college or vocational training is a major cause of concern for rural youth. One possible reason for this factor is a lower than average percentage of adults in rural communities have a college degree, so they may lack the experience necessary to guide their children through the college application and financial aid process (Hedrick et al., 2013). The study mentioned one way to alleviate this concern for rural students: financial education that is incorporated into existing curriculum. Through the programs College Readiness for Rural Youth and 4-H, students in rural Ohio areas have received instruction

using Real Money-Real World, and the program has assisted students with college transition, specifically by helping them develop an educational and financial plan to meet their career goals (Hedrick et al., 2013). The action research study that I implemented provided junior students with similar college transition information; their college and career research project included sections such as paying for college and potential future earning based on majors, careers, and/or training obtained.

Carlin and Robinson (2012) found that students who have had financial education instruction "save more, pay off debt more quickly, and spend less on entertainment and eating out [when compared to their non-financially educated peers]" (p. 306). They also reported the following:

> Students who received classroom financial [education] training made a range of choices that were consistent with delaying immediate gratification to increase overall wealth. The data indicates that students who received classroom training internalized the training program's messages of save more today, use credit sparingly, and plan for the future. (Carlin & Robinson, 2012, p. 306)

Learning to save portions of their future income, use credit wisely, and create clear and realistic plans for the future are all positive concepts students were exposed to in the intervention portion of this action research study.

Financial planning education can be useful to students in their future employment since 21st century employers desire their staffs to have financial knowledge. Davis and Carnes (2005) published a study that reported the financial skill that employers most want employees to have is budgeting. Their conclusion stated that employees who do not

know how to budget and manage their money are more likely to be distracted at work, be absent from work, participate in fraud/theft, and file for bankruptcy, which can reflect poorly on the employer (Davis & Carnes, 2005). This information overlapped with some of the Transform SC's Profile of the SC Graduate (2016), in that employees who possess traits of integrity and work ethic are more valuable to their employer. The connection between financial planning education and employee desirability must be noted. Furthermore, this action research study incorporated curriculum that contained units that covered this exact information that employers want their employees to have: Money Management and Borrowing.

Research indicated that financial knowledge is a concerning problem for many South Carolinians. The Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas published a study in 2012 that ranked all 50 states according to the financial knowledge of their respective citizens; SC came in 43 out of 50. Also, one of SC's leading newspapers, *The State,* reported in 2009 that "about 432,000 South Carolina households, or 24.2 percent, [are] underbanked—that is, they have bank accounts but also use more costly financial services…[and] 182,000, or 10.2 percent of SC households, don't have a relationship with a bank, period" (Crumbo, 2009). The costly financial services mentioned include taking out pay-day loans (with extraordinarily high interest rates) and purchasing cashier's checks or money orders (with fees ranging from $3-$10 each) instead of using a check or online bank payment. While some of this deficit can be corrected by personal finance or economics classes, these concepts can also be incorporated into the curriculum of other content areas.

Research also demonstrated that South Carolina students were not learning positive financial habits from their parents. According to a 2012 article published in *The State*, "only 43 percent of parents have discussed the importance of prioritizing needs and wants with their kids, and a surprising 42 percent of parents have not taken the steps to discuss financial basics" (Rantin, 2012). So, almost half of the parents surveyed had not discussed basic financial concepts with their children. A *Time* article (2015) titled "10 Things to Know About Money Before You're 20" cited an Everfi study that found, "the average U.S. college student can only answer about a third of basic financial questions correctly" and "60% of college students mistakenly think [one] can build credit by paying for stuff with checks or debit cards" (Poppick). Perhaps even more alarming were results from a 2011 survey that indicated "parents are nearly as uncomfortable talking to their children about money as they are discussing sex" (Charles Schwab, 2011). Clearly, studies showed that students are not being taught financial concepts at school or at home, and there seemed to be a "they will get the information elsewhere" mentality related to financial knowledge, which is harmful to students and communities. A reversal of this deficit of information could also positively contribute to students' future employability.

2.8 THEORETICAL CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

The first theory that can be applied to this study is essentialist theory. As William Bagley (1939) explained, the essentialist theory asserted that there is a certain core curriculum that all students should study; this curriculum is intended to produce an informed and productive member of society. English classes teach skills such as reading informational texts, researching, communicating, speaking, and writing that are necessary for producing high school graduates who are ready to either gain training, skills, and/or

degrees necessary to meet their educational goals or enter the workforce ready to apply the skills they gained throughout their K-12 education.

Social construction theory was also used to ground this quantitative action research study. Danes et al. (2013) provided an explanation of the theory:

> [Social construction theory] is composed of four central assumptions when applied to the classroom learning context: (a) learning occurs not just through objective, unbiased observation but through critical thinking and applications, (b) learning is historically and culturally specific, (c) learning is sustained by social processes, and (d) learning and social interaction go together. (Danes et al., 2013, p. 22)

Throughout the study, students were asked to demonstrate competency when applying concepts learned during the intervention, discuss their current and previous assumptions with their classmates and me, and complete several journal-entry assignments as they learned and processed new information.

Portions of this study included curriculum and hands-on learning that reflected David Kolb's model of the learning process, which "relies on the concurrent roles of education, observational, and experiential components of knowledge acquisition" (Tang & Peter, 2015, p.134). Incorporating Kolb's model of learning, students participated in research, lecture, application, and discussion.

Additionally, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory was applied to the study. This theory asserted that parts of a student's knowledge acquisition can be related to observing the behavior of others within a social interaction or experience (Erlich & Russ-Eft, 2011). The self-efficacy portion of Bandura's theory was also used to ground the study: students

must be willing to gain the confidence necessary to put their college and career plan into action. Another part of Bandura's theory that was used to ground the study was the Social Cognitive Career Theory, which asserted that people can be assisted in developing "'career-life preparedness' skills necessary to minimize barriers and strengthen supports for educational and career attainment" (Poynton et al., 2015, p. 58). Many students lacked the education necessary for them to make well-informed decisions regarding college and/or career training payment options. This caused some students to forgo college attendance, some to start but end up dropping out, and others to take out large amounts of student loans to finance their education (Poynton et al., 2015). This research project assisted students in developing the skills necessary to gain as much education as they desire, maximize their earning potential, and manage their earnings effectively.

2.9 OPPORTUNITY FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Two outside studies verified the idea that a research project can support students' post-high school readiness. The first study related more to the underrepresented college-bound students in my classes. Radcliffe and Bos (2013), found that several of the factors that prevent students from achieving success in high school and beyond are psychological and can be overcome with guidance from caring adults. In their longitudinal study, factors such as academic-related perceptions, goal orientation, and strategies for perseverance were positively modified through the incorporation and facilitation of a college and career research project along with mentoring. They found that such a project not only decreased the dropout rate of at-risk students, but also helped students "recognize that a college education may be important to [their] future success" and "set

short- and long-term goals that support becoming college-ready" (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013, p. 137).

The second study related more to the workforce-bound students in my classes. Stipanovic and Stringfield (2013) found that students were more engaged with their high school coursework when they "were provided with specific information about career pathways, course planning, [and] career and postsecondary information" (343). The researchers' results contained the statement that "persons best able to provide this guidance would be knowledgeable and experienced adults who hold extensive information regarding careers and training in helping young people engage in self-exploration" (Stipanovic & Stringfield, 2013, p. 334).When students' current assignments were relevant and provided a link to their futures, they were more engaged and likely to graduate and continue to further education/training or a career of interest.

Stipanovic and Stringfield (2013) also reported that when students engaged in guided self-exploration regarding college and careers, they were more likely to set and achieve post-high schools goals. However, Stipanovic and Stringfield (2013) focused exclusively on vocationally-orientated students, and Radcliffe and Bos (2013) focused solely on college-bound students. Therefore, an opportunity for further research was available to create a project that would be useful to the futures of all English 3 students. My classroom-based action research study benefited both college- and career-bound students by assisting each student in the creation of his or her post-high school education/training and career plan.

2.10 CONCLUSION

Educators today have a responsibility to students, parents, and the community to produce students that are ready for college and/or careers. The problem of practice for this quantitative, classroom-based action research study is that although all students are encouraged to go to college and enrolled in at least College Preparatory (CP)-level classes, students are not provided the support necessary to reach those goals. Also, some students desire to head directly into the workforce or attend vocational or technical training instead of college. Recent educational policy changes included the implementation of standards that focus on College and Career Readiness preparation for all students (South Carolina Department of Education, 2015). However, due to school guidance counselors' increased caseload, they do not have enough time to spend with each student to develop a detailed plan for creating and reaching his or her post-high school goals (Stone-Johnson, 2015). Students, especially racial and ethnic minority, low socio-economic status, and first-generation college-bound ones, often do not have familial support in setting and reaching post-graduation goals (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Finally, rural students are the group least likely to go to college (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017), and many students at the high school where I teach live in rural areas.

The information contained in the literature review lead to the creation of a quantitative action research study in which a college and career research project was incorporated into the secondary English classroom to assist students in defining their post-high school goals. This Project-Based Learning (PLB) approach is not a new one; it can be traced to back to John Dewey's 1907 educational philosophy that involved organizing learning around a project (Liu, 2003). However, PBL is a current initiative at

the school where I teach, and educators are encouraged to find opportunities to implement PBL into our curriculum. The results of the intervention were examined to determine if one PBL assignment could effectively meet the needs of both college-bound and vocationally-orientated students.

CHAPTER THREE: Action Research Methodology

3.1 PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

The problem of practice is that without a clearly-defined college or career goal, students struggle in achieving post-high school success.

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

The guiding question for this action research study was the following: How will incorporating a college and career research project into the secondary English curriculum assist students in defining their post-high school goals?

3.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This purpose of this quantitative action research study was to familiarize high school juniors with the array of post-high school options available to them while also increasing their College and Career Readiness. Students were active participants in this research study as they utilized informational texts and Project-Based Learning (PBL) to create a multimedia presentation that outlined their desired educational, career, and lifestyle goals after high school graduation.

3.4 ACTION RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is classified as action research because it was an organized inquiry completed by a classroom teacher who has an interest in the student performance outcomes of the study. The results will be used to inform subsequent teaching practice and/or research (Mertler, 2014). The material covered in the intervention is crucial to students' College and Career Readiness in each of the following areas: (a) demonstration

of necessary English/Language Arts skills including informational text analysis; digital research and multimedia project production; and presentation/communication; (b) exposure to financial education concepts such as budgeting, student loans, and ROI; (c) information regarding alternatives to four-year college such as vocational school, military, apprenticeships, and technical school ;(d) students' creation of a long-range education, career, and lifestyle plan.

The study took place in the spring of 2017 with the 62 participating English 3 students. To protect the identity of the participants and setting, no names are included in the study. The data was taken from pre-and post-intervention surveys where students were asked to respond to college-and career-related questions on a four-part Likert-scale (see Appendix G). The results from the surveys were converted to statistical data and analyzed to reach a conclusion on the impact the students' completion of a college and career research project had on their post-high schools educational and career goals.

The participants in the study were a convenience sample of 62 consenting students in my English 3 classes. The research site for the study was a large, rural high school located in a suburb of Charleston, South Carolina. Most English 3 students are juniors around the ages of 16-17, but some in this study were gifted students who took English 1 in middle school and were a year ahead of their peers. There were also some students included in this study who were in an English 3 class but were technically sophomores, because they are behind and have not yet earned enough credits to be considered a junior. The sample included zero English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) students, five Special Education students who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and three students with a 504 Accommodation Plan. Participants under the

age of 18 as of April, 2017 and their parents were both asked to sign a permission release for the study (see Appendix E). Two students over the age of 18 provided their own signed consent and were included in the study (see Appendix F). This sample represented female and male participants from a variety of races, ethnicities, and socio-economic statuses.

3.5 RESEARCH METHODS

The data collection instrument used for this study was a Likert-scale pre-and post-intervention survey (see Appendix G). Results from each survey were converted to statistical data and compared to determine if the intervention assisted students with the creation of their post-high school goals. A Likert-scale survey instrument was designed for the following reasons: the questions were easy for participants to understand, participants could express their opinion with a variety of options, and it made the pre-and post-intervention easy to analyze. Mertler (2014) recommended a 5-point Likert scale that includes a "no opinion" option, but he also cautioned that this can sometimes prevent people from thinking about how they actually feel about a statement, so instead I utilized a 4-point scale. One potential disadvantage of using this a survey instrument is that a validity problem may occur if participants are lead to an answer via a previous question or if they feel they are expected to answer in a certain way.

The college and career research project that I created for my English 3 students in the 2014-2015 school year ultimately provided the material for what became the survey questions. First, I created an outline for what it means for students to be college and career ready. Second, I created three categories that contained factors important to post-high school success: (a) education/training, (b) intended career, and (c) lifestyle expenses.

Next, I added relevant subcategories. For example, tuition costs and student loans were added to education/training; future salary was added to intended career; and budgeting was added to lifestyle expenses. Then, I generated the English 3 College and Career Research Project assignment (see Appendix A) as well as the College and Career Research Project Rubric (see Appendix B). Finally, I used the categories and subcategories from the assignment and rubric to develop the survey instrument (see Appendix G).

3.6 PROCEDURE

In January of 2017, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of South Carolina determined that my proposed research study qualified for Exempt Status (see Appendix C). I then sought approval from my principal and district to use my classroom as the research site. My principal stated she defered to district decisions, and in March of 2017, I received a letter of approval to conduct classroom research from my district's Research Review Committee (see Appendix D). In early April of 2017, I began collecting consent forms from students in my English 3 classes and their parents (see Appendix E and Appendix F).

The collected study data was quantitative and was derived from statistical data mined from student responses to a pre-and post-intervention survey (see Appendix G). After permission was granted from the district, students, and parents, each student was asked to complete a survey that contained Likert-scale questions related to his/her college and/or career plans. The following are sample items from the survey:

- The adults at my high school expect me to go to a four-year college.
- I am informed about my various four-year/two-year college options.

- I am informed about my various vocational training/apprenticeship options.
- My guidance counselors have discussed my various post-high school goals and options with me.

The survey covered three areas crucial to College and Career Readiness: Career plans, college/training plans, and financial plans. Student demographic information such as gender, race, ethnicity, first-generation college student status, and socio-economic status (as determined by free/reduced lunch participation) was also collected via the survey instrument.

Next, students participated in an intervention: lessons from two units of the High School Financial Planning Program (2013) curriculum provided by the National Endowment for Financial Education. Each student received two small workbooks that contained the following units that corresponded to the college and career research project:

- Money Management: Control Your Cash Flow, and
- Borrowing: Use—Don't Abuse.

I began incorporating these lessons into the English 3 curriculum in mid-April and covered several topics such as budgeting, student loans and interest rates, costs associated with different lifestyle options, conducting research using the South Carolina Career and Occupational Information System (SCOIS), and conducting a personality inventory survey per week. During this time, representatives for each of the following training/career options came to speak to students regarding alternatives to four-year college:

1. The district-sponsored vocational school,
2. The research site apprenticeship coordinator/career specialist, and

3. Admissions representatives from the local technical college.

Beginning in May of 2017, students then applied the information from the mini-lessons and used it to conduct their own research and create a multimedia presentation they shared with the class at the end of May of 2017. This presentation contained the goals students created based on their personality and intended career. The presentation also included information regarding a description of the future career, required qualifications, education and training options, a budget based on anticipated future salary, and lifestyle goals (see Appendix A).

3.7 DATA ANALYSIS

The quantitative, statistical data from the pre-and post-intervention survey was analyzed in relation to the following eight anticipated findings:

Finding 1: The majority of students would report on the pre-survey that they "agree" or "strongly agree" to being informed about four-year college options but "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to being informed about vocational and apprenticeship options.

Finding 2: The number of students reporting that they "agree" or "strongly agree" to the statement "I understand the basic principles of student loans including interest and repayment" would increase from the pre-survey to the post-survey.

Finding 3: The number of students reporting that they "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to the statement "I would feel comfortable borrowing [more than $25,000] for educational expenses" would increase from the pre-survey to the post-survey.

Finding 4: The number of students reporting that they "agree" or "strongly agree" to the statement "I know which career(s) matches my personality" would increase from the pre-survey to the post-survey.

Finding 5: The number of students reporting that they "agree" or "strongly agree" to the statement "I know what specific degree/certification/training/internship is required for my future career" would increase from the pre-survey to the post-survey.

Finding 6: The number of students reporting that they "agree" or "strongly agree" to the statement "I know how to create a budget/spending plan based on income or anticipated income" would increase from the pre-survey to the post-survey.

Finding 7: The number of students reporting that they "agree" or "strongly agree" to the statement "I have considered my future lifestyle goals and the income required to achieve them" would increase from the pre-survey to the post-survey.

Finding 8: The majority of student-participants will be placed in one or more of the subsections (first-generation, ethnic minority, low socio-economic status) of underrepresented college-bound students.

Butin (2010) suggested action researchers begin descriptive analysis by organizing data via an online database or the use of a spreadsheet such as Excel. I utilized Google Docs for my students' surveys, and the data was automatically converted to pie graph format. This visual display of percentages made it easy for me to complete the subsequent steps of comparing and contrasting the pre-and post-survey responses, looking for patterns or surprises, and analyzing the data in relation to the anticipated findings (Mertler, 2014).

Calculations were performed to determine the exact increase or decrease in student knowledge or perception related to the intervention.

3.8 PLAN FOR REFLECTING WITH PARTICIPANTS ON DATA

After the data from the pre-survey and post-survey were collected and analyzed, I created a PowerPoint presentation that contained easy-to-read graphics as well as text that demonstrated the changes participants experienced during the intervention. I shared this information with students one day during the last week in May of 2017; this was after the study was complete but before students began their final exams. I organized the PowerPoint in relation to the eight anticipated findings, and I informed students about the findings that were confirmed as well as the following unanticipated findings: (a) a decrease in the discussion of goals and options at home, (b) an increase in student willingness to borrow above average amounts of student loans and (c) a decrease in students' knowledge of two-year college options. Informal discussion occurred regarding the unanticipated findings, but because the study lacked a qualitative component, the information could not be systematically collected and analyzed.

The PowerPoint that contained the results of the study was posted to my school webpage, and parents were notified when it was added. The informal feedback that I received via email from two parents was that they were glad students were developing plans for their future and being informed of their various options. In my 10 years of experience as a high school teacher, I have discovered that parents and college-bound students are most concerned about acceptance and the cost of education; this project may have been a first step in the process for some of these students. Finally, as requested by

the district's Research Review Committee, they were sent a report of my findings of their files.

3.9 PLAN FOR DEVISING AN ACTION PLAN

The Project-Based Learning assignment that was included in this action research study is a project that my English 3 students complete each year. Typically, this assignment is a culmination of curriculum, mini-lesson, and guest speakers that students experience throughout the school year. However, the difference during the 2016-2017 school year was the concentration of the material. For the action research study conducted in the spring of 2017, everything was condensed into two months: collecting permission forms, the pre-intervention survey, the intervention (mini-lessons, guest speakers, student-conducted research, and student presentations), and the post-intervention survey. Because I anticipated completing my data collection at that time, I incorporated these factors into the long-range curriculum plan for my English 3 classes that was developed in August of 2016.

In the future, I plan to conduct this study with my English 3 students each year because the findings demonstrate that it was effective in helping them develop or define their post-high school plans. Beginning with the 2017-2018 school year, I would create a long-range curriculum plan that begins incorporating the material in August and covers it in intervals throughout the year. I also plan to recruit other English 3 teachers at my school to incorporate this college and career project into their curriculum. Finally, I plan to seek opportunities to present my study and findings to colleagues in English and other departments with the goal of convincing others of the value of including relevant, Project-Based Learning assignments in their courses.

CHAPTER FOUR: Findings from the Data

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Students cannot be truly ready for college and/or career when they are graduating from high school without a clear idea of what is required or involved for various avenues they may want to pursue. Incorporating a college and career research project into the secondary English curriculum can assist students in formulating a plan for their post-high school lives and a goal to work towards as they begin adulthood. The overburdening of high school guidance counselors, the recent focus in South Carolina on educational/training alternatives to four-year degrees, and the nationwide student loan debt concerns all combined to point to the utility of an action research study that provided an interdisciplinary way for students to conduct relevant, real-world, goal-setting research that may impact their future success.

In the spring of the 2016-2017 school year, 62 consenting students in my English 3 classes became participants in a quantitative action research study that sought to determine the effectiveness of the incorporation of a college and career research project into the secondary English curriculum. The students took a Likert-scale pre-survey and experienced an intervention consisting of guest speakers, mini-lessons, and a research project; then students answered the same questions for the Likert-scale post-survey. The resulting data were analyzed to draw conclusions, and the results were shared with students, parents, and district office personnel.

4.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question for this quantitative action research study was: How did incorporating a college and career research project into the secondary English curriculum assist students in defining their post-high school goals?

4.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this action research study was to familiarize high school juniors with the multiplicity of post-high schools training, education, and career options available to them. Students were active participants in this Project-Based Learning assignment as they accomplished the following objectives:

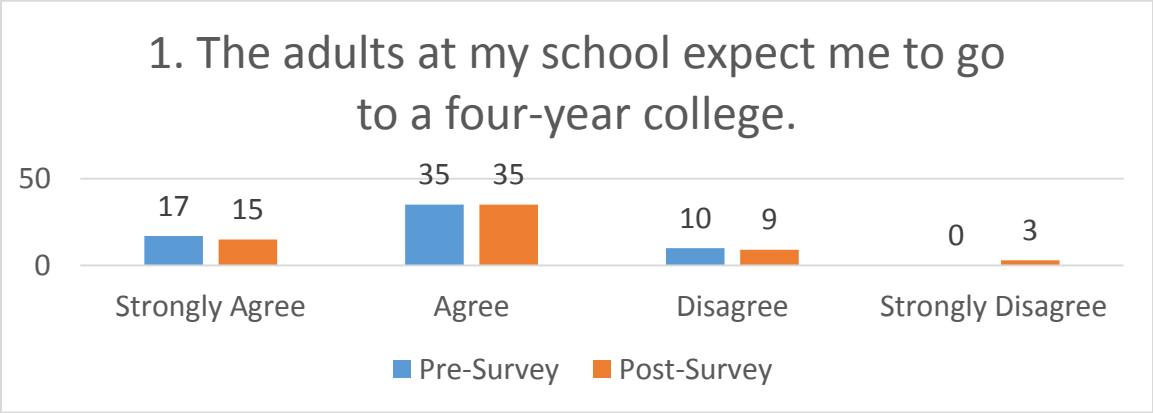
1. Completed digital research.
2. Reinforced their MLA formatting skills.
3. Increased their exposure to and interaction with informational texts.
4. Learned from guest speakers about a variety of training and educational options available to them.
5. Determined which career(s) match their personality type.
6. Utilized South Carolina Career and Occupational Information System (SCOIS), a digital database of current, SC-specific information, to complete the following: gather information regarding qualifications, education/training options, and salary information regarding their chosen future career.
7. Used the starting salary information for their chosen future career and information regarding the costs of supporting their intended future lifestyle to create a sample budget.

8. Compiled the information they gathered regarding their future plans and goals into a multimedia project which they presented during class to their English 3 peers.

4.4 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

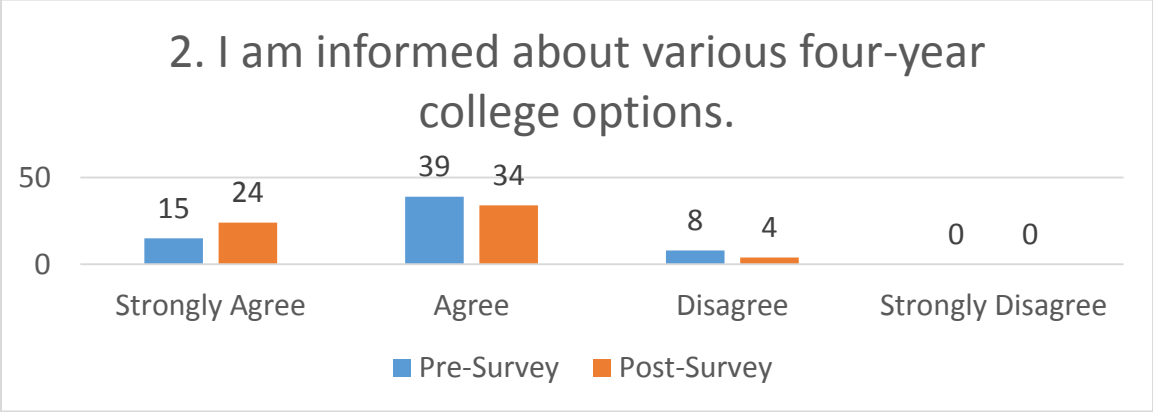
At the conclusion of the study, I collected student data via a post-intervention survey which is the same instrument that was used for the pre-intervention survey (see Appendix G). The data was compared and analyzed, and the results indicated that student knowledge of the following topics increased as a result of the intervention: (a) vocational training and apprenticeship options, (b) specific training and education requirements for students' intended future career, and (c) financial concepts such as student loan information and budgeting basics. The following contains the outcomes of a careful analysis of each question on the pre-and post-intervention survey (see Appendix G).

Table 4.1: School expectations



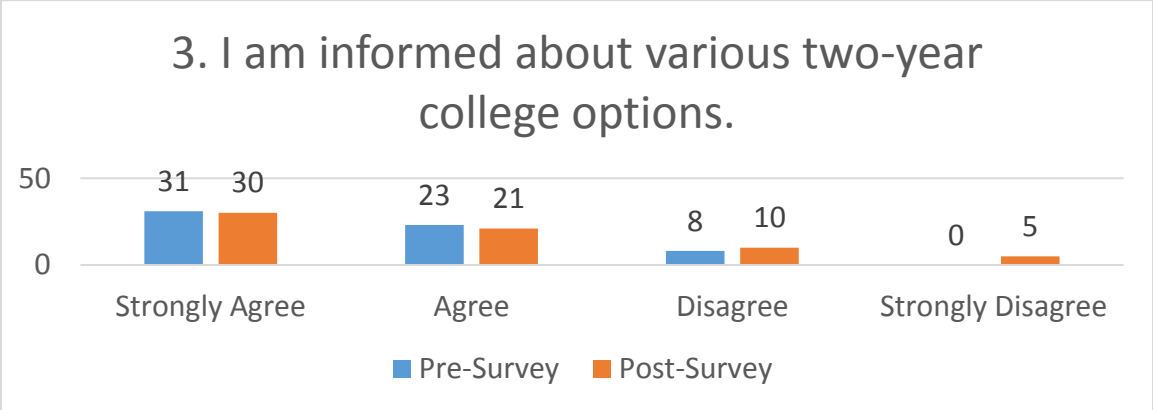
This data set indicated a 4% decrease in student perception that the adults in their school expected them to go to a four-year college.

Table 4.2: Four-year options



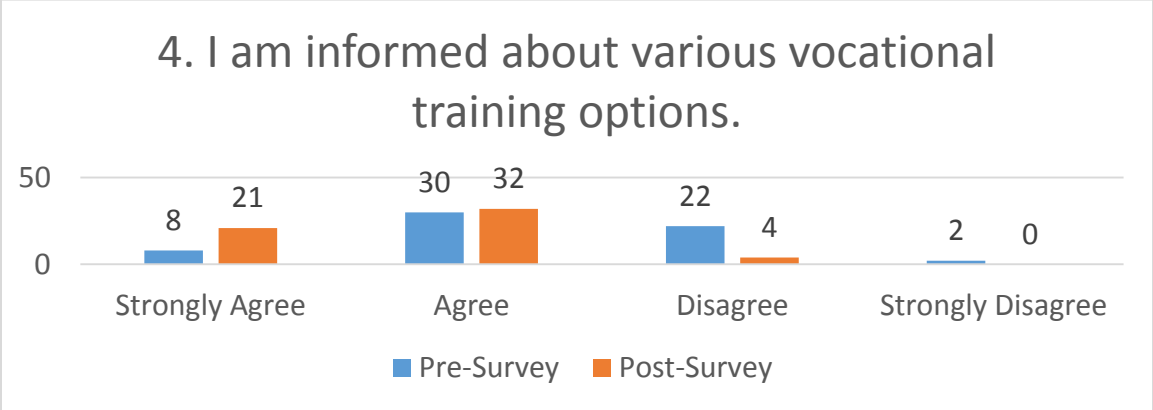
This data set indicated a 7.4% increase in participants reporting that they were informed of various four-year college options.

Table 4.3: Two-year options



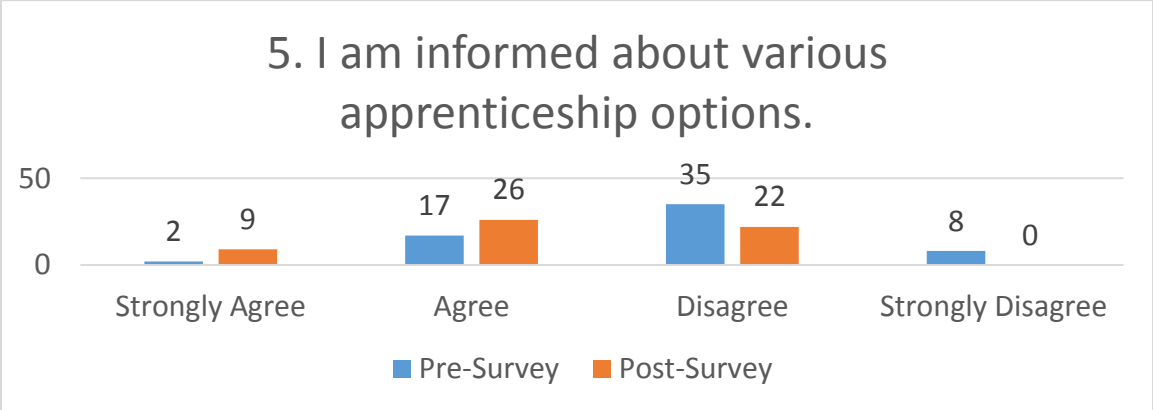
This data set indicated a 5.9% decrease in participants reporting they were informed about various two-year college options.

Table 4.4: Vocational options



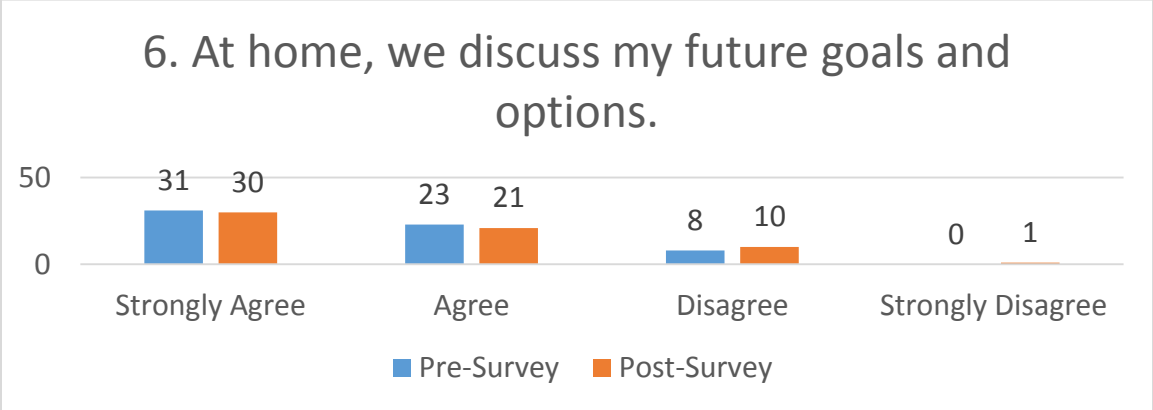
This data set indicated a 39.4% increase in the number of students who were informed of their vocational training options as a result of the intervention.

Table 4.5: Apprenticeship options



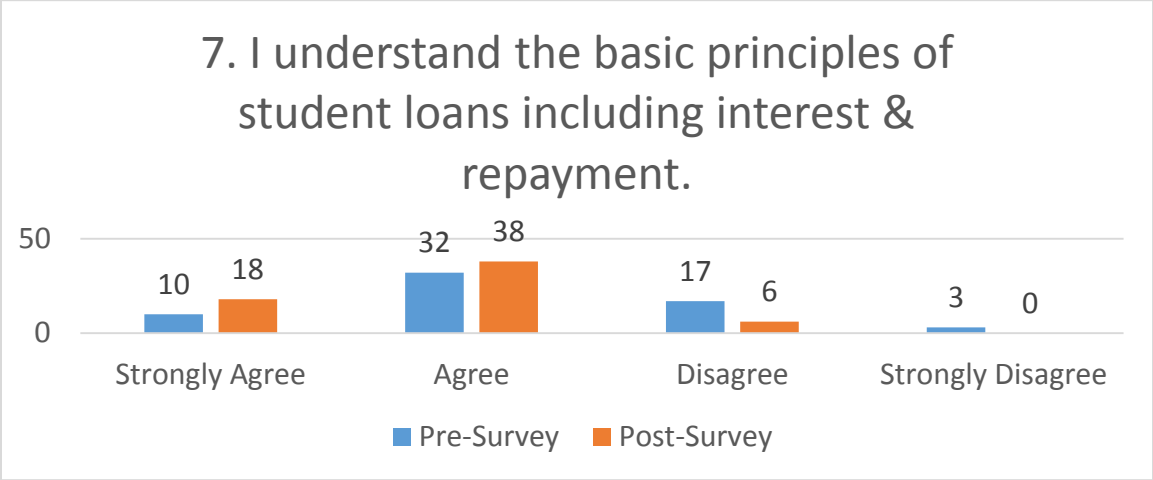
This data set indicated an 81% increase in the number of students who were informed about their apprenticeship training options as a result of the intervention.

Table 4.6: Home discussion



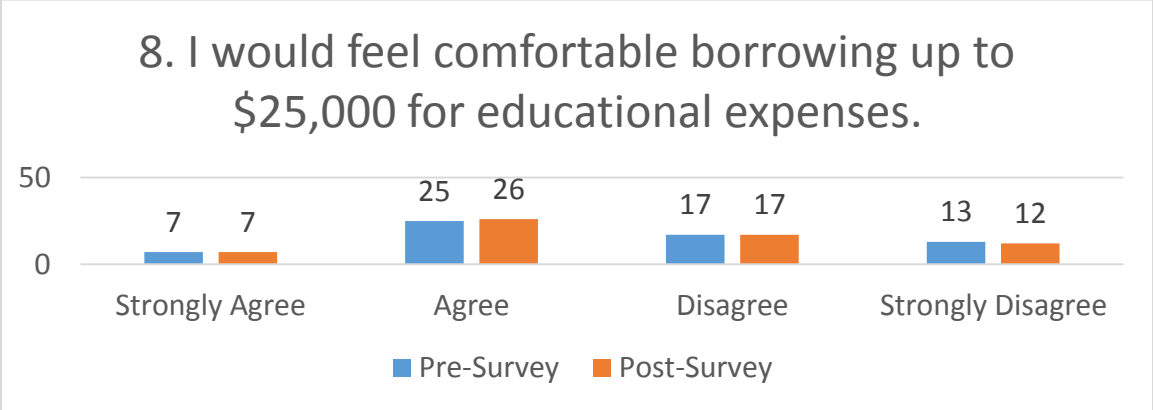
This data set indicated a 5.9% decrease in students reporting that they discussed their future goals and options at home.

Table 4.7: Student loan knowledge



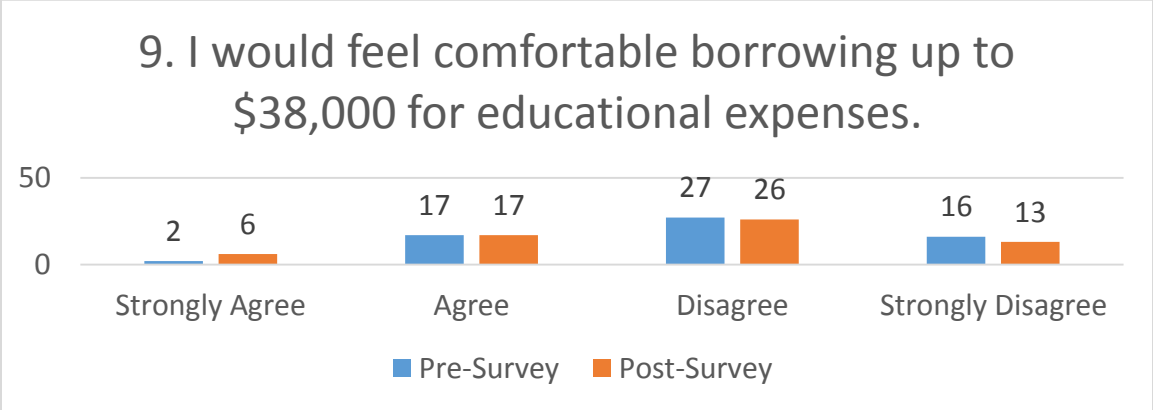
This data represented a 33.3% increase in student knowledge of the basic principles of student loans and indicated that post-intervention, 90% of students reported understanding student loan interest and repayment.

Table 4.8: Borrowing up to $25,000



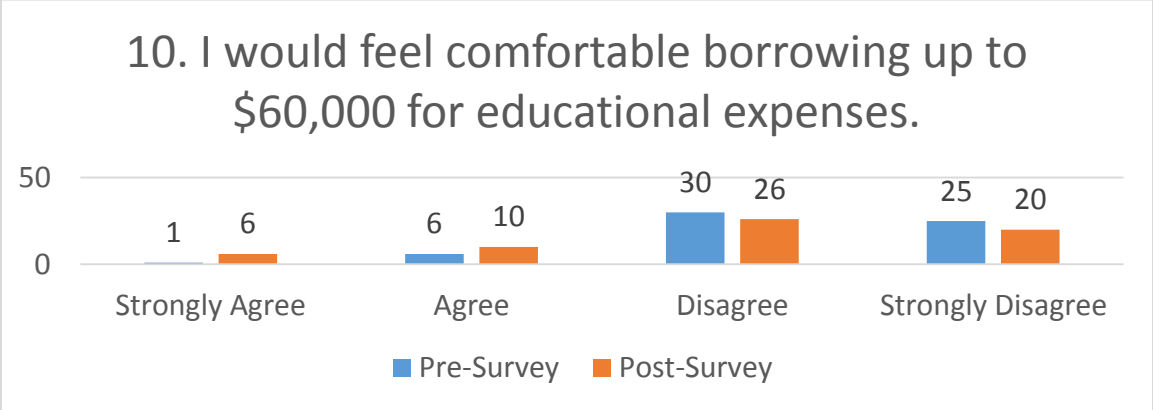
This data set indicated that 51.6% of participants reported on the pre-survey that they would feel comfortable borrowing up to $25,000 for educational expenses, and 53.2% reported the same on the post-survey.

Table 4.9: Borrowing up to $38,000



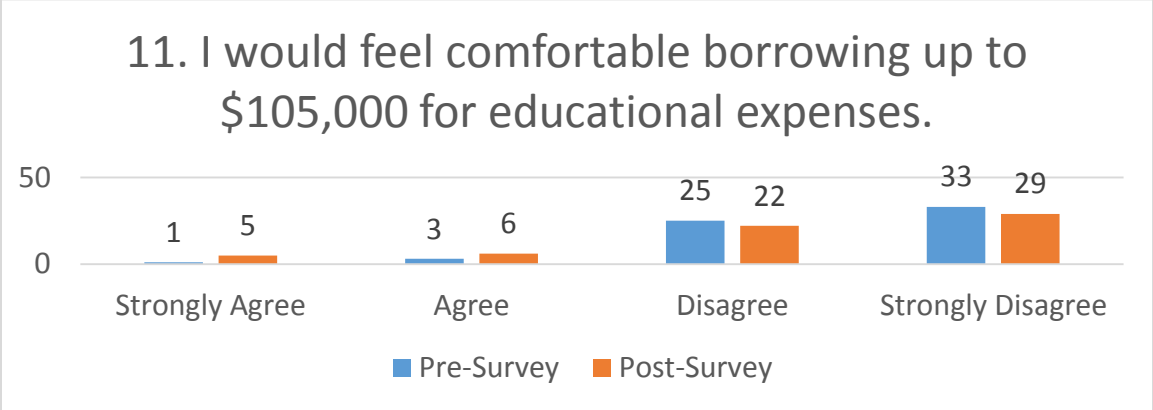
This data indicated that 30.6% of participants reported on the pre-survey that they would feel comfortable borrowing up to $38,000 for educational expenses, and 37.1% reported the same on the post-survey. This represented a 21% increase in the number of students who were willing to borrow up to $38,000.

Table 4.10: Borrowing up to $60,000



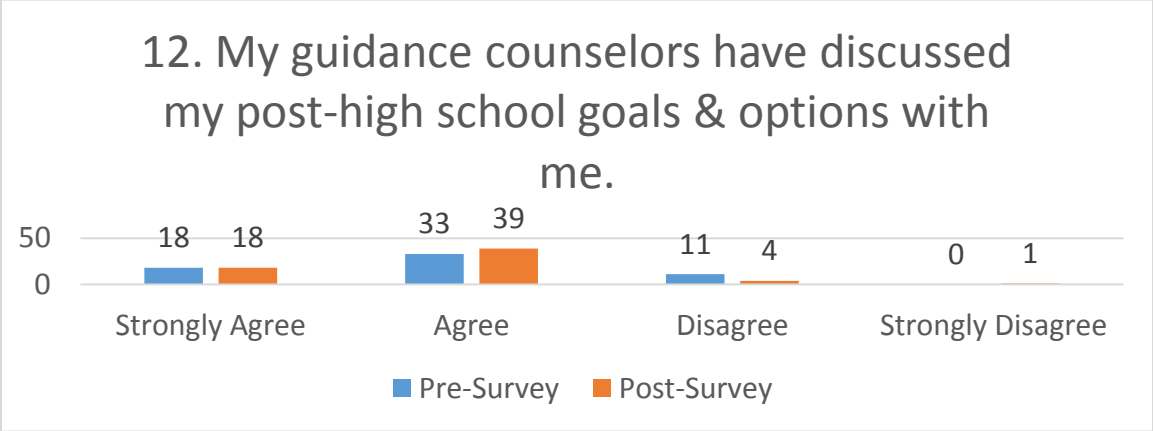
This data indicated that 11.3% of participants reported on the pre-survey that they would feel comfortable borrowing up to $60,000 for educational expenses, and 25.8% reported the same on the post-survey. This represented a 128.6% increase in the number of students who were willing to borrow up to $60,000.

Table 4.11: Borrowing up to $105,000



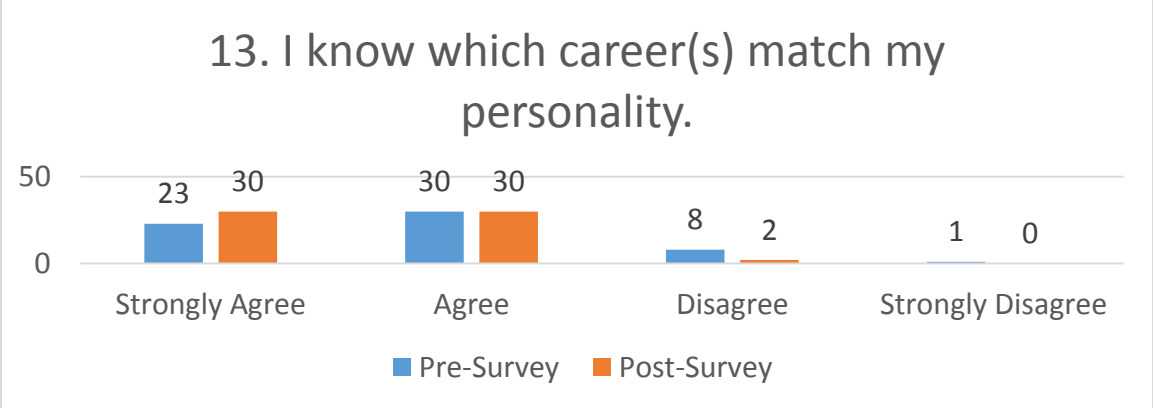
This data indicated that 6.5% of participants reported on the pre-survey that they would feel comfortable borrowing up to $105,000 for educational expenses, and 17.7% reported the same on the post-survey. This represented a 175% increase in the number of students who were willing to borrow up to $105,000.

Table 4.12: Guidance counselor discussion



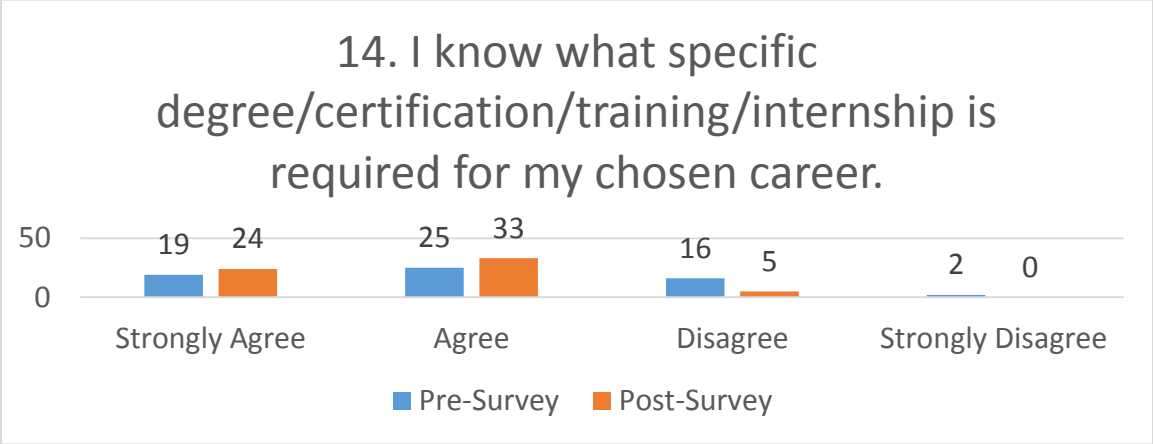
This data set indicated that there was an 11.8% increase in the number of participants reporting that their guidance counselor(s) had discussed post-high school options with him/her.

Table 4.13: Career and personality



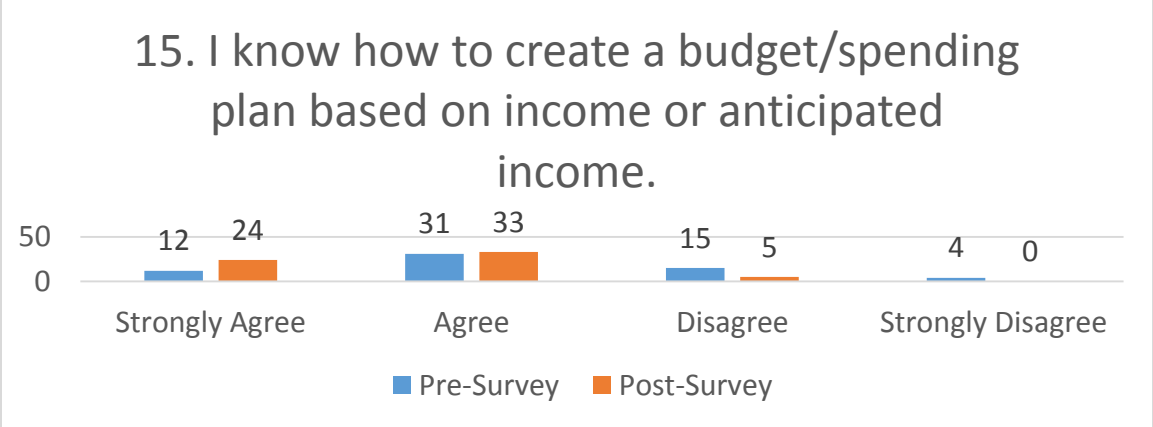
This data set indicated a 13.2% increase in participants reporting that they knew which career(s) matched their personality and also indicated that post-intervention, 96.8% of students possessed this knowledge.

Table 4.14: Career requirements



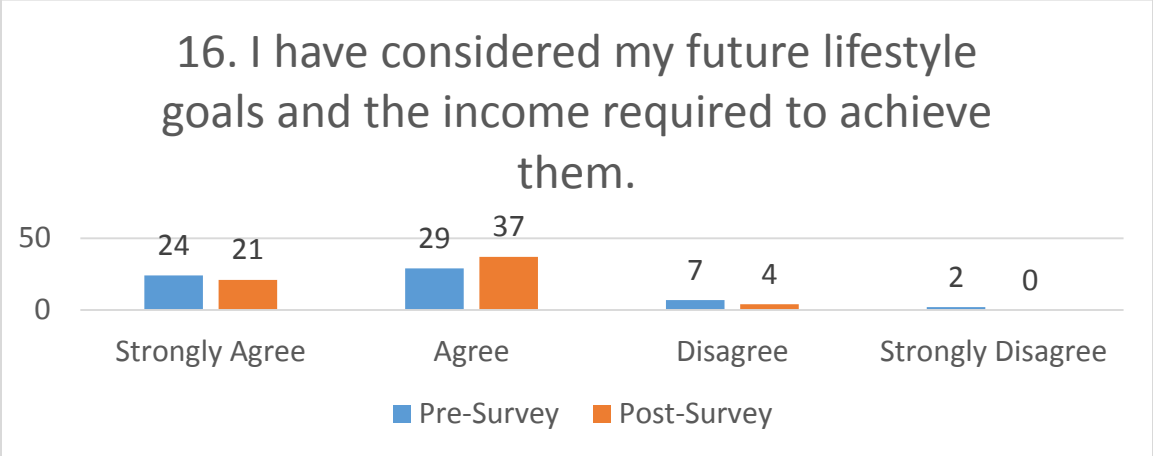
This data set indicated a 29.5% increase in students reporting post-intervention that they knew the training/educational requirements for their chosen career.

Table 4.15: Budget knowledge



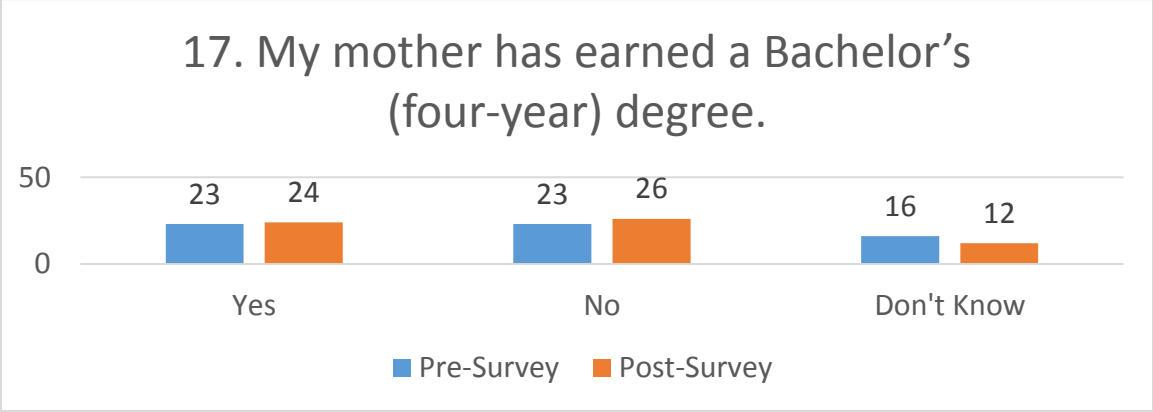
This data represented a 32.6% increase in students reporting post-intervention that they knew how to create a budget/spending plan based on income or anticipated income.

Table 4.16: Lifestyle goals



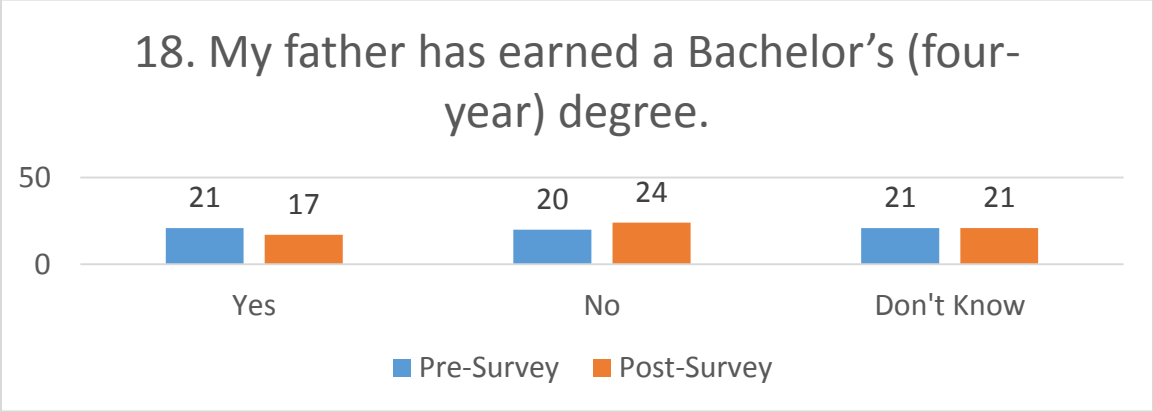
This data represented a 9.4% increase in students reporting on post-intervention that they had considered their future lifestyle goals and the income required to achieve them.

Table 4.17: College graduate status of mother



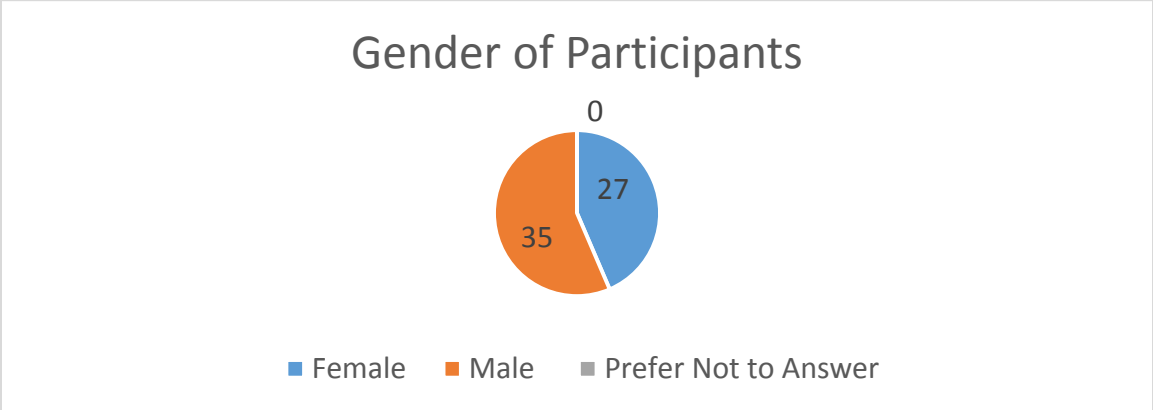
This post-survey data was used to determine if participants were first-generation college-bound students.

Table 4.18: College graduate status of father



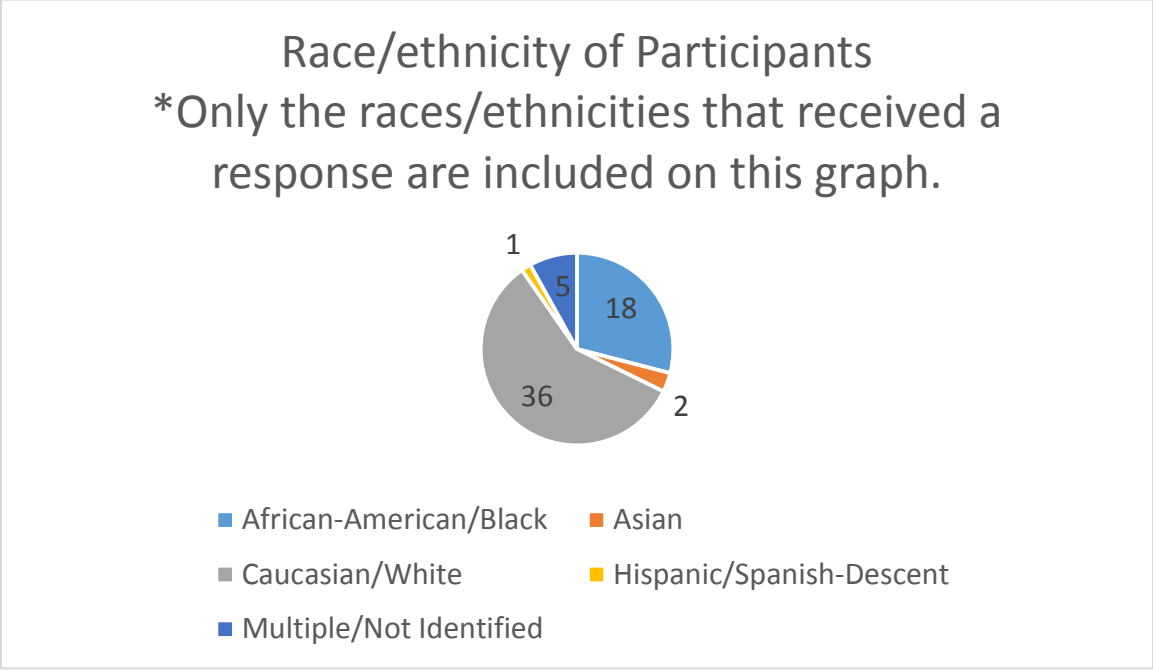
This post-survey data was used to determine if participants were first-generation college-bound students.

Table 4.19: Participant gender



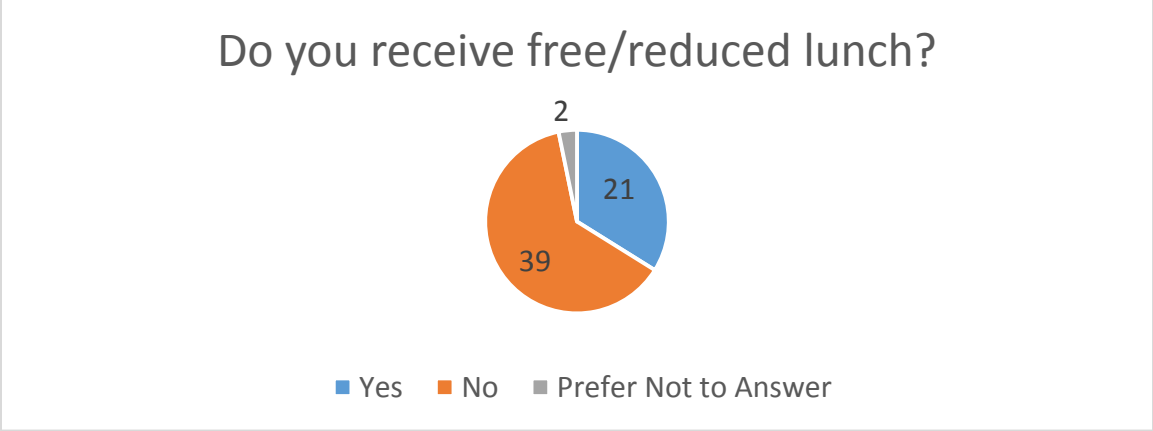
This information was used to classify students during the data analysis.

Table 4.20: Participant race/ethnicity



This information was used to classify students during the data analysis.

Table 4.21: Participant free/reduced lunch status



This information was utilized during the data analysis. For classification purposes, students who answered affirmatively were placed in the low-socioeconomic status category.

4.5 INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

One of the variables of interest in this study concerned student perception of the expectations of adults in their school. Background research indicated that it is critical that students know all of their post-high school options instead of just their four-year college option. In the pre-survey, the majority of students reported a perception that the adults at their school expect them to attend a four-year college. However, after the intervention, there was 4% decrease in this perception that could be due to students being more familiar with their non-four-year college options such as vocational training, apprenticeships, and/or two-year college (see Table 4.1).

Another variable of interest was the degree to which students were informed of all post-high school options including four-year college, two-year college, vocational training, and apprenticeship. The post-survey indicated a 7.4% increase in participants reporting that they were informed about various four-year college options (see Table 4.2). Student self-directed research about their educational options was part of the intervention, so it is likely that students gained this information during the study.

A third variable of interest involved students' knowledge of their various two-year college options. The post-survey indicated a 5.9% decrease in participants reporting that they are informed about these options (see Table 4.3). This was an unanticipated finding since the intervention included guest speakers from the local community college, and students had the opportunity to research two-year college options when they were creating their College and Career Research Project. It is possible that this finding was a result of a flaw in the wording of that statement on the survey instrument. It is suggested that for future studies, the word "various" be removed or clarified.

The next variables of interest concerned whether the data indicated that students were informed of their vocational and apprenticeship options. The data from the post-survey showed that there was a 39.4% increase in the number of students who reported that they were informed of their vocational training options (see Table 4.4). This finding was reasonable because a portion of the intervention entailed a guest speaker from the district-sponsored vocational school visiting my classroom and sharing a presentation that informed students of their vocational training options available as free high school electives.

According to the pre-survey responses, only 30.6% of participants reported being informed of their apprenticeship options; this low number was an anticipated finding because apprenticeships are a recently reemerging trend in South Carolina. The post-survey data indicated that there was an 81% increase in the number of students who were informed about their apprenticeship options as a result of the intervention (see Table 4.5). The increase in student knowledge regarding their apprenticeship options that was revealed on the post-survey was likely because the career specialist from the high school where I teach was a guest speaker in my classroom during the intervention portion of the study and shared a presentation with students that contained information about their apprenticeship options.

The next variable of interest concerned the discussion of students' post-high school goals and options that occurs at home. An unexpected post-intervention finding was that there was a 5.9% decrease in students reporting that they discussed their future goals and options at home (see Table 4.6). It was expected that students would discuss with their parent or guardian the information regarding their goals and options they were

discovering as they completed the research for their project. One possible explanation for this decrease is that when students realized they had more options than had previously been discussed at home, they perceived a decrease in the discussion of goals and options. For example, if a parent only ever discussed four-year college as a goal and option with a student, once that student realized that he/she has additional options such as vocational training, apprenticeships, and two-year college, he or she may agree less with the following statement that is listed on the survey: *At home, we discuss my future goals and options.* Another possible explanation is that during the intervention, students were expected to examine educational, career, and lifestyle goals. Perhaps during the post-survey, students felt only one or two goals were the focus of home discussion. It is suggested that in future studies, an assignment be added to the project that assists in facilitating a home-school discussion about students' futures.

The following variables of interest involved financial education information. Background research indicated that student loans and debt were a large factor in students' post-high school success, so questions addressing this topic were included in the survey and the intervention. The post-survey indicated a 33.3% increase in student knowledge of the basic principles of student loans and indicated that post-intervention, and 90% of students reported understanding student loan interest and repayment (see Table 4.7). This finding was anticipated since a portion of the intervention included mini-lessons from the High School Financial Planning Program (2013) curriculum that covered concepts such as loan interest rates and repayment information. Students were given the opportunity to practice calculating simple and compound interest, payment schedules were discussed,

and students were required to include their anticipated student loan payment amount when they created the budget that was part of their research project.

An analysis of the data indicated that about half of the participants (51.6%) reported on the pre-survey that they would feel comfortable borrowing up to $25,000 for educational expenses, and 53.2% reported the same on the post-survey (see Table 4.8). According to a (2017) report by the Institute for College Access and Success, the average amount that graduates of South Carolina colleges and universities borrowed in 2015 was $30,564, so the amount that about half of participants were willing to borrow is aligned with the state average.

It was anticipated that once students experienced the study intervention that included information about student loans, interest, repayment, tuition rates, and anticipated salary for their future careers, they would be less willing to borrow higher amounts for educational expenses. However, an analysis of the pre-and post-survey data revealed the following:

- A 21% increase in the number of students willing to borrow up to $38,000 for educational expenses (see Table 4.9).
- A 128.6% increase in the number of students willing to borrow up to $60,000 for educational expenses (see Table 4.10).
- A 175% increase in the number of students willing to borrow up to $105,000 for educational expenses (see Table 4.11).

A close examination of this data revealed that on both the pre-survey and the post-survey, the majority of students are not willing to borrow $60,000 or $105,000; however, it cannot be ignored that a small number of students were willing to borrow more for educational expenses after the intervention.

Possible explanations for this unanticipated finding include the following:

1. During the research portion of the intervention, students realized that the starting salary of their intended future career was higher than they initially thought; therefore, when they calculated the Return on Investment (ROI) of their educational expenses, they decided they could borrow more.
2. When students created their budget based on their anticipated future salary and included the student loan payment that was based on the amount they expected to borrow for educational expenses, they realized the monthly payment was more manageable than they had expected, so they decided they could borrow more.
3. When students were researching training, college, and university options while gathering information to create their project, they discovered their educational expenses would be higher than they anticipated, so they decided they would need to borrow more to reach their goals.

The financial education variable was one example of an instance during the research study when a mixed-methods approach or a qualitative component would have been helpful. Then, focus groups could have been developed, and student interviews could have been recorded and analyzed to determine the factors that caused students to respond differently on the post-survey.

Two additional variables of interest were related to financial education. The first was whether students knew how to create an income-based budget. Background research indicated that effective money management was a key component to students' future financial success regardless of the salary associated with their chosen career field. An analysis of the data indicated a 32.6% increase in students reporting post-intervention that they knew how to create a budget/spending plan based on income or anticipated future income (see Table 4.15). This finding was anticipated due to two factors: (a) students learned about budgets and created a practice spending plan for one of the mini-lessons from the HSFPP (2013) curriculum and (b) students researched the starting salary for their anticipated future career and used that information to create a budget that was included in their final presentation.

The second and final variable related to financial education related to students future lifestyle goals and the income required to achieve them. Background research indicated that students often have lifestyle goals that require income levels that exceed average starting salaries. To help ensure students were as realistic as possible with their lifestyle goals and career choices, this variable was included in the survey and intervention. An analysis of the post-survey data indicated a 9.4% increase in students reporting that they have considered their future lifestyle goals and the income required to achieve them (see Table 4.16). This finding was anticipated because a portion of the College and Career Research Project (see Appendix A) that students completed during the intervention required them to use curriculum provided by the Federal Reserve of Richmond to research costs associated with lifestyle choices related to the following: housing, transportation, food, entertainment, connectivity (phones), and clothing.

Students then incorporated this information into the budget they created based on the starting salary of their anticipated future career and their lifestyle goals.

Another variable of interest was students' perception of whether their guidance counselors had discussed their post-high school goals and options with them. Background research indicated that the majority of school guidance counselors' time is dedicated to Individual Graduation Plan (IGP) meetings, so this variable sought to determine if students found those meetings valuable. The pre-survey indicated that the majority of students did feel their guidance counselors had discussed their future goals and options with them, and the post-survey also indicated an 11.8% increase in this perception (see Table 4.12). One possible explanation for the increase was that a school guidance counselor/career specialist came into my classroom during the intervention to share apprenticeship options with students. Another possible explanation is that once students began to utilize the information they gained during the intervention to define their post-high school plans and goals, they may have made an appointment with their guidance counselor to amend their class schedule for their senior year of high school. One possible amendment would be students moving from a College Preparatory (CP) class to an Honors or Advanced Placement (AP) course with the intention of increasing their Grade Point Average (GPA) before applying to their college or university of choice. Another possible amendment would be students switching school-based electives to vocational school electives if they were interested in the training options available there.

One variable of interest that relates to possible future job satisfaction is whether students knew which career matched their personality. Background research indicated that students may not have considered this factor when selecting a potential future career.

The post-survey data indicated a 13.2% increase in participants reporting that they knew which career(s) matched their personality and also indicated that, post-intervention, 96.8% of students possessed this knowledge (see Table 4.13). This finding was anticipated since a portion of the College and Career Research Project (see Appendix A) that students completed as part of the intervention required them to take a free Myers-Briggs personality test and include the resulting four-part personality profile in their presentation. Along with the four-part personality profile, students received a list of careers that matched their personality. Based on informal observations of student discussion during the creation of the presentations, the career/personality information seemed to be useful to students who did not have a clear idea of a career goal or desired future career.

Since the majority of students' training and education decisions are based on preparing for a particular career or a job in a certain career field, one variable of interest concerned student knowledge of the training and/or education requirements for their intended future career. An analysis of the pre-and post-survey data indicated a 29.5% increase in students reporting post-intervention that they knew the requirements for this variable of interest (see Table 4.14). This finding was anticipated due to the fact that the College and Career Research Project (see Appendix A) that students completed during the intervention required them to use the SCOIS website to research education and training preparation requirements for their anticipated future career. Students included this information on their final presentations.

The final variables of interest were related demographic information that was utilized for student grouping during the data analysis. This information was collected to determine if students were classified in one or more of the traditionally underrepresented college student categories (racial or ethnic minority, low socio-economic status, or first generation college-bound). An analysis of the data revealed that 70.9% of participants in this action research study could be placed in one or more of the categories previously listed (see Tables 4.17, 4.18, 4.20, and 4.21). Often, participants were traditionally underrepresented in more than one category. For example, participants who were classified as low socio-economic status due to their free/reduced lunch status were frequently also first generation college-bound students. This finding supports the necessity for an action research study such as this to be incorporated into the curriculum; as background research indicated, underrepresented college-bound students often need additional guidance in setting and achieving educational and career goals.

Lastly, an analysis of the demographic information indicated an unanticipated finding: Even post-intervention, 19.3% of students did not know if their mother possessed a Bachelor's degree, and 33.9% of students did not know if their father possessed a Bachelor's degree (see Tables 4.17 and 4.18). It is probable that a small percentage of students were not in contact with at least one parent and therefore were unsure of his/her educational attainment status, but it is more likely that this indication mirrors the data results reported in Table 4.6: only about half of student-participants reported discussing future goals and options at home. This finding revealed an opportunity for future research on ways a school-home discussion surrounding educational and career options and goals can be facilitated.

4.6 CONCLUSION

How did the incorporation of a college and career research project assist students in defining their post-high school goals? The research project provided students with a concrete long-range plan for their educational/training, career, and lifestyle goals. It also provided participants with a roadmap for achieving these goals. The data indicated that students increased their knowledge on the following topics related to the creation of future goals: College and training options as well as student loans, budgeting, & lifestyle costs. Improved understanding of these topics should be helpful as students make subsequent decisions regarding future training, education, career, and lifestyle options. There were a few unanticipated findings that would potentially hinder students' post-high school success: Participants' unfamiliarity with various two-year college options (Table 4.3), a decrease in goal discussion at home (Table 4.6), and an increase in student willingness to borrow above average amounts of student loans (Tables 4.8, 4.9, 4.10, and 4.11). Additional action research studies should be completed with a similar sample of junior students to determine the generalizability of these results. I plan to conduct an identical study with my English 3 classes during the 2017-2018 school year. I also plan to find opportunities to encourage other English 3 teachers in my district, state, and nation to conduct similar studies to assist their students in defining their post-high school goals. The unanticipated findings that resulted from this study present opportunities for future research that will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Research such as Royster et al. (2015) showed that without clearly-defined educational and career goals, students have difficulty motivating themselves to succeed in high school and beyond. Therefore, the Problem of Practice for this study was the fact that students are graduating from high school without clearly defined educational and career goals. The intent of this study was to create an intervention that could help students define and clarify their post-high school educational and career goals while also increasing their College and Career Readiness by providing them with additional exposure to informational texts, requiring them to conduct digital research, and having them create and present a multimedia project. The effectiveness of the intervention was determined by the data collected via pre-and post-intervention surveys and analyzed considering the research question. In many ways, the intervention did provide opportunities for students to develop or hone their post-high school goals. There were also a few unanticipated findings, and opportunities for future research were discovered. This chapter will provide an overview of the study, discuss the major points and implications, and reveal an action plan to be utilized with future English 3 students.

5.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question for this quantitative action research study was: How did incorporating a college and career research project into the secondary English curriculum

assist students in defining their post-high school goals? The ways the project assisted students are measured by the pre-and post-intervention surveys.

5.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this quantitative action research study was to familiarize high school juniors with the range of post-high school options available to them. Students were active participants in this Project-Based Learning assignment as they worked with digital informational texts to compare and evaluate information to create a multimedia presentation that outlined the following regarding their intended future career: ways it matched their personality, the qualifications required, education/training options, and how their lifestyle goals matched their intended future salary.

5.4 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

The data analysis of this quantitative action research study revealed that the intervention was useful in helping students to define their post-high school goals. The major points of the study are discussed below:

The first insight was that career planning/counseling must begin in high school. Researchers such as Schaub (2012) and Galles and Lenz (2013) advocated for reform in college career counseling centers, but the 21st century reality is that career planning must begin in high school. One reason for this is that students can tailor their high school course schedule to prepare for a career or college major. Another reason for this is that not all students are headed straight to a four-year college, and those apprenticeship-or vocationally-orientated students need and deserve career counseling services, too. The findings of this study showed that career planning can be useful to students in the areas of making them aware of a variety of training/education options, providing relevant

financial education, and helping them consider how their personality and lifestyle goals intersect with career objectives.

Relevant to the first insight, another major point that was supported by this action research study was that financial education is effective. Post-intervention, participants reported a 33.3% increase in knowledge of the basic principles of student loans (see Table 4.7), a 32.6% increase in knowledge about creating a budget based on income or anticipated income (see Table 4.15), and a 9.4% increase in considering the income necessary to support their future lifestyle goals (see Table 4.16).

The third insight of this quantitative research study was that students must be fully informed about the benefits and risks of student loans. During the intervention, students learned how to conduct a Return on Investment (ROI) analysis using the cost of their intended education/training as well as the starting salary of their anticipated future career. They were also taught the basics of student loans including interest rate, repayment options, and monthly payments based on amount borrowed. However, an analysis of the post-intervention data indicates that 6.5% of participants were willing to borrow up to $105,000 for educational expenses (see Table 4.11). Potential reasons for this were discussed in Chapter Four. In the future, these students may borrow that amount, successfully finish their degree(s), and complete the repayment, but this point revealed that it is imperative to ensure students understand both the benefits and potential risks of debt for educational expenses.

A fourth insight of this study was that Project-Based Learning (PBL) was an effective way to engage students with informational texts, digital research, and multimedia presentations. When incorporated into the curriculum of high school subjects,

PBL can assist in supporting the following goals of the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate: collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, and innovation. This action research study provided students with an opportunity to interact with informational texts and complete digital research, both of are suggested for increasing students' College and Career Readiness. The creation of a multimedia project gave students the opportunity to think critically, problem-solve when necessary, collaborate with their peers and teacher, and present in front of an audience. Finally, the findings demonstrated that one PBL assignment could meet the post-high school planning needs of both college-bound and career-bound students.

The fifth insight was that students need to know all their post-high school options before making decisions about their futures. While four-year college options are familiar to most students (see Table 4.2), guest speakers were invited into the classroom during the intervention of this action research study to inform students about lesser-known options including vocational training, apprenticeships, and two-year college. Perhaps due to a combination of the speakers as well as students' individual research, participants reported a 39.4% increase in post-intervention knowledge of their vocational training options and an 81% increase in post-intervention knowledge of their apprenticeship options. As previously discussed, participants also reported a 5.9% decrease in post-intervention knowledge of various two-year college options, and possible reasons for this decrease have been mentioned. For students to make well-informed decisions about their post-high school training and career goals, they must be informed of all their options. This action research study demonstrates that through exposure to new information, student knowledge on options can increase.

Several implications can be drawn from the findings of this quantitative action research study. These implications are listed below:

1. Continue the implementation of career planning in into the English 3 curriculum. When combined with Project-Based Learning (PBL) assignments, career planning can increase students' College and Career Readiness as well as assist them in defining their post-high school goals.
2. Continue the incorporation of financial education into the English 3 curriculum and even recruit colleagues in other departments such as math, social studies, and electives to do the same. Ways to incorporate these lessons into the curriculum include working a local credit union or Junior Achievement to give students an additional perspective. Additionally, ways for students to pay for training/college could be included in these lessons.
3. Continue to strive to inform students of their various non-four-year college options after high school. Inviting guest speakers into the classroom to share their expertise is an effective way to inform students of less familiar avenues. Future guest speaker possibilities include military recruiters, Junior Achievement volunteers, and representatives from additional colleges.

5.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

During the data analysis phase of the study, several opportunities for future research arose. One of the unanticipated findings was that the data indicated that students were willing to borrow more money for educational expenses after the intervention. There were three possible explanations for this phenomenon. The first was that students realized that the income for their intended future career was higher than they expected;

therefore, when calculating their Return on Investment (ROI) for educational expenses, they determined they could borrow more than they initially thought on the pre-survey. Another possibility was that when students created their budget based on their intended future salary, they determined that the monthly student loan payments were more manageable than they expected; therefore, on the post-survey, they were willing to borrow more for educational expenses. A third possibility was that when students researched the cost of their intended training, they realized that their educational expenses were going to be higher than they initially planned; therefore, they were willing to borrow more money on the post-survey to meet their training and career goals.

A mixed-methods approach to this study would have been helpful when this finding surfaced. Focus groups could have been created, and interview questions could have been developed to balance the quantitative portion of the study with a qualitative portion to determine the reasons some students were willing to borrow more for educational expenses after the intervention. This finding presents an opportunity for further research.

Another unanticipated finding was that when the pre-and post-intervention survey data was analyzed, there was a decrease in participants reporting that they were informed about various two-year college options. This was surprising because during the intervention, recruiters from the local community college came and spoke to students about benefits of two-year college including lower cost, open enrollment, and university-transfer options. Students also had the opportunity to research two-year college options during the intervention while completing their College and Career Research Project. This finding was possibly due to a flaw in the question on the survey instrument which stated:

I am informed about various two-year college options (see Appendix G and Table 4.3). The data analysis during the 2015-2016 pilot study did not result in the same conclusion; therefore, the flaw was not discovered then. The word various implies that students were informed about options other than the one presented by the speakers from the local community college. This finding presented two opportunities for additional research: clarify the question on subsequent surveys and/or ensure students are familiar with additional two-year college options. For example, the University of South Carolina Salkehatchie campus is another local two-year college that may be an option for participants.

Finally, an opportunity for future research on facilitating school-home discussion regarding students' educational and career options and plans surfaced during the data analysis. This surfacing occurred in dual areas. First, it was unexpected to discover that when the responses to the following statement were compared pre-and post-intervention, participants reported a decrease: *At home, we discuss my future goals and options* (see Appendix G and Table 4.6). As previously mentioned, it is possible that once students realized there were more education, training, and career options available to them than had previously been discussed at home, they perceived a decrease in this discussion.

Another unanticipated finding is that post-intervention, 19.3% of participants reported not knowing if their mother had earned a Bachelor's degree (see Table 4.17) and 33.8% of participants reported not knowing if their father had earned a Bachelor's degree (see Table 4.18). It was expected that during the intervention, student-parent discussion of plans, goals, and options related to education, training, career, and lifestyle would occur organically as students completed their College and Career Research Project. It was

expected that through this discussion, parents would discuss with students their own education and career-planning experience. However, this expectation was not met and presented an opportunity for future research on ways that schools can facilitate more parental involvement with their students' future training and career decisions. The following are possibilities: (a) an assembly with parents, students, and teachers in which a school guidance counselor presents the multitude of post-high school options with the audience, (b) an assignment where students interview their parents regarding their own college and career journey, (c) and inviting parents into the classroom to share with students about their professional and trade jobs.

To determine generalizability, this action research study should be conducted with junior students in the 2017-2018 school year. Opportunities should be sought to recruit other teachers in my department, teachers from other departments in my school, and English 3 teachers throughout my district to conduct similar studies in their classrooms. I should clarify the survey question about two-year college options, find ways to facilitate school-home discussion, and ensure that students are aware of the benefits and risks dangers of student loans. I should possibly incorporate a qualitative research component in the form of a focus groups to explain unanticipated findings that might arise from the second action research study.

5.6 CONCLUSION

The results from this classroom-based, quantitative action research study indicated that the invention assisted students in defining their post-high school goals. It provided students with an opportunity to increase their College and Career Readiness by increasing their exposure to informational texts, digital research, multimedia projects, and

presenting in front of their peers. The Project-Based Learning (PBL) assignment that students completed (see Appendix A) required participants to utilize critical thinking, collaboration, and problem solving skills while creating content relevant to their futures. Completing the PBL assignment forced students to create a long-range educational, training, career, and lifestyle goals for themselves. The pre-and post-survey data indicated that participant knowledge on the following topics increased because of the intervention:

- Training options including vocational and apprenticeship,
- The basics of student loans including interest rate and repayment,
- Careers that match their personality,
- The training/education requirements for their intended future career,
- Creating a budget based on income or future income, and
- Considering future lifestyle goals and the income needed to achieve them.

An analysis of the pre-and post-survey data also indicated a few areas for potential future research including:

- Informing students of multiple two-year college options;
- Ensuring students are knowledgeable about both the benefits and potential risks of student loans; and
- Facilitating home-school discussion regarding students' future goals and options, including training, education, career, and lifestyle objectives.

Overall, the data indicated that this action research study did aid in helping participants define their post-high school goals while simultaneously providing an opportunity for students to increase their College and Career Readiness.

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APPENDIX A

English 3 College & Career Research Project

We will be in the lab the week of May 1, 2017 for you to conduct research on your personality type, educational plans, and career goals as well as create a presentation. Your assignment is to create a multimedia presentation (PowerPoint or Prezi) that contains the following information and share it with your class the week of May 8 (exact presentation date for each student to be determined):

Slide 1—Your name and two-ten pictures that illustrate you and/or your personality/likes.

Slide 2—A summary of the results from the personality test. Include your four-part personality type and one-three suggested careers for your personality type. You can use this site for the personality test--http://www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/jtypes2.asp.

Slide 3—A summary of how your personality fits well with your career goal. Describe your desired post-high school job/career. Include a visual/picture that illustrates this job/career.

Slide 4—Information regarding the qualifications required for this career. What training/certifications/degree do you need to get a job in your desired field?

Slide 5—What are one-two options of schools or training facilities for this career? Include location, admissions requirements, and total cost of the training/degree. Include a visual/picture.

Slide 6—Using the starting salary for your intended job/career, create a budget that includes the following:

- 25% deduction for taxes, housing, transportation, food, clothing, entertainment, utilities (phone, water, internet/cable, power), insurance (medical and auto, if applicable), savings, and giving (if applicable).

Slide 7—Future goals—what lifestyle do you want to have once you finish your training and start your career? Include pictures/images to explain.

Policies/Additional Information:

- Students MUST present during their class period to get full credit. Students will be allowed to present during ILT on certain days for 40 points off. These requests will be handled on a case-by-case basis. See Mrs. Bowers before May 8 if you need more information.
- This project will be worth one test grade for Quarter 4. Participation grades may be assigned when class time is provided to work.
- If you are disruptive or disrespectful during a classmate's presentation, points will be deducted from your project grade.
- Late policy: 10-point penalty per day.
- A rubric will be provided and used to score your project.
- Up to five class periods will be provided in the lab. Otherwise, students will be responsible for finishing the project on their own time at home or during ILT.
- SCOIS is an excellent website to use for this project.

  Username: ashleyridge Password: high school.

APPENDIX B

College & Career Research Project Rubric

Slides: ***See assignment sheet for additional details.	Excellent—14.3 points/ea	Average—10 points/ea	Developing—7.1/ea	Points:
1: Name and pictures	All elements present: Name and two-ten pictures/images	Missing one element	Missing more than one element	
2: Results from personality test *Must include MLA citation	All elements present: Four-part personality profile and one-three suggested careers.	Missing one element	Missing more than one element	
3: Summary of how your personality matches your chosen career	All elements present: A description of career and how it matches personality. One or more pictures/images.	Missing one element	Missing more than one element	
4: Qualifications for your chosen career *Must include MLA citation	All elements present: A description of certifications/ degrees needed for chosen career.	Missing one element	Missing more than one element	
5: Training/education options for your chosen career *Must include MLA citation	All elements present: one-two options including location, admissions requirements, and cost for each + visuals.	Missing one element	Missing more than one element	
6: Sample budget using the starting salary of your chosen career.	All elements present: Includes average starting salary and all expense categories listed on assignment sheet.	Missing one element	Missing more than one element	
7: Future goals/anticipated lifestyle	All elements present: Includes three-five goals with pictures.	Missing one element	Missing more than one element	Total points:

APPENDIX C

IRB Exemption-Status Letter

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA
OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN RESEARCH
DECLARATION of NOT RESEARCH

This is to certify that research proposal: **Pro00063506**

Entitled: *Incorporating a College and Career Research Project into the Secondary English Curriculum to Assist Students in Defining Their Post-High School Goals*

Submitted by:
Principal Investigator: Ashley Bowers
College of Education
Department of Instruction & Teacher Education / Curriculum Studies
Wardlaw
Columbia, SC 29208

was reviewed on **1/18/2017** by the Office of Research Compliance, an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB), and has determined that the referenced research study is not subject to the Protection of Human Subject Regulations in accordance with 45 CFR 46 et. seq.

No further oversight by the USC IRB is required; however, the investigator should inform the Office of Research Compliance prior to making any substantive changes in the research methods, as this may alter the status of the project.

If you have questions, contact Arlene McWhorter at arlenem@sc.edu or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Johnson
IRB Manager

APPENDIX D

District Research Permission Letter

March 21, 2017

Dear Ms. Bowers,

I am happy to report the Research Review Committee reviewed the research proposal you submitted and you are granted approval to conduct your research as delineated.

Since your research is being conducted in Dorchester School District Two, we anticipate receipt of a report of your findings when your research concludes.

If you have any further questions for the committee, please feel free to contact me.

We wish you success in your research and in completing your dissertation.

Sincerely,

Julie Anne Kornahrens
Assistant Superintendent

APPENDIX E

Dorchester School District Two
Minor Consent Form

Parent/Guardian Research Consent Form: To be completed by the parent/legal guardian of a school-aged participant under 18 years.

Project Name: Incorporating a College and Career Research Project into the Secondary English Curriculum to Assist Students in Defining Their Post-High School Goals.

Sponsoring Organization(s): The University of South Carolina

Principal Researcher: Ashley E. Bowers Telephone: 843-695-4900 ext. 52158 Email: abowers@dorchester2.k12.sc.us

Project Location: Ashley Ridge High School (ARHS)

Student's Name _____

Home Address _____**Telephone** _____

Student's School: ARHS **Grade** _____ **Age** _____

Participants/Parental Rights and Assurances

I have received a copy of the approved Dorchester School District Two Research application form for the aforementioned research project (printed on reverse). Having read the application, I am familiar with the purpose, methods, scope and intent of the research project.

___ **I am willing** for my child to participate in this research project.

___ **I am not willing** for my child to participate in this research project.

If I am willing for my child to participate in this research, I understand that during the course of this project, my child's responses will be kept strictly confidential and that none of the data released in this study will identify my child by name or any other identifiable data, descriptions or characterizations. Furthermore, I understand that my child may discontinue his/her participation in this project at any time or refuse to respond to any questions to which he/she choose not to answer. My child is a voluntary participant and has no liability or responsibility for the implementation, methodology, claims, substance or outcomes resulting from this research project. I am also aware that my child's decision not to participate will not result in any adverse consequences or disparate treatment due to that decision. I fully understand that this research is

being conducted for constructive educational purposes and that my signature gives consent for my child to voluntarily participate in this project.

Parent's Signature _____ Date _____

Student's Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX F

Dorchester School District Two
Consent Form

Research Consent Form: To be completed by non-student participant or student participant 18 years and above.

Project Name: Incorporating a College and Career Research Project into the Secondary English Curriculum to Assist Students in Defining Their Post-High School Goals.

Sponsoring Organization(s): The University of South Carolina

Principal Researcher: Ashley E. Bowers Telephone: 843-695-4900 ext. 52158 Email: abowers@dorchester2.k12.sc.us

Project Location: Ashley Ridge High School (ARHS)

Student's Name _____

Home Address _____ **Telephone** _____

Student's School: ARHS **Grade** _____ **Age** __ ____

Participants Rights and Assurances

I have received a copy of the approved Dorchester School District Two Research application form for the aforementioned research project (printed on reverse). Having thoroughly read the application I am familiar with the purpose, methods, scope and intent of the research project.

___ **I am willing** to participate in this research project.

___ **I am not willing** to participate in this research project.

If I am willing to participate I this research, I understand that during the course of this project, my responses will be kept strictly confidential and that none of the data released in this study will identify me by name or any other identifiable data, descriptions or characterizations. Furthermore, I understand that I may discontinue my participation in this project at any time or refuse to respond to any questions I choose not to answer. I am a voluntary participant and have no liability or responsibility for the implementation, methodology, claims, substance or outcomes resulting from this research project. I am also aware that my decision not to participate will not result in any adverse consequences or disparate treatment due to that decision. I fully understand that this

research is being conducted for constructive educational purposes and that I voluntarily participate in this project.

Student's Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX G

College and Career Readiness Pre- and Post-Intervention Survey

First & Last Name:_____ Period: _____

Circle the race/ethnicity with which you most closely identify.

African-American/Black

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Caucasian/White

Hispanic/Spanish-Descent

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

Multiple/Not Identified Above

Prefer Not to Answer

Other

Circle the gender with which you most closely identify.

Female

Male

Prefer Not to Answer

Circle the applicable answer below to the following question: Do you receive free/reduced lunch?

Yes

No

Prefer Not to Answer

Please answer the next questions using the following scale:

Strongly Agree (SA) Agree (A) Disagree (D) Strongly Disagree (SD)

1 The adults at my high school expect me to go to a four-year college.

SA A D SD

2 I am informed about various four-year college options.

SA A D SD

3 I am informed about various two-year college options.

SA A D SD

4 I am informed about various vocational training options.

SA A D SD

5 I am informed about various apprenticeship options.

SA A D SD

6 At home, we discuss my future goals and options.

SA A D SD

7 I understand the basic principles of student loans including interest and repayment.

SA A D SD

8 I would feel comfortable borrowing up to $25,000 for educational expenses.

SA A D SD

9 I would feel comfortable borrowing up to $38,000 for educational expenses.

SA A D SD

10 I would feel comfortable borrowing up to $60,000 for educational expenses.

SA A D SD

11 I would feel comfortable borrowing up to $105,000 for educational expenses.

SA A D SD

12 My guidance counselors have discussed my post-high school goals and options with me.

SA A D SD

13 I know which career(s) match my personality.

SA A D SD

14 I know what specific degree/certification/training/internship is required for my chosen career.

SA A D SD

15 I know how to create a budget/spending plan based on income or anticipated income.

SA A D SD

16 I have considered my future lifestyle goals and the income required to achieve them.

SA A D SD

17 My mother has earned a bachelor's (four-year) degree. YES NO DON'T KNOW

18 My father has earned a bachelor's (four-year) degree. YES NO DON'T KNOW