Soft-Skill Development In Co-Curricular Programs: An Evaluation Of A Community College Student Leadership Program

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SOFT-SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN CO-CURRICULAR PROGRAMS: AN EVALUATION OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

By

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BA (Springfield College) 2000
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A DISSERTATION

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SOFT-SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN CO-CURRICULAR PROGRAMS: AN EVALUATION OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Abstract

Colleges are vital for the provision of a trained workforce. As of 2017, over 1,100 community colleges were serving about 41% of the undergraduates across the nation. The emphasis on preparing students to enter the labor market has led to colleges developing integrated academic and co-curricular programs. Many professionals in higher education believe that education happens best in a truly integrative learning environment, where both academic and student affairs programs are used to educate the student.

The New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership program was developed to help students gain soft-skills, as identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. The objective of this summative evaluation was to discover if the NHCC SLP contributes to the soft skill development of student participants. Two research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do participants in the New Hampshire Community Student Leadership Program perceive the program to have helped them develop soft-skills?

RQ2: Do students who participated in the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program feel prepared to enter the workforce at the time of their graduation?

As a summative program review, no human participants were used for this study. The evaluation highlighted several NHCC SLP strategies that could be used beyond their student leadership
program. The research identified the importance of building learning outcomes into co-curricular programs and the impact that experiential learning has on student engagement. The findings support how co-curricular programs can help prepare students for the workforce. The results revealed that students participated in large part because of their intrinsic motivation; the theoretical framework of self-determination theory supported this finding. Additional data is needed to determine the long term benefits of soft-skill development through co-curricular programs.

Recommendations include the need to distinguish between extracurricular activities and co-curricular activities. Co-curricular activities should be based on intentional program design and include targeted learning outcomes. Additional research should be conducted on the long term benefit of soft skill development at the collegiate level. Consideration should be given to the future study of co-curricular programs and soft-skill development utilizing the Goal Content Theory.
University of New England

Doctor of Education
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DEDICATION

To Mom & Dad

Thank you for all of your support, love, and encouragement.

To Memere & Pepere

I wish you were physically here to celebrate this accomplishment. You are in my heart and thoughts every day. Thank you for believing in me long before I believed in myself.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

A college education can provide opportunities that would otherwise not be offered to the majority of people (Baum & Payea, 2004; Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). Educated people are more likely to engage in healthy habits and be actively engaged citizens (Ma et al., 2016).

Several studies assert that a higher level of education leads to higher wages, better access to healthcare, and retirement strategies (Ma et al., 2016). Beyond the impact that higher education has on individuals, colleges are vital to providing a trained workforce for business and industry (Hora, Benbow, & Oleson, 2016). The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (2015) projects that higher education will be a critical requirement for two-thirds of all jobs by 2025. A follow-up study by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (2018), revealed that there would be a shortfall of 11 million skilled workers in the United States over the next ten years. To address the shortage of skilled workers, many institutions of higher education have developed degree or short term training programs (Mitchell, Leachman, & Saenz, 2019; Selingo, 2017).

At the same time that employers are facing a shortage of qualified workers, the cost of higher education has reached an all-time high, which has caused some to question the value of attending college (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018; Selingo, 2017). The advantages of financially investing in various levels of postsecondary education may not be as apparent to some because the emphasis has long been on four-year bachelor degree granting institutions (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). However, data show that earning an associate degree, and even attending college without obtaining a degree, has a substantial reward for both individuals and businesses (Ma et al., 2016). Likewise, associate degree programs and short-term credentials
take less time and money (Ma et al., 2016). As higher education institutions grapple with the societal objectives of increasing the share of people who have the chance to obtain postsecondary education and minimizing the number of people for whom it does not work, it will be critical for higher education leaders to reduce barriers to access and prepare students with the skills needed to be successful in the workforce (Ma et al., 2016).

**Community Colleges**

The mission of many community colleges is to provide quality, accessible, and affordable education (Dunn & Kalleberg, 2016). Core to the mission of most community colleges is their purpose of providing a trained and qualified workforce by increasing educational attainment for their students, regardless of their backgrounds (Dunn & Kalleberg, 2016; Lumina Foundation, 2013). As of 2017, there were over 1,100 community colleges that served roughly 41% of the undergraduates in the nation (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017). Karp (2011) asserts that, beyond their mission, community colleges have the reach to affect the skilled workforce shortage.

The emphasis on preparing students to enter the labor market has led to colleges developing integrated academic and co-curricular programs (Peck et al., 2017). Many professionals in higher education believe that education happens best in a truly integrative learning environment, where both academics and student affairs programs are used to educate the student (Dungy & Peck, 2019). By integrating workforce development programs, relevant academic degrees, and co-curricular programs, colleges are well equipped to increase the number of trained and skilled workers in the regions they serve (Karp, 2011). Traditionally, higher education has placed great emphasis on teaching technical or hard skills (Dungy & Peck, 2019). Technical skills or hard skills are those that are quantifiable and are often taught or learned in
schools and colleges or from previous work experiences (Robles, 2012). Hard skills are usually specific to a particular job, such as typing speed, machine operation, or computer programming (Peggy, 2008). Higher education’s focus on hard skill development has not prepared students with the soft skills needed in the workforce (Ellis, Kisling, & Hackworth, 2014; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). In a survey conducted on behalf of the Lumina Foundation (2013), over 89% of business leaders felt that college graduates did not have the soft skills required to be successful in the workplace.

Many soft skills can be gained through participation in a wide variety of co-curricular programs (Dungy & Peck, 2019). Smith and Chenoweth (2015) stated that leadership (a trait that involves soft skills) is a learning outcome for many business school undergraduates. Yet, they also recognized that teaching leadership is challenging (Brungardt, 2011). The results of the Smith and Chenoweth (2015) study showed that students engaged in co-curricular student organizations believed that they had more leadership traits and behaviors as compared to those students who were not involved in co-curricular student organizations.

Statement of the Problem

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2018) asserts that higher education is failing to produce students that have the soft skills needed to meet business and industry needs. Nationally, only 11% of business leaders feel that higher education is teaching students the necessary skills to be successful in the workplace (Lumina, 2013). In New Hampshire, the need for higher education to prepare students for employment is critical to the economy and workforce development (Gittell, 2015). Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (2015) estimates that over 68% of all jobs in New Hampshire will require a credential beyond high school by the year 2025. Projections indicate that New Hampshire will not have the adequate
number of trained adults needed to meet workforce needs, due to an aging population, a declining high school population, and a decline in the number of educated adults moving to the region (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2018). Failure to have trained adults to meet workforce needs will have a long-term impact on the state’s economy. It will damage the state’s ability to attract and retain businesses (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2019).

**Purpose of the Study**

A study, Project CEO, conducted by Campus Labs, examined whether students were learning the employment skills identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (Griffin, 2016). The goal of the study was to gain an understanding of how students develop soft skills through co-curricular programs (Griffin, 2016). The study included more than 1,300 students from colleges of varying sizes, and the results suggested that students viewed their co-curricular experiences as a vital tool in developing their soft skills (Peck et al., 2017). Dungy and Peck (2019) assert that the ultimate goal of co-curricular programs is to provide students with opportunities to develop the skills needed to be successful in society and the workplace. The result of the study offered a look at the connection between co-curricular programs and the development of skills that employers seek, thus supporting the benefits of student engagement (Peck et al., 2017).

The purpose of this summative program evaluation was to build on the study conducted by Campus Labs (Griffin, 2016) and provide research-based evidence concerning the impact that student leadership programs have on the soft skills identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. For the purposes of this study, the site was given the pseudonym New Hampshire Community College. The study results may be useful for student affairs practitioners with respect to program design and assessment. Additionally, the results could influence how
colleges prepare students to meet the projected shortage of prepared workers. Posavac (2016) asserted that program evaluations determine whether strategies and activities were implemented as intended and whether the approach achieved the desired results. Furthermore, program evaluation results strengthen research findings and can be used to improve future offerings (Posavac, 2016).

**Research Questions**

To best prepare students to meet the needs of the local workforce, New Hampshire Community College developed a Student Success Initiative that intentionally embedded soft skill development into all noncurricular programs. One component of the Student Success Initiative was the student leadership program. The program consisted of an annual retreat and encouraged participants to become actively involved in student clubs (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). To explore the impact of the student leadership program, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do participants in the New Hampshire Community Student Leadership Program perceive the program to have helped them develop soft skills?

2. Do students who participated in the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program feel prepared to enter the workforce at the time of their graduation?

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study drew on data obtained as part of New Hampshire Community College’s 2013 student leadership initiative program. Through a summative program review, this study examined the impact that co-curricular programs have on preparing students for the workforce. The premise of this study stemmed from the New
Hampshire Community College’s student success initiative. The initiative was developed as a response to previous studies conducted by the Lumina Foundation and the National Association of Colleges and Employers, which showed that college graduates lacked the skills most sought by employers. The initiative’s goal was to better prepare students for success in the workplace by intentionally embedding soft skills into their co-curricular programs (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019).

**Theoretical Support**

The theoretical underpinning for this study consisted of involvement theory and self-determination theory. These theories guide this study in its aim to examine the role of co-curricular activities in soft skill development, as evidenced by student participants’ perception of soft skill development and perceived preparedness to enter the workforce. Involvement theory focuses on the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to their academic experience (Astin, 1999). The theory is based on the premise that the more involved a student is in their education, the more successful they are. A highly engaged student is one who interacts with the college community, spends considerable energy on studying, and participates actively in student life. Involvement theory emphasizes active student participation in the learning process.

Self-determination theory represents a macro theory related to human motivation and personality. The primary concerns of self-determination theory are inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs. Moreover, self-determination theory is associated with the motivation behind the choices made by humans without the consideration of external interference or influence. Thus, self-determination theory is based on the degree to which the behavior of an individual is self-determined and self-motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Under
this theory, the quality of motivation influences the quality and quantity of actions and behaviors. Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Deci (2006) stated that the quality of motivation refers to the type of motivation that influences one’s learning behavior, which makes it more useful for achieving goals.

The three assumptions of self-determination theory—active engagement in development, the natural desire for growth, and universal psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000a)—are often present in student leaders, which lead to skill and knowledge development. These theories complement each other; involvement theory suggests that the more involved a student is, the more they will learn, while self-determination theory suggests that a person’s motives for why they do something are vital to their learning. The combination of the two theories supports students in developing the skills that are necessary to be successful in society in and in the workplace.

**Scope**

The scope of a study refers to the factors under which the study will be operated (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). This study examined how co-curricular activities, specifically the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program, provides students with training in soft skills, which are critical abilities that employers seek (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). The most sought-after soft skills are problem-solving and the ability to work as a team (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). Beyond soft skill development, employers have also identified leadership as one of the most sought-after experiences for prospective applicants, ranking after their internship experience and their major (Marques, 2013; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). To address these concerns, the New Hampshire Community College developed a student leadership program
aimed at enhancing the development of soft skills and leadership among students (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). The purpose of this program evaluation was to explore how the New Hampshire Community College leadership program contributed to soft skill development.

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

Assumptions are ideas in a study that are presumed to be true (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Given the projected shortage of trained workers and the demand for workers to possess more soft skills (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018), this program evaluation examined the operation of the student leadership program and its impact on students developing soft skills. The primary assumption in this study was that co-curricular programs could improve students’ soft skills and better prepare them for the workforce (Griffin, 2016). The secondary assumption was that students who participate in co-curricular activities are more likely to feel prepared for the workforce at the time of their graduation. Research shows that community and commuter colleges have fewer co-curricular activities than four-year and residential institutions (Albert, Pettys, & Wolfer, 2018; Mertes, 2015). While this study could not control other external factors, it was assumed that students who participated in the New Hampshire Community College leadership program graduated at a higher rate as compared to those who did not participate.

Limitations are weaknesses in a study that are beyond the control of the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). This study contained several limitations, including the small sample size. This study was limited to students who participated in the student leadership program at New Hampshire Community College. It did not include students from other regions of the state or the country (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication,
November 9, 2019). This study also did not capture all of the soft skill programs that are held at 
NHCC; specifically, it did not include the noncredit WorkReadyNH program, which is aimed at 
unemployed New Hampshire citizens. This study also did not capture other co-curricular 
programs where soft skills could be learned. The limited size of the study may confine the 
findings to schools of comparable size, population, and other demographic characteristics. The 
documentation (student surveys, employer interviews, program assessments, participant 
feedback summaries, graduation surveys) provided by New Hampshire Community College may 
have certain limitations in itself. The lack of employment data is a significant limitation that 
should be addressed in future studies. Because the study was limited to New Hampshire 
Community College, the documents may not be a reflection of all community colleges.

Delimitations define the boundaries that the researcher set for the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). This study examined data sets from one community college’s co-curricular student leadership program and its efforts to improve student’s soft skills. This study did not consider 
other co-curricular programs offered at the institution, nor the different ways in which students 
could have developed their soft skills. This study did not factor in how well a student performs 
their job and whether they have mastered the skills required. This study did not collect 
quantitative data to examine any measurable variables.

Significance of Study to New Hampshire

In New Hampshire, higher education’s role in preparing students for employment is 
critical to the economy and workforce development (Gittell, 2017). An unprepared workforce 
could have dire consequences for any region, but this is especially the case in New Hampshire 
because of their aging population and income-tax-free system (Gittell, 2017). The State of New 
Hampshire projected that by 2025, over 31 percent of the state’s total population would be age
60 years or older. This percentage will increase to 34 percent by 2035 (New Hampshire Employment Security, 2018). As the median age of New Hampshire’s population rises, the increase in retirees leaving the workforce, combined with the increased cost from services related to caring for seniors, will substantially impact the economy (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2018). Figure 1 provides an overview of New Hampshire’s population age sixty or older. The projections go through 2040.

![New Hampshire Population Projections](image)

**Figure 1.** Reprinted from *New Hampshire’s Workforce, Wages, and Economic Opportunities* (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2019, p. 3).

An aging population, combined with the rising costs of housing, presents other short- and long-term limitations to the growth of the state’s economy (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2018). The increasingly aging population indicates an impending decrease in the number of available workers. Adding to New Hampshire’s shortage of trained workers, the state experienced more than 39 consecutive months with an unemployment rate under 3% (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2019). In the short term, this will result in labor shortages.
Adding to the problem is the projection from Georgetown University (2015) that over two-thirds of all jobs in New Hampshire will require a credential beyond a high school diploma by the year 2025. In the long term, the reduction of workers may increase the total number of vacant jobs and may cause business and industry to leave the state (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2018).

As a response to employers in New Hampshire struggling to find the number of workers necessary to fill vacant positions (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2019), the governor adopted the 65 x 25 goal (Gittell, 2015). The goal is for 65% of all New Hampshire adults to have a credential beyond high school by the year 2025 (Gittell, 2015). The goal is an effort to prepare New Hampshire adults to enter the labor market with the skills needed to be successful (Gittell, 2015). In addition to the 65 x 25 initiative, New Hampshire must attract new workers that are not in the labor force (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2018). Likewise, it is pivotal that young people remain in the state after graduating from high school to meet the state’s future labor demand (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2018).

**Definition of Terms**

- **65 x 25** refers to New Hampshire’s goal to ensure that 65% of all adults aged 25 years or older have a postsecondary education credential by 2025. (Gittell, 2015)
- **Co-Curricular Activities** are defined as any school-sponsored team, organization, or activity that takes place outside of the classroom. (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013)
- **Employability skills** are a combination of hard/technical skills and soft/interpersonal skills. (Dania, Bakar, & Mohamed, 2014)
- **Hard skills or technical skills** are skills that are quantifiable and are often taught or learned in schools and colleges or from previous work experiences. Hard skills are
usually specific to each job and include occupational and vocational, literacy, numeracy, and technology skills. (Burns, 1997; Robles, 2012)

- *Soft skills or interpersonal skills* are subjective skills and are often not specific to one job. Soft skills include communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and other skills that are more personality-oriented. (Burns, 1997)

- The subset of soft skills is classified as interpersonal skills. (Burns, 1997)

- *Student Leadership Initiative* refers to New Hampshire Community College’s initiative to intentionally embed soft-skills into all co-curricular activities. (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019)

- *Student Leadership Program* refers to the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program. (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019)

**Conclusion**

As technology evolves, students continue to evaluate colleges based on how academic and co-curricular programs can help them to secure a well-paying job (Selingo, 2017). Therefore, it will be critical for colleges to evolve to meet student needs (Hullinger, 2015). Likewise, employers will continue to push colleges to produce students who are better prepared for the workforce (Drucker, 2014). Pinto and Ramalhelra (2017) showed that high academic performance combined with participation in co-curricular activities resulted in higher employability. On the other hand, involvement in co-curricular activities combined with a modest academic performance resulted in lower job employability, but nearly similar positive results in terms of time management and learning skills. The findings of the Pinto and Ramalhelra (2017) study highlighted the prominence of academic efficiency combined with co-
curricular activities and how it could be a valuable method to improve soft skill development, thus reducing the barriers graduates face when trying to enter the labor market. One way to reduce the barriers to the labor market is for Student Affairs to collect data on how co-curricular programs help students to gain the skills they need to be successful (Griffin, 2016). Moreover, student affairs should strive to help students articulate the skills that students learn from their involvement in co-curricular activities (Peck et al., 2016).

Community colleges have a responsibility to contribute to the communities they serve (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017). Many employers believe that colleges are not adequately preparing students for jobs (Johnson, 2011). To address this problem, the New Hampshire Community College student affairs professionals have worked to intentionally embed soft skill development lessons into the student leadership program (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). This program evaluation was designed to provide documentation about how New Hampshire Community College used its student leadership program to improve the soft skills of students. This study also aimed to address the lack of research on the role of co-curricular programs in soft skill development.

A full literature review on soft skill development is explored further in Chapter 2. The goal of this summative program evaluation was to provide a theoretical lens through which the role of co-curricular programs can be assessed and implemented in higher education settings. Chapter two also connects the body of research to the study’s conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Subsequently, chapter three describes the research method that was utilized in this study and outlines elements of the qualitative analysis that were used for this study.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bloomberg & Volpe (2016) assert that the purpose of a literature review is to survey scholarly articles that are related to a particular research topic. This literature review focused on soft skill development in higher education, the role of soft skill development in co-curricular activities, and the role of soft skill development in employability and job-readiness. Several rounds of searches were conducted using several educational databases, including ProQuest Central, ProQuest Education, EBSCO, ERIC, Academic Complete, LexisNexis, and Google Scholar. The search terms used in the various searches include soft skill development, job skills employers seek, soft skill development in higher education, co-curricular activities and soft skills, workforce development and soft skills, student leadership and job skills, New Hampshire economic forecast, and shortage of skilled workers, among others.

An initial review of scholarly articles and books utilizing the search terms soft skills and job skills employers seek was conducted to provide a historical perspective of the need for soft skill development. The search resulted in several books, articles, and quantitative studies that clearly showed the link between soft skill development and desired employer skills. The volume of literature on soft skills and job skills employers seek led to a secondary search being conducted to narrow the scope of research. The secondary search utilized the key terms and phrases soft skill development in higher education, and co-curricular activities and soft skills. The secondary search resulted in significantly fewer results. It showed a clear gap in research and literature on soft skill development in higher education, especially in co-
curricular programs. The results of the second search allowed the researcher to narrow the initial research questions.

Two additional searches were conducted before the research questions were finalized and the research methodology was chosen. The third search expanded on search terms used in the first two searches to capture any missed literature. To achieve this outcome, variations of the previous search terms were utilized. Specifically, the following terms were used, *workforce development and soft skills and student leadership and job skills*. By specifying workforce development and student leadership, additional literature was found, including studies on student leadership development in graduate business students. The fourth search of the literature was used to narrow the scope of the study to the researcher’s geographic area. To achieve this, the fourth search used the terms *New Hampshire economic forecast* and *shortage of skilled workers*. The results of the fourth search allowed the researcher to narrow the focus of the study to two topics, soft skill development in co-curricular programs in higher education and New Hampshire’s need for a skilled workforce. Once the issues were narrowed, the researcher determined that a summative program evaluation of a student leadership co-curricular program would be a valid methodology for this study.

The majority of the research cited in this study was written in the past eight years, with exception of critical contributions that laid the foundation for significant discussion points, such as the involvement theory and the self-determination theory. The results identified apparent gaps in research, including the lack of literature on soft skill development in co-curricular programs and the lack of qualitative studies on the subject. The research showed a lack of assessment of the co-curricular programs that do embed soft skill development. Additionally, most of the current literature was conducted in graduate schools.
or four-year institutions, and in comparison, this study was conducted at a community college.

America’s Shortage of Skilled Workers

A study conducted by Georgetown University (2018) projects that America is facing a shortage of 11 million workers by the year 2028. Contributing to the deficit is the lack of people who have credentials beyond high school to meet the projected job requirements (Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 2018). The U.S. Census Bureau (2019) showed that between 2013 and 2017, more than 92% of the population age 25 years or older had at least a high school diploma. More than 42.0% of the population age 25 years or older had at least an associate’s degree. The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (2015) projects that more than 65% of all jobs in the U.S. require training beyond high school.

In 2016, 70% of high school graduates in the United States enrolled in higher education institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). By comparison, only 63% did the same in 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Overall enrollment in colleges has soared to 16.9 million students in 2016 in contrast to only 13.2 million in 2000, a 28% increase, and 17.4 million students are expected to be enrolled in 2027 (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Although the total number of students attending higher education institutions has increased, data suggest that students are not learning and developing all of the skills needed to be successful in the workplace (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018).

Higher education, primarily technical and career schools, have a long history of training students in the hard skills to meet the workforce needs (Hora et al., 2016). Hard skills or technical skills are quantifiable and are often taught or learned in schools and colleges or from previous work experiences (Burns, 1997; Robles, 2012). Hard skills are usually specific to each
particular job. In contrast, soft skills, or interpersonal skills, are subjective skills and are often not specific to one situation (Burns, 1997; Robles, 2012). In the workplace, hard skills describe specialized training that can be observed, measured, and executed (Shakir, 2009). Hard-skill training for new graduates is relatively simple if they obtain an essential understanding of these skills in college (Shakir, 2009).

In contrast, soft skills, which are usually referred to as people skills, are not commonly taught, although they are required in the workforce (Burns, 1997; Robles, 2012; Shakir, 2009). Soft and hard skills enhance each other, and exceptional employees have excellent technical and people skills (Shakir, 2009). While the mentoring process and knowledge of hard skills are simplified with typical entry requirements and uniform curriculum and assessment systems, the advancement of soft skills among undergraduates remains an uphill struggle, as they include less quantifiable aspects (Shakir, 2009).

**Soft Skills**

For more than 50 years, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has surveyed hiring managers to gather their perspectives on the skills that are most critical for workplace success (Mackes, 2017). The annual survey asks employers which characteristics they look for in new hires, and consistently, the top ten responses are all considered soft skills (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). Soft skills, often known as interpersonal or people skills, are subjective skills and are widely transferable from one job to another (Burns, 1997; Robles, 2012). Soft skills include communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and other skills that are more personality-oriented (Connell, 1998). Burns (1997) and Robles (2012) assert that soft skills are often more sought after because they are harder to teach. Most employers prefer to train employees on the hard/technical skills specific to their company.
Figure 2 outlines these two categories of employability skills—hard/technical skills and soft/people skills (Williams, 2015). As depicted in Figure 2, hard skills can be further categorized into other subsets, including occupational and vocational, literacy, numeracy, and technology skills.

![Diagram of employability skills]

**Figure 2:** Soft skills perceived by students and employers as relevant employability skills (Williams, 2015)

The subset of soft skills is often just classified as people skills (Burns, 1997; Williams, 2015). Soft skills are described as an umbrella term for skills under three essential practical components: (1) people skills; (2) social skills; and (3) individual professional qualities (Peggy, 2008). Soft skills enhance hard skills to achieve an efficient work environment, general efficiency, and daily life proficiencies (Peggy, 2008). These skills can consist of social development, interaction capabilities, language skills, personal practices, psychological or cognitive compassion, time management, and team effort characteristics (Peggy, 2008).

Hurrell, Scholarios, and Thompson (2013) stated that soft skills are non-technical and are reliant on abstract thinking, which includes intrapersonal and social capabilities, for mastering
efficiency in specific contexts. Grugulis and Vincent (2009) listed interaction, analytical, teamwork, the ability to enhance personal knowledge and efficiency, motivation, effort, management, and judgment as the soft skills required in any workplace. Despite not always being included as a soft skill, it is still acknowledged that many jobs do need some type of abstract thinking (Hurrell et al., 2013). Parente, Stephan, and Brown (2012) defined soft skills as people management skills, with sub-skills including clear interactions and meaningful feedback, fixing and/or handling disputes, and comprehending human behavior in group settings. Kim, Erdem, Byun, and Jeong (2011) specified three broad classifications of soft skills: (1) social skills such as team effort and customer care skills; (2) thinking skills such as decision making and understanding how to engage in innovation; and (3) individual skills such as sociability and self-management. When considering the degree of efficiency anticipated from the use of soft skills, Promis (2008) focused on the area of psychological intelligence. They surveyed employment listings to identify which, if any, soft skills were most desired by companies. The soft skills most typically noted in employment listings were development, effort, service orientation, flexibility, interaction, management, partnership and cooperation, and teamwork (Promís, 2008).

Research on soft skills has included both the direct examination of soft skills in specific environments and the recognition of basic work environment proficiencies in which soft skills are essential for high efficiency (Robles, 2012). When Robles (2012) asked service executives to each list the ten skills they most desired in new employees, 517 skills were named based on 26 discrete skills. The top 10 were sent to other service executives to be ranked from most important to least important, resulting in the following: (1) stability; (2) interaction; (3) courtesy; (4) duty; (5) social skills; (6) professionalism; (7) positive attitude; (8) team effort skills; (9) versatility;
and (10) work principles (Robles, 2012). Windels, Mallia, and Broyles (2013) utilized field observations, official interviews, and casual discussions from six marketing companies to determine the soft skills crucial for the marketing field. They found that the four most valuable skills were vital thinking, social interaction, discussion, and persuasion skills.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2019), soft skills that are necessary for the workforce include (1) communication, (2) enthusiasm and attitude, (3) teamwork, (4) networking, (5) problem solving and critical thinking, and (6) professionalism. Houghton and Proscio (2001) described how four highly respected workforce development programs cultivated emotional intelligence. Table 1, below, shows key soft skills supported by existing literature (Williams, 2015).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Soft Skills Identified in Literature</th>
<th>Clarification of Soft Skills</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Oral, written, and nonverbal means of processing and sharing information.</td>
<td>Evers, Rush, and Berdrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>Ability to evaluate ideas—self-criticism, constructive critique of others’ ideas.</td>
<td>Brunsgardt (2009) and</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Heimler (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making</td>
<td>Using accurate information to determine action.</td>
<td>Kar (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Working and/or interacting well with others.</td>
<td>Adams (2007), Heimler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2010), and Kar (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Generating and implementing solutions to problems.</td>
<td>Arensdorf (2009) and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kar (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>Ability to work well in groups or teams; collaborating with others.</td>
<td>Mitchell (2008) and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Raptopoulos et al. (2009)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1:* Key soft skills identified in the literature (Williams, 2015)

Despite the value that hiring managers place on soft skills, the term is still unclear and often used with little context about its significance in the workplace (Matteson, Anderson, &
Boyden, 2016). Although no official universal set of soft skills exists, researchers have agreed on the importance of some skills (Matteson et al., 2016). Research conducted by Chell and Athayde (2011) explored how soft skills impact innovation. The Chell and Athayde (2011) study supports findings reported by Connell (1998) who advocated for soft skill development because many jobs now require employees to have strong critical thinking skills and the ability to work as part of a team. Data show that soft skill development is a vital lifelong learning skill, and more coordinated efforts are needed for people to develop those skills and suggest there is a need for soft skill development in higher education (Gibb, 2013).

**Soft Skills and Higher Education**

One of the areas studied was the debate between academic credentials and training students in practical skills such as soft skills. Their findings support the notion that academic qualifications alone do not guarantee job placement (Chell & Athayde, 2011). Although higher education in the United States has not universally adopted a model for soft skill development, there is some research on soft skill development in specific academic programs (Nealy, 2011; Talgar & Goodey, 2015). Research in biochemistry and molecular biology education showed that a considerable gap existed between the skills required by employers and skills possessed by graduates (Talgar & Goodey, 2015). Data also showed that 86% of the essential skills necessary for students to be successful in the hospitality field were soft competencies (Sisson & Adams, 2013). Lester and Costley (2010) noted that significant growth occurred in the engagement of higher education with workforce development, which led to the premise of work-based learning. Work-based learning, deemed to be useful in preparing students for the workforce, contributes to the general conclusion that workforce development and soft skill development go hand-in-hand (Lester & Costley, 2010).
In comparison, research from the United Kingdom included Chamorrow-Premuzic, Arteche, Bremner, Greven, and Furnham’s (2010) study, which explored soft skill development in higher education. The authors utilized three United Kingdom studies to explore soft skill development processes across different disciplines. The research from the study identified many issues with assessing the validity of soft skills as well as conceptual and methodological limitations. One such issue was that the “catalog” of soft skills had varied widely from one study to the next. This is partly because practitioners used different labels to identify the skills. The results of Chamorrow-Premuzic et al.’s (2010) study supported that students in humanities and social sciences required different skills than students in natural sciences. Andrews and Higson (2008) also concluded that business graduates are expected to possess high levels of discipline, particularly skills synthesized with more generic interpersonal and interaction competencies; i.e., they are expected to be employment-ready, geared up with essential skills and proficiencies, and able to work with minimal supervision.

Despite the issue of “cataloging” soft skills consistently, schools in the United Kingdom did focus part of their curriculum on transferable soft skills and competencies that were integral for employability (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Despite the cultural and socioeconomic differences in the U.K., employers have similar expectations for the “hard” company skills and “soft” interpersonal proficiencies among company graduates. Andrews and Higson’s (2008) study produced strong evidence of a correlation between transferable soft skills and graduate employability.

**Soft Skills and Co-curricular Programs**

With the rise in the number of college graduates, the competition between graduates in the labor market is increasing (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013). Students are conscious that their
degree may not guarantee them a job and realize they should add additional values and differences to their qualifications to achieve positional benefits (Clark, Marsden, Whyatt, Thompson, & Walker, 2015; Selingo, 2017). In their 2015 qualitative X type of study, Smith and Chenoweth stated that leadership (a trait that involves soft skills) is a learning outcome for many business school undergraduates. Still, they also recognized that teaching leadership is challenging. The results of the Smith and Chenoweth (2015) study showed that students who engaged in co-curricular student organizations believed that they had better leadership traits and behaviors, as compared to those students who were not involved in co-curricular student organizations. Smith and Chenoweth (2015) concluded that for these students, the learning experience was holistic across the classroom and co-curricular activities. Pinto and Ramalhelra (2017) showed that a student’s high academic performance, combined with their participation in co-curricular activities, results in higher perceived employability. In comparison, a student involved in co-curricular activities combined with a modest academic performance resulted in lower job employability but with similar high rankings of personal and company time management and learning skills (Pinto & Ramalhelra, 2017). The findings of this study highlighted the importance of an integrated curriculum where academic classes combined with co-curricular activities to improve students’ employability (Pinto & Ramalhelra, 2017).

Being involved in co-curricular activities such as student organizations is one technique that enables students to demonstrate learned skills that are otherwise not visible in their resumes due to minimal job experience (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013). Opponents of student organizations argue that these organizations facilitate division. In contrast, proponents say that these organizations facilitate learning, growth, and college adjustment (Bowman, Park, & Denson, 2015). Bowman, Park, and Denson (2015) conducted a longitudinal study across ten years,
aimed at quantitatively exploring the relationships between these organizations and post-college civic outcomes by using a sample of 8,634 participants from 229 facilities. The results indicated that regardless of participation in student organizations, there was a significant and positive association with civic behavior and attitude six years after graduation. Gellin (2003) conducted a meta-analysis from 1991 to 2000 which consisted of 8 quantitative studies. The focus was on determining the impact of clubs and organizations, living on campus, faculty and peer interaction, employment, and Greek life on students’ critical thinking. It was found that students who were involved in these activities had higher gains in critical thinking, as opposed to uninvolved students (Gellin, 2003). Roulin and Bangerter (2013) interviewed 66 students about their use of co-curricular activities in relation to the labor market. They described the skills the students obtained through the co-curricular activities, how they integrated these skills in their resumes, their understanding of their peers’ behaviors, and their beliefs about how employers would translate their activities. Roulin and Bangerter (2013) showed that the students associated with co-curricular activities stood apart from their competitors when it came to their employability skills. Dania et al. (2014) stated that employability skills are the skills, understandings, and personal characteristics that allow a person to acquire employment, and to be productive and satisfied in their selected profession.

**Higher Education, Soft Skills, and Personal Economic Impact**

Employability skills make it possible for people to obtain appropriate work and, at the same time, to establish their careers (Dania et al., 2014). Employability skills are required across all locations and kinds of jobs (Dania et al., 2014). The capacity for students to gain skills that help them stand apart from their competitors in the job market is critical to their career earning potential (Hora et al., 2016). Data show that education leads to improved job opportunities and
increased salaries for graduates (Abdullah, Doucouliagos, & Manning, 2015). In 2015, a person with a bachelor’s degree earned an average of $48,500 a year, while those with only a high school diploma earned $23,900 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Beyond the initial salary differences, research also supports the fact that individuals with a college degree are more likely to earn higher wages and less likely to need public assistance (Ma et al., 2016).

A student’s lifetime earning potential is something that all students should consider when deciding to attend college, especially after the costs of higher education and student debt are factored in (Selingo, 2017). Several elements are responsible for student debt. If student debt was in sync with inflation, then graduates would not be facing this enormous debt pressure (Selingo, 2017). The United States saw a steady ascension in student loan debt from 2015 to 2017, where New Hampshire brought the highest typical debt per student at $27,167 (Brookings Institution, 2019). As of 2018, an overall total of 44.2 million customers owed a total of more than $1.5 trillion in student debt; the rate of delinquency higher than 90 days, or default, has actually doubled to over 11% across the country, according to the Federal Reserve (van den Heuvel, 2018).

There were four overlapping durations of crisis associated with student loans in the United States: (1) 1958–1972 with the very first federal student loans and the founding of Sallie Mae; (2) the Mid-1960s–1978 with high rates of default and the near impossibility of student loan discharge, leading to personal bankruptcy; (3) Mid-1990s–2019 with “squashing debt”; and (4) 2012–2019 with widespread financial damage (Best & Best, 2014). The interest rates significantly add to the disconcerting debt numbers; nevertheless, the growth of college fees is another significant aspect contributing to the United States’ considerable amount of student debt. In 2013, public university students paid an average of nearly $8,400 yearly for in-state tuition; in
comparison, students paid more than $19,000 if they were out-of-state students. Student registrations increased from 15.2 million in 1999 to 20.4 million in 2011; however, they fell by 2% in 2012. There were approximately 37 million customers with impressive student loans in 2013. Student loan debt in the United States lay between $902 billion and $1 trillion in 2014 (Best & Best, 2014).

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was based on qualitative data obtained from New Hampshire Community College’s 2013 student leadership initiative (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). The data was utilized to gain a better understanding of how all aspects of education can help students develop soft skills, and subsequently, how soft skill development impacts students’ perception of workforce readiness. Former President Barrack Obama (2010) stated: “economic progress and educational achievement go hand in hand, educating every American student to graduate prepared for college and success in a new workforce is a national imperative” (p. 2). The study used previously conducted surveys from the 20 local employers involved in the development of the student leadership initiative (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). The surveys align with the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2012) report that the most sought-after skills are soft and interpersonal skills. Thus, this study explored the role that higher education institutions play in the development of soft skills.

Topical interest is a critical component of the conceptual framework (Creswell, 2014), and this summative program evaluation explored how colleges can best prepare students to meet the needs of employers. Two sources, the 2018 National Association of Colleges and Employers report, and surveys of 20 local employers conducted by New Hampshire Community College
were used to determine which skills were most desired by employers. Both sources identified soft skills as the most critical skills needed to be successful. Research on soft skill development in higher education is limited, but the data sets that do exist show that co-curricular programs are an effective way for students to learn soft skills (Peck et al., 2017). The Community College System of New Hampshire has a goal of training and educating a prepared workforce (Gittell & Reid, 2013). As part of that effort, New Hampshire Community College intentionally embedded soft skill development into their co-curricular programs (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). This study examined student participants’ perceptions of those efforts on soft skill development.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study used involvement theory and self-determination theory as theoretical frames through which to examine how students can develop soft skills through co-curricular programs in higher education, as evidenced by student participants’ perception of soft skill development. These theories also guided this study in its aim to examine the role that higher education could play in soft skill development. Lastly, the two theories served as the foundation to explore how students’ participation in co-curricular programs influenced their perceived preparedness to enter the workforce.

**Involvement Theory**

Involvement theory (Astin, 1984, 1999) is beneficial to this study because it provides a useful approach to help educators in the development of effective learning environments. According to Astin (1999), student involvement is the physical and psychological energy devoted by the student to the academic experience. Astin (1984, 1999) stated that a highly involved student spends much time on campus and studying, actively participates in student
organizations, and engages in frequent interaction with faculty and other students. Thus, based on these attributes, the primary accentuation of the involvement theory is the behavior of the student, thereby emphasizing the importance of active student participation in the learning process (Astin, 1984, 1999).

Astin (1984) articulates five core principles of the theory. First, the concept of “involvement” may be generalized or specific. Second, there is a distinct continuum of involvement for each student. Third, involvement can be measured (quantitative). Fourth, under involvement theory, the amount of learning and personal growth associated with any educational program or facility is proportionate to the quality and quantity of student involvement. Lastly, Astin asserts, “the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement” (p. 519). Thus, based on these core principles, the more schools can provide intentional involvement opportunities for students to be engaged, the more likely the students are to be successful in their academic studies (Astin, 1984, 1999).

**Relationship/application to the study.** The interactionalist model by Tinto (1993) asserts that colleges should focus on students’ institutional experience and their integration to the community. In general, community and commuter colleges have fewer co-curricular activities than four-year and residential institutions (Albert et al., 2018; Mertes, 2015), which has led to inconsistent social integration (Mertes, 2015). Inconsistent social integration often leads to students leaving their college prior to completion (Tinto, 1993). To address this problem, many community colleges have placed more emphasis on peer groups and interactions during academically-related activities (such as those within the classroom), partly due to the lack of (or fewer) co-curricular activities offered by community colleges (Albert et al., 2018). Albert,
Pettys, and Wolfer (2018) suggested that learning communities in both community and commuter colleges impact social integration and interpersonal development by connecting students with other members of their community.

Garfield and David (1986) supported the involvement theory and stated that “students who get significantly involved in student services programs show gains in critical thinking skills as well as interpersonal competence and cognitive complexity” (p. 490). This statement suggests that the more involved the student, the higher their thinking skills and interpersonal competence.

According to Kuh (1995), life outside the classroom may be perceived as an incubator, where knowledge is obtained in other areas, which may be tested, tried, and reworked to be utilized in meaningful ways by students. One way this process can occur is through involvement in co-curricular activities.

In New Hampshire, six of the seven community colleges are commuter schools. Only three offer a student life leadership department, whereas two offer intercollegiate athletics. Based on the assertions of Garfield and David (1986) and Kuh (1995), these limited offerings may indicate that, to some extent, after graduation, these workforce entrants are not adequately prepared in terms of thinking skills and interpersonal competence. This lack of preparation could have a negative impact not only on the careers of individuals but also on the companies that hire them and the consumers they serve. In this study, involvement theory was used as part of the framework for the exploration of soft skill development in co-curricular activities. This theory recognizes that “involvement” might be measured quantitatively, and participants might also offer their own perspectives on their level of involvement qualitatively.
Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination is a macro theory related to human motivation and personality. The primary concerns of the self-determination theory are inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs. Moreover, the self-determination theory is associated with the motivation behind the choices made by humans without the consideration of external interference or influence. Thus, the self-determination theory is based on the degree to which the behavior of an individual is self-determined and self-motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). During the 1970s, research on the self-determination theory evolved from studies that focused on the comparison of intrinsic and extrinsic motives, as well as the role played by intrinsic motivation in behavior (Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973). However, the formal introduction of the self-determination theory did not occur until the mid-1980s, and it did not become overwhelmingly popular in social psychology until the early 2000s. Studies about intrinsic motivation, such as the one conducted by Deci (1971), found that intrinsic motivation referred to the initiation of an activity for its own sake, due to the initiator’s interest and satisfaction in completing the action, as opposed to the start of an action to meet an external goal.

Additionally, the degree of a person’s internalization of motives often leads to different types of motivations being manifested (Ryan, 1995). In this context, internalization refers to the effort made to transform extrinsic motives to personally held values, which lead to behavioral regulation assimilation (Ryan, 1995). Deci and Ryan (1990) worked together to expand on early work that differentiated between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which led to the proposal of three intrinsic needs associated with self-determination. They include: (1) competence; (2) autonomy, and (3) relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). These needs motivate the self to engage in behaviors that positively impact their psychological health and well-being. These
needs are universal, innate, and psychological. Moreover, they occur across time, culture, and gender (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

According to Ryan and Deci (2000a), there are three essential elements of the self-determination theory. The elements are (1) humans are inherently proactive regarding their individual perceptions of their potential and have the ability to master inner forces, such as emotions and drives; (2) humans are inherently capable of engaging in growth development and integrated functioning activities; (3) humans are inherently able to develop optimally, which leads to improved actions, but this is not an automatic process, and a nurturing social environment is essential for the actualization of their potential (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

**Relationship/application to the study.** At the college level, participation in co-curricular activities is usually voluntary. Students tend to become involved in activities in which they have an interest or which they find meaningful and beneficial. Because of the voluntary decision to participate in co-curricular activities, there is a natural incentive for them to learn and grow.

Foubert and Urbanski (2006) found that at the end of their final year, seniors of a medium-sized public university who reported being more involved in co-curricular activities through the Student Development Task and Lifestyle Inventory exhibited more development in autonomy through interdependence and purpose establishment and clarification. Students who were not involved in co-curricular programs had lower developmental scores based on the inventory. Moreover, those students who joined or were leaders of co-curricular activities demonstrated more development, as opposed to those who solely attended the meetings (Foubert & Urbanski, 2006).

Under the self-determination theory, the quality of motivation affects the quality and quantity of actions and behaviors. Vansteenkiste et al. (2006) stated that the quality of motivation
refers to the type of motivation that underlines the learning behavior, which makes it more useful for achieving goals. The three assumptions of the self-determination theory—active engagement in development, the natural desire for growth, and universal psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000a)—are often present in student leaders. They lead to skill and knowledge development. In Figure 3, representing the complete internalization of a regulation for autonomous purposes, individuals must internally understand the meaning and value of the regulation. These meanings are what become internalized and integrated into those environments and lead to the provision of support for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. As understood through the self-determination theory, the adoption and internalization of a goal are more likely to occur if it is clearly understood and the individual has the related skills to succeed at the goal. Therefore, competence supports and facilitates internalization (Ryan & Deci, 2000b).

Figure 3: Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000b).

The self-determination theory establishes a technique for motivation by considering what consistently motivates an individual, instead of thinking of motivation as a unitary idea. Self-
determination theory differentiates between various kinds of motives and the impact of each. Intrinsic motivation is the natural, inherent drive to look for difficulties and brand new possibilities that self-determination theory relates to social and cognitive advancement. Extrinsic motivation comes from external sources. It is the context of such motivation that concerns the self-determination theory, as these contexts impact whether the motives are internalized and incorporated into the sense of self. Externally managed behavior is the least self-governing. It is carried out because of external needs or possible benefits. Such actions can be viewed as having an externally viewed locus of causality (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b).

An introjected guideline of behavior explains adopting specific policies of conduct; however, it does not explain the idea of accepting stated guidelines as the individual’s own. This is the kind of behavior in which people feel motivated to show their capability to preserve self-regard. Whereas self-regard is internally driven, introjected habits have an externally viewed locus of causality or something that does not come from one’s self. A guideline through recognition is a more autonomously driven extrinsic motivation. It constitutes purposely valuing an objective or policy so that the stated action is accepted as personally crucial (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Integrated regulation is the most self-governing type of extrinsic motivation. When guidelines are entirely integrated with the self, they are part of an individual’s self-examination and beliefs on individual requirements. As a result, incorporated motivations share qualities with intrinsic motivation. However, they are still categorized as extrinsic because the objectives that are attempted to be accomplished are directed toward factors that are extrinsic to the self, instead of intrinsic satisfaction or interest in the job (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Extrinsically encouraged behaviors can be incorporated into the self. When there is a sense of relatedness, internalization is more likely to take place. The internalization of extrinsic motivation is connected to skills.
Autonomy is especially crucial for individuals who are attempting to incorporate behaviors into their sense of self. If an external context enables an individual to include guidelines, they must feel skilled, self-governing, and associated. Individuals need to comprehend the guidance in terms of their other objectives to assist them in their sense of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

Scenarios that provide autonomy, as opposed to taking it away, also impact motivation. Other external elements, such as due dates, which function to manage and limit, reduce intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Research studies looking at options have discovered that increasing an individual’s choices and alternatives increases their intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Providing favorable feedback on a job just to improve one’s intrinsic motivation reduces extrinsic motivation for the job. Unfavorable feedback has the opposite impact (i.e., reducing intrinsic motivation by lowering people’s requirement for proficiency) (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

As per Figure 3, the most autonomous, extrinsic form of motivation is integrated regulation, which occurs when identified regulations have been fully assimilated (internalized). Regulation through identification is another type of extrinsic motivation, in which the personal importance of the behavior is noted, and it leads the individual to accept and adopt the rule. The taxonomy of the self-determination theory (see Figure 3) shows the left-to-right progression of motivation. All aspects of this motivation were considered in this study, ranging from amotivation, extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation. The reason for this inclusion was to provide an assessment of how different types of motivation (or the complete lack of motivation) influence participation in co-curricular activities and affect the soft skill development required in the contemporary workforce.
Conclusion

The intent of chapter two is to provide a scholarly foundation to be able to conduct a summative program evaluation of the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program. The literature reviewed in this section delineated the differences between hard and soft skills, the need for soft skills, and the connection between soft skills and workforce development. The research also captured how higher education is using co-curricular programs to develop soft skills in their students. The findings were used as the foundation for the summative program evaluation of the NHCC Student Leadership program, in addition to looking into how soft skills can contribute to a student’s perception of their job readiness. The literature captures data that was not covered in this study, including the economic impact of teaching soft skills, the graduation rate, and actual employment rates. The literature review revealed that employers identify their top ten needs as soft skills. Soft skill development should be a critical component of higher education. The question should no longer be whether higher education should require soft skill competencies but instead, how they should be implemented.

The direct connection between soft skill development and employment is something that cannot be ignored. With the complete internalization of regulations for autonomous purposes, individuals must internally understand the meaning and value of each regulation. These meanings are what become internalized and integrated into work environments, leading to the provision of support for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. As understood through the self-determination theory, the adoption and internalization of a goal are more likely to occur if it is understood, and the individual has related skills to succeed. Therefore, an employee’s competency supports and facilitates the internalization of a goal (Ryan & Deci, 2000b).
Chapter three provides a detailed overview of the research method that was utilized in this study. Chapter four presents the study findings and any recommendations for actions. Chapter five offers an overview of the research and concludes with the researcher’s interpretation of the results. Chapter five also includes implications of the study, recommendations for actions, and future research.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The overarching goal of co-curricular programs is to provide opportunities for students to develop the skills needed to be successful in the workplace and society (Dungy & Peck, 2019). A holistic learning experience across classrooms and co-curricular activities provide students with the best chance to be successful (Roulin and Bangerter, 2013). The results of a study conducted by The Campus Labs (Griffin, 2016) indicated that the majority of the students who participated in co-curricular programs viewed their experience as critical for developing the soft skills needed to enter the workforce (Peck et al., 2017). These data are supported in the National Association of Student Personnel Administrator’s book, *The Engagement, and Employability: Integrating Career Learning Through Co-curricular Experiences in Postsecondary Education* (NASPA, 2017). The book is composed of research conducted by six student affairs professionals who examined nine distinct co-curricular programs. The data collected by the researchers captured how co-curricular programs promoted the development of skills desired by employers. NASPA’s (2017) findings supported the role of co-curricular programs in enhancing students’ job readiness.

In New Hampshire, six of the seven community colleges are commuter schools, and only three offer co-curricular programs (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). Of the three colleges that offer co-curricular programs, two offer intercollegiate athletics, and two others provide a student leadership program (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). Fewer co-curricular programs in community colleges translate into fewer opportunities for students to develop skills such as critical thinking and interpersonal competencies that are associated with
active participation in co-curricular activities (Peck et al., 2017). Prior literature implies that graduates may not be adequately prepared, in terms of thinking skills and interpersonal competence, to enter the workforce (Garfield & David, 1986; Kuh, 1995; NACE, 2018).

Employment skills are critical for every resident, but this is especially the case in New Hampshire because of the shortage of well-prepared applicants (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2018). The lack of workers in New Hampshire is a complex problem that the state is trying to address through its 65 x 25 goal (Gittell, 2015). The shortage is partly because of New Hampshire’s historic run of low unemployment (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2018). Figure 5, below, provides unemployment rate data for New Hampshire from August 2014 through August 2019. Figure 4 shows that New Hampshire’s unemployment rate has remained 3% or lower since 2016.

![Unemployment Rate Graph](image)

*Figure 4: Reprinted from New Hampshire’s Workforce, Wages, and Economic Opportunities (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2019, p. 4).*
The flat unemployment rate may also be indicative of many other issues, including a shortage of employees willing to fill open positions (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2019). The aging population leaving the workforce (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2019) may also drive the rate lower. As of July 2019, New Hampshire’s unemployment rate was 2.5% and had been under 3% for more than 39 consecutive months (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2019). New Hampshire Employment Security (2018) states that another reason for New Hampshire’s workforce shortage is the number of residents who leave the state. More than 93,000 people left for jobs in Massachusetts in 2015 alone (New Hampshire Employment Security, 2018). In contrast, only 38,000 people left Massachusetts in 2015 for employment in New Hampshire (New Hampshire Employment Security, 2018).

To address the concern of unprepared workers and the shortage of qualified applicants with the skills that employers seek, New Hampshire Community College launched a student success initiative designed to develop soft skills that complement the hard skills that students learn in the classroom (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). The goals of the Student Success Initiative were as follows:

- To intentionally provide a variety of opportunities for students to develop their soft skills and competencies;
- To improve students’ understanding of soft skills and their importance in society and the workplace;
- To enhance the employability of the students who participate in the program.

This study aimed to gain a better understanding of how co-curricular programs can adopt soft skill learning outcomes to help students in community colleges develop employment skills. This study also explored whether soft skill learning outcomes in co-curricular programs
influence students’ perception of preparedness at graduation. The latter is something that has not been explored in studies reviewed. To achieve this goal, a summative program evaluation was conducted on the New Hampshire Community College’s student leadership program. The goal of the study was to evaluate whether the student leadership program achieved its goals and objectives. Based on the data available, this study was not able to analyze or assess the impact of the New Hampshire Community College student leadership program on graduation rates or employability. These areas should be addressed in future studies.

**Research Design**

This study was designed to be a summative program evaluation. The summative evaluation, also known as a summative assessment, is designed to evaluate the result and effectiveness of a program (Dungy & Peck, 2019). Summative evaluations are conducted at the end of the program or after several years of the program to analyze whether the program has achieved its intended outcomes (Frechtling Westat, 2010). Summative assessment is widely taught in education programs in the United States to assess a program’s impact and its weaknesses or to identify areas that need to be addressed (McDavid, Huse, & Hawthorn, 2018).

Summative evaluations determine the impact, value, merit, and worth of a program (Frechtling Westat, 2010). This summative evaluation aimed to determine whether the New Hampshire Community College’s student leadership program affected students’ soft skill development. To complete this summative evaluation, the researcher conducted a comprehensive desk review of all the relevant documents related to the New Hampshire Community College student leadership program.
Research Questions

To best prepare students to meet the needs of the local workforce, New Hampshire Community College developed a Student Success Initiative that intentionally embeds soft skill development into all non-curricular programs (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). One component of the Student Success Initiative was the student leadership program. This program consisted of an annual retreat and encouraged participants to become actively involved in student clubs. To explore the impact of the program, this study addressed the following research questions.

1. How do participants in the New Hampshire Community Student Leadership Program perceive the program to have helped them develop soft skills?

2. Do students who participated in the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program feel prepared to enter the workforce at the time of their graduation?

Setting

The Community College System of New Hampshire (CCSNH) is composed of seven schools located throughout the state. CCSNH was formed in 1945, at the end of World War II. Known as the Trade Schools of New Hampshire, the schools were established to train the soldiers, sailors, and airmen who would be demobilized and returning to civilian life (Gittell & Reid, 2013; Ryan, 1982). New Hampshire legislators wanted a system that not only met the needs of veterans but one that would also meet the needs of New Hampshire’s businesses and citizens (Gittell & Reid, 2013; Ryan, 1982). Through the years, NH legislators voted to increase the number of trade schools to provide affordable education and training to all regions of New Hampshire (Gittell & Reid, 2013; Ryan, 1982). In 1969, legislation changed the name from New
Hampshire Trade Schools to the New Hampshire Vocational and Technical School to emphasize the focus on vocational and technical training (Gittell & Reid, 2013; Ryan, 1982). Similar legislation was passed in 1989, which changed the name to the New Hampshire Technical College. The change was made to focus on technical education programs (Gittell & Reid, 2013; Ryan, 1982). Finally, in 2007, legislation was passed, thereby officially establishing the Community College System of New Hampshire (Gittell & Reid, 2013) to highlight comprehensive education and create pathways to four-year institutions (Gittell & Reid, 2013).

New Hampshire Community College offers several associate degrees and certificate programs (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). In addition to the credit-bearing degrees and certificates, New Hampshire Community College provides direct training at several companies in the counties they serve. New Hampshire Community College also works closely with the state and local economic development departments to help encourage businesses to relocate to the region (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). As of 2019, the Community College System of New Hampshire serves almost 18,000 students on an annual basis, and more than 97% of students reside or work in NH. CCSNH institutions remain the most affordable public institutions in the state (CA, personal communication, November 9, 2019).

Participants/Sample

The researcher conducted a desk review of the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program documentation. Materials included employer surveys from the New Hampshire Community College Student Success Initiative project in 2013, student leadership program outcomes, student leadership participant surveys, and student leadership participant graduation surveys. The student leadership program is held off-site over one weekend each fall.
Students can participate in the program twice. The goal of the desk review was to identify critical factors of the program to help determine if the overall scope and objectives of the New Hampshire Community College leadership program have been achieved. The researcher removed all personal information about the participants and employers. The study consisted of 50 students who participated in the student leadership program from 2014–2018. Ten students from each year were randomly chosen for the study. Surveys from the students selected were used in the analysis of the program.

**Data**

This study used existing documents containing information on the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program. The review of the current documents helped establish an understanding of the program’s history and operation (McNamara & O’Hara, 2006). Specifically, this study examined documents related to students who participated in the program in the academic years from 2014–2018. The following materials utilized in this study are:

- Ten randomly selected student leadership evaluations from each year, 2014–2018, of the New Hampshire Community College’s Student Leadership Program.
- Employer surveys completed by 20 employers in 2013. The employers were all located close to the New Hampshire Community College. The surveys contain qualitative information on the soft skills needed in the region. This data was used to examine whether the leadership program included program outcomes that address the employers’ perspective. This research was utilized in research question one.
- Student Life documents from 2014–2018, including but not limited to the Student Success Initiative, student leadership co-curricular activities, and the Student Leadership Programs.

The New Hampshire Community College used these documents for internal reporting on the program’s performance. Still, a comprehensive program evaluation was never completed. As the former program manager and a senior leader of the college, the researcher had regular access to these documents. The study followed a four-step process. The researcher (a) obtained written consent from the New Hampshire Community College to conduct the research; (b) collected all the documents related to the New Hampshire Community College student leadership program; (c) coded all the materials received, and (d) reported all of the findings.

Analysis

The researcher used Saldaña’s (2016) code to theory model, as seen in figure 6 below. Descriptive coding is ideal for new researchers learning how to code data and is suitable for most qualitative studies (Saldaña, 2016). Descriptive coding identifies relevant and common themes from the students’ responses in their student leadership survey results and their student graduation surveys. The themes served as the foundation for analysis. Additionally, descriptive coding allowed the readers of this study to see and hear as the researcher does (Wolcott & Haderlie, 1996). Figure 5, below, captures the codes to theory model (Saldaña, 2016) that the researcher used for this study.
Coding was based on topics and not on abbreviations of the content (Tesch, 1995). To achieve this analysis, one-word codes or nouns were utilized to summarize the response of each survey question. Codes were then grouped together in primary/parent groups to allow the researcher to find similarities and connections among the data responses and the data collected. Depending on the number of primary/parent codes, sub-codes or children codes may be used to analyze the data (Gibbs, 2007) further. All sub-codes would share the same primary code. Once coding was complete, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify any patterns that may help answer the research questions. The analysis is not a summary of data but rather a clear interpretation of the data so the researcher can answer the research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

To answer the research questions, a total of 50 surveys completed by students who participated in the student leadership program from 2014–2018, ten each from 2014–2018 program years, were analyzed. All of the randomly selected surveys were coded. Coding was
also done on the questionnaires completed by the 20 employers that developed the student success initiative. Finally, all of the graduation surveys of the 50 students that were randomly selected for this study were coded. The goal of the summative program evaluation was to look at the program as a whole for the years selected. As such, surveys were not separated based on the year of participation. After all surveys were coded, a thematic analysis of all three surveys (employer surveys, student leadership program surveys, student graduation surveys) was done. Employer survey results were compared to program outcomes to determine if the program is addressing the needs identified by employers. Student participant survey results were analyzed to determine if the program is achieving the intended program outcomes. Graduation surveys were coded and themed to examine whether students who participate in the program feel prepared to enter the workforce. In total, this approach provided a thorough summative evaluation of the student leadership program and answered both research questions. Additional data or themes that are outside of the scope of the two research questions become known through this process and are captured and shared in the results.

**Integrity and Validity**

Internal validity refers to whether the observations in a study are obtained from the manipulation of the independent variable and not some other factor. In other words, it determines whether there is a cause-and-effect relationship within the study (Trochim, 2006). To establish the internal validity for this research study, the researcher examined the New Hampshire Community College student leadership program’s impact on students’ perception of soft skill development and perceived preparedness for employment.

External validity refers to the extent to which the results of a study can be generalized to other settings (ecological validity), other people (population validity), and over time (historical
validity) (Trochim, 2006). The external validity for this research study was demonstrated through an understanding of how the New Hampshire Community College student leadership program may be applied to other student-related initiatives among colleges nationwide. To maintain the integrity of the study, all data were collected through a comprehensive desk audit. All the data were examined for relevance to soft skill development and workforce preparedness. This examination allowed the researcher to gain a sense of the program’s strengths and weaknesses (Yin, 2009).

**Participants’ Rights**

No human subjects were used in this study. The researcher obtained written consent from the New Hampshire Community College to conduct the program evaluation. The request also included full access to all the documents related to the New Hampshire Community College’s student leadership program. All the electronic materials that were obtained were encrypted and secured on a password-protected computer. All the paper documents that were received were secured in a locked file cabinet. All the identifying information of the students was removed. At the conclusion of the study, all documents were returned to New Hampshire Community College.

**Limitations**

Limitations are the weaknesses in a study that are beyond the control of the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). There are several limitations to this study. This study was limited to students who have participated in the student leadership program at New Hampshire Community College and does not include data from other programs that could impact soft skill development. This study also does not include students from other regions of the state or the
country. Limiting the study to students at New Hampshire Community College limited the sample size of the study.

Further restricting the sample size was the total number of students who participated in the leadership program and the limited years the program has been in existence. The limited scope of the study may confine the findings to schools of comparable size and population. The documentation (student surveys, employer interviews, program assessments, graduation surveys) provided by the New Hampshire Community College may have its own limitations. Because the study is limited to New Hampshire Community College, the documents may not be a reflection of all the state’s community colleges. As the researcher and program developer, it was vital to be cautious of any personal biases and the impact they may have had on the study.

**Conclusion**

This study aimed to present a summative program evaluation of the New Hampshire Community College’s student leadership program. This program supports the national agenda of enhancing students’ soft skills (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018) and New Hampshire’s needs for a trained and well-prepared workforce (Gittell, 2017). As part of the program evaluation, an in-depth qualitative, summative assessment of the program was conducted.

Chapter three described the research method that was utilized for this study. The findings are presented in chapter four. Chapter five includes an overview of how the study was conducted and the researcher’s interpretation of the findings, along with the implications of the research and recommendations for action and future research. Student affairs professionals may benefit from this study’s results for determining future co-curricular programs. Likewise, colleges may benefit from the study’s findings to learn how to best
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Historically colleges are vital for the provision of a trained workforce (Hora et al., 2016). As of 2017, more than 1,100 community colleges were serving about 41% of the undergraduates across the nation (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017). On the whole, the mission of community colleges has been to provide quality, accessible, and affordable education (Dunn & Kalleberg, 2016). Core to the mission of most community colleges has been the provision of a trained and qualified workforce by increasing the educational attainment of their students, regardless of background (Dunn & Kalleberg, 2016; Lumina Foundation, 2013). Educational attainment can lead to opportunities for individuals that would not otherwise be offered. Individuals with an education are more likely to be engaged in the community in which they live (Baum & Payea, 2004; Ma et al., 2016). Additionally, having a higher level of education means that individuals have higher wages, leading to better healthcare access and retirement strategies (Ma et al., 2016).

In 2018, a study was conducted by Bloomberg and Workday. The study, “Building Tomorrow’s Talent” (2018), explored whether employers thought recent college graduates were prepared when they entered the workforce. The results of the study revealed that 89% of employers felt that recently hired graduates were not ready to perform the job functions at a high level (Bloomberg, 2018). This aligns with a previous study conducted in 2013 by the Lumina Foundation, which revealed that nationally only 11% of all business leaders perceived higher education as capable of teaching the necessary skills to be successful in the workforce. It was projected by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (2015) that higher education would be required for two-thirds of all jobs by 2025.
It was also estimated that there would be a shortage of 11 million skilled workers within the United States by 2025 (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2015). Karp (2011) stated that community colleges could work “past their mission and impact the shortage of skilled workers.” As such, many colleges have developed degrees or short-term training programs for addressing this projected shortage (Mitchell et al., 2019; Selingo, 2017). These employment trends were even more significant in New Hampshire, where it was estimated that more than 68% of all New Hampshire jobs would require some type of postsecondary credential by 2025 (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2015). Due to an aging population, declining high school population, and a decrease in the number of educated workers moving to the region, it was also projected that New Hampshire would have an inadequate amount of educated and trained workers needed to meet workforce demands (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2018). The failure to have trained and educated adults to meet the needs of the workforce could lead to long-term impacts on the economy and damage the ability of the state to both attract and retain businesses (New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute, 2019).

The results in this study were derived from a summative program evaluation that was conducted on a student leadership program located in New Hampshire. The site was given a pseudonym—New Hampshire Community College. The study aimed to expand upon a study conducted by Campus Labs, Project CEO (Griffin, 2016), which provided evidence regarding the impact that co-curricular programs had on soft skills identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. The goal of Project CEO’s study was to gain an understanding of how students developed soft skills through co-curricular programs (Griffin, 2016). The Project CEO study included more than 1,300 students and found that students
viewed co-curricular experiences as being vital in the development of soft skills (Peck et al., 2017). Dungy and Peck (2019) asserted that co-curricular programs provided students with opportunities to develop skills required to be successful in the workforce. The Project CEO study found that there was a connection between co-curricular programs and the development of skills sought by employers, supporting student engagement benefits (Peck et al., 2017). The researcher reviewed existing program documents to gain a broader understanding of the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program (NHCCSLP). The reviewed materials provided an understanding of how the NHCCSLP impacted soft-skill development among student participants. There were no human participants utilized in the study, and only program documents were collected and assessed. Through the lens of the NHCCSLP program, this summative program evaluation asked the following research questions:

1. How do participants in the New Hampshire Community Student Leadership Program perceive the program to have helped them develop soft-skills?

2. Do students who participated in the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program feel prepared to enter the workforce at the time of their graduation?

The expectation is that results from this study will be beneficial for program design and assessment development. Moreover, the results may impact how colleges prepare students to meet the projected workforce shortage. According to Posavac (2016), program evaluations determine if the implementation of the intended strategies and activities achieved the desired results, leading to strengthened research findings and improvement of future offerings.
This chapter outlines the analytical approach used to explore the perceptions of students regarding soft skills development through their NHCCSLP participation. The section also identifies three primary themes that evolved from the data analysis. These themes include:

- Student engagement and why students participate
- The role of experiential learning
- Intentionally building learning outcomes into co-curricular activities

The chapter concludes with a summary of how the findings link to the purpose of the study.

**Analysis**

The Community College System of New Hampshire, founded in 1945 following the end of World War II, is composed of seven schools throughout the state. The Community College System of New Hampshire was known as the “Trade Schools of New Hampshire.” It was established to train the demobilized military that would soon be returning to civilian life (Gittell & Reid, 2013; Ryan, 1982). Legislators in New Hampshire wanted to create an educational system that would not only meet the needs of veterans but also meet the needs of the businesses and citizens of New Hampshire (Gittell & Reid, 2013; Ryan, 1982). In 1961, New Hampshire legislators authorized additional locations to increase the number of trade schools (Gittell & Reid, 2013; Ryan, 1982). Legislation was passed in 1969 to change the name from New Hampshire Trade Schools to the New Hampshire Vocational and Technical School to emphasize the focus on technical and vocational training (Gittell & Reid, 2013; Ryan, 1982). In 1989, similar legislation was passed, leading the name to be changed to New Hampshire Technical College, to show the focus on technical education programs (Gittell & Reid, 2013; Ryan, 1982). More legislation was passed in 2007, in which the Community College System of New
Hampshire was officially established to highlight the focus on comprehensive education and to create pathways to four-year institutions (Gittell & Reid, 2013; Ryan, 1982).

In 2019, the Community College System of New Hampshire served almost 18,000 students annually, and more than 97% of these students either resided or worked in New Hampshire. The Community College System of New Hampshire institutions were the most affordable public colleges in the state. Further, six of the seven community colleges were commuter schools, and only three offered co-curricular programs. Of the three colleges offering co-curricular programs, two offered intercollegiate athletics and a student leadership program, while the third school offered just a student leadership program (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). As community colleges often have fewer co-curricular programs, they frequently have fewer opportunities for students to develop soft skills, such as critical thinking and interpersonal competencies that are commonly associated with active participation in co-curricular activities (Peck et al., 2017). Prior literature has shown that a lack of co-curricular activities, or students’ nonparticipation, often resulted in graduates who not adequately prepared to enter the workforce (Garfield & David, 1986; Kuh, 1995; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). New Hampshire Community College offered several associate degrees and certificate programs. In 2019, the New Hampshire Community College also offered direct training at several companies in the counties it served. New Hampshire Community College leaders worked in collaboration with state and local economic development departments in order to encourage businesses to relocate to New Hampshire (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019).
For this study, data were obtained from the documents related to the NHCC’s Student Leadership Program. The study was conducted as a summative program review, allowing an examination of the impact of co-curricular programs on student preparation for the workforce. The subject of the present study is the student success initiative by New Hampshire Community College. This initiative was developed in response to local graduate/employer experiences and prior studies conducted by the Lumina Foundation (2013) and the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2018), showing that graduates lacked skills most sought after by employers. The goal of the initiative was to better prepare students for success in the workplace through the intentional embedding of soft skills into the co-curricular programs (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019).

Co-curricular programs should be designed to provide opportunities for students to develop the skills required for success within the workplace (Dungy & Peck, 2019). Chances for success are enhanced through a holistic learning experience that occurs across both classrooms and co-curricular activities (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013). The results of the Project CEO study indicated that most students who participated in co-curricular programs perceived their experiences were critical for the development of soft skills required for success in the workforce (Griffin, 2016; Peck et al., 2017). These findings were supported by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (2017) in *Engagement and Employability: Integrating Career Learning Through Co-Curricular Experiences in Postsecondary Education*. The research was conducted by six professionals across nine co-curricular programs and captured how these programs promoted the skills most desired by employers. Their book provided guidance in the formation of this study. The findings of
the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (2017) supported the role held by co-curricular programs in the enhancement of job readiness.

**Methods**

In the present study, the researcher conducted a desk review of the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program, utilizing documentation in relation to those students who participated in the program between 2014 and 2018. Materials used involved student leadership evaluations from ten randomly selected students from each year between 2014 and 2018 of the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program; 20 employer surveys completed in 2013 about soft skills required for success in the workforce; and Student Life documents from between 2014 and 2018 relating to the Student Success Initiative, student leadership co-curricular activities, graduation surveys from 2014 to 2018, and the Student Leadership Programs. New Hampshire Community College used these documents for internal reporting regarding the performance of the program. Still, no comprehensive program evaluation had been conducted. A complete list of documents used in the desk audit is in Table 2.

Table 2.

| New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program Desk Audit Documents. |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Documents                     | # of Reviewed Documents | Years           |
| Employer Surveys              | 20                  | 2013            |
| Student Leadership Surveys    | 50                  | 2014–2018       |
| Student Life Planning Docs    | 27                  | 2013–2018       |
| NHSLP Learning Outcome        | 3                   | 2014–2018       |
| Graduation Surveys            | 1112                | 2014–2019       |
The goal of the desk review was to identify critical factors of the program to determine whether the scope and objectives of the New Hampshire Community College leadership program were achieved. The researcher de-identified information about participants and employers. The results were derived from the program surveys of 50 students who participated in the student leadership program between 2014 and 2018. A random selection method was used to select ten student surveys from each year. The information was used to develop an understanding of the history and operation of the program (McNamara & O’Hara, 2006).

While the researcher—as the former program manager and a senior leader of the college—had open access to these documents, the study was conducted using a four-step process. First, written consent was obtained from the New Hampshire Community College to conduct the research. Second, all documents relating to the New Hampshire Community College student leadership programs were collected. Third, 50 surveys completed by students (ten chosen randomly for each year between 2014 and 2018) who participated in the student leadership program were analyzed through coding. Coding was also done for 20 employer surveys completed in 2013 that were used to develop the student success initiative.

**Coding**

The code to theory model by Saldaña (2016) was used in the completion of the present study. As part of the code to theory process, the researcher utilized descriptive coding. Descriptive coding is ideal for new researchers who are learning how to code data and is suitable for qualitative studies (Saldaña, 2016). In this case, descriptive coding allowed for the identification of relevant and common themes obtained from student responses in the student leadership survey results. The themes derived from these results
served as the foundation for analysis. Descriptive coding is also beneficial because readers of the present study can follow how the researcher obtained information (Wolcott & Haderlie, 1996). Descriptive coding is also helpful because it allows for the identification of patterns or themes from qualitative data but does not require analysis with preconceived analytical categories (Patton, 2015). There were three rounds of coding. In the first round, an open coding approach was used (Creswell, 2015; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2016). The open coding approach may be descriptive, conceptual, or theoretical, depending on the phenomena that are being observed and the preexisting knowledge and experience brought to the work (Saldaña, 2016). The first round of coding was beneficial because it provided initial insights into potential categories and emerging connections. The first round of coding was done by identifying codes on a line-by-line basis. This approach assisted the researcher in determining which codes were dominant and which were less critical. Thus, emerging concepts were developed through code clusters and connected to other codes, which led to the development of refined categories. The second round of coding was focused and allowed for a greater analysis of emerging connections. The data set was reviewed and recoded in this stage, allowing for grouping into tentative categories. Next, these categories were compared, and some codes were combined or deleted.

The coding process allowed the development of analytic memos, which are brief or extended narratives with the reflections of the researcher regarding the data (Miles et al., 2014). This enabled a more in-depth examination of the codes and emerging categories, allowing for code and category comparison between the data and the determination of connections and patterns between codes. These memos were beneficial because they helped the researcher mitigate bias and collect evidence regarding the links that emerged in the
study. During each round of coding, patterns were identified through the connections made of similarities in data.

Following the coding process, a thematic analysis was conducted across all three surveys (employer surveys, student leadership program surveys, and student graduation surveys). Employer survey coding results were compared to program outcomes to determine if the program addressed needs identified by employers. Student leadership program surveys were analyzed to determine if the program achieved the intended results. Student graduation surveys were analyzed to determine if graduates perceived themselves as ready to enter the workforce. This approach allowed for a thorough summative evaluation of the student leadership program.

Generating Themes

The thematic analysis aims to recognize themes, or trends, in data that are relevant to address the subject of research (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Charmaz (2014) stated that the researcher must determine which codes make the most sense within the frame of the analysis.

A theme is the product of coding, critical reflection, and contemplation, categorization of meaning, not something “coded“ as such (Saldaña, 2016, p. 12). Theme generation allowed for the analysis of codes and categories. Themes refer to extended phrases or sentences to describe the meaning of data. They may be summarized by the participants regarding what occurred at the time (Saldaña, 2016). Themes found in the initial analysis were analyzed further, and the final count of themes was three, based on the patterns of the participant responses in surveys. Each theme was integral to the whole when examining the perceptions of participants, and the theming process took multiple efforts for the determination of common elements. While most of the NHCC documents and reports identified themes and subthemes, some papers and reports did not address the topics. The
New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program model changed from the years 2014 to 2018 as the program continued to grow and identify opportunities for improvement. These programmatic changes over time may explain why not all documents included all themes/subthemes.

The thematic analysis was undertaken by the researcher to identify patterns between codes and memos (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Similar to Saldaña’s (2009) structural coding method, Braun and Clarke noted that the purpose of the thematic analysis is to identify patterns that are relevant to answering a specific research question. As topics began to emerge through analysis, Saldaña’s axial coding process helped to group codes into thematic categories. Coding, memo writing, and analysis resulted in three thematic categories and two subthemes, which are presented in the Thematic Findings section of this chapter.

The thematic analysis process revealed that student participants had very similar experiences with some slight differences in their outcomes. Students elaborated on the benefits of being off-campus and the importance of connecting with other students, faculty, and business leaders. Although students did not directly relate those connections with networking, the student responses indicated that they understood the benefits of peer to peer interaction. Overall, the researcher was able to narrow all of the collective codes into three overarching themes. Table 3 outlines the themes and subthemes resulting from the analysis of the NHCCSLP documents. A description of each theme, subthemes linked to data, and applied to the theoretical framework of the study follows Table 3.
Table 3.

*Relevant Themes and Subthemes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Student Engagement, Why Students Participate, Matters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 The Role of Experiential Learning</td>
<td>Workshops, Low Ropes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 Intentionally Building Learning Outcomes into Co-Curricular Activities</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Results**

The present study focused on gaining a better understanding of how co-curricular programs adopted soft skill learning outcomes to help community college students in the development of employment skills. The study also explored whether or not soft skill learning outcomes in co-curricular programs influenced the perceptions of students of their preparedness to enter the workforce after graduation. A summative program evaluation was conducted on the New Hampshire Community College’s Student Leadership Program. The goal of the study was to evaluate whether the program achieved its goals and objectives. However, due to the lack of data, it was not possible to assess the impact of the program on graduation rates or employability. These types of evaluations are often conducted following the completion of a program or after a program has existed for several years to analyze if the intended outcomes were achieved (Frechtling Westat, 2010; McDavid et al., 2018). Thus, summative evaluations have been beneficial for determining the impact, value, merit, and worth of a program (Frechtling Westat, 2010). The goal of the summative program
evaluation was to determine if the NHCCSLP, as a single entity for the years of interest, had an impact on the soft skill development of students.

**2013 Student Success Initiative**

The first step of the summative program evaluation was to review and analyze the surveys from 20 employers that served as the impetus for the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program. The qualitative responses from employers identified seven soft skills they deemed critical (Figure 6). Of the seven critical soft skills identified, the employers ranked communication and critical thinking/problem solving as the two most essential.

![Figure 6. Seven Critical Soft Skills Identified by Employers Rank by Most Important](image)

**NHCCSLP definitions as defined in January 2020.**

- *Communication*—Articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively in written and oral forms to persons inside and outside of the organization. The ability to speak in public, express ideas to others; can write/edit memos, letters, and technical reports clearly & effectively.
• *Enthusiasm & Attitude*—When employers look at prospective candidates, beyond skills, experience, and training, they look for those who demonstrate enthusiasm, or an eagerness to tackle the job. Employers assume that the assigned tasks will be performed positively and cooperatively.

• *Teamwork*—Working collaboratively with colleagues and customers; recognizing and working within a team structure; navigating and resolving conflicts.

• *Networking*—Students will understand that networking takes place any time you participate in a school or social event, volunteer in a church, visit members of your religious group, talk to neighbors, speak to someone in a shop, or communicate with friends online.

• *Problem Solving and Critical Thinking*—Exercise sound reasoning to analyze issues, make decisions, and overcome problems. The individual can obtain, interpret, and use knowledge, facts, and data in this process and may demonstrate originality and inventiveness.

• *Professionalism*—Reflect a professional demeanor including dress, the ability to control their emotions, nonverbal body language, taking individual responsibility for actions, possessing a strong work ethic, reliability, ability to work with others, and strong time management skills.

• *Leadership*—The skills to leverage the strengths of others to achieve common goals. The individual will have the ability to motivate others, be organized, and be capable of prioritizing and delegating work.
Program Documents

The second part of the summative program evaluation was to examine all of the documents associated with the NHCCSLP, including all retreat itineraries, individual lesson plans for workshops and intended learning outcomes for each workshop. A review of documents revealed that although the program changed, the learning outcomes for each workshop remained the same. From 2014 to 2018, the NHCCSLP had the following broad learning outcomes.

- Understand and learn to manage the complexities of groups and their processes.
- Develop a comprehensive set of practical skills and tools to use in the context of leadership. Practical skills include but are not limited to effective communication, conflict resolution, time management, meeting management, group process, fiscal literacy, and critical thinking.
- Learn how diversity manifests itself in various organizations and how the issues it raises should be considered and managed.

Individual lesson plans for each student leadership program workshop had more specific and measurable goals.

Theme 1: Student Engagement, Why Students Participate, Matters

Why students choose to participate in co-curricular activities at the college level plays a critical role in their level of participation (Astin, 1999). Because student engagement is often a voluntary decision, students who do get involved do so from an intrinsic motivation to expand and learn (Ryan, 1995). Students often become involved in activities in which they have an interest or those that they discover to be purposeful and beneficial (Garfield & David, 1986). As part of the summative program review, the researcher reviewed all materials related to the New
Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program from 2014 through 2018. The documents showed that the NHCCSLP had been held at the same location each of those years. Documents also clearly showed that student participation was completely voluntary. Although not part of the scope of this study, documents showed that before 2014, certain student groups, such as the Student Government Association, were required to attend. The review of program workshops and curriculum also confirmed that all activities and workshops were “challenges by choice.”

All workshops began with an overview of the exercise and a statement of the challenge by choice philosophy. In all documents reviewed, challenge by choice was a consistent component of the program since its inception. Challenge by choice means that students could choose whether or not to participate in any activity. Forty-nine of the 50 student surveys reflected learning, each of which identified challenge by choice or voluntarily signing up in other responses. Additionally, several student surveys indicated positive feedback about the challenge by choice philosophy. One student stated, “I participated in every activity, but it was nice to know that I did not have to if I felt uncomfortable.” Surveys also identified reasons why students choose to participate in the SLP. Many participants had more than one reason for participating in the student leadership program (see Figure 7 below). In the case of returning students, the primary reasons to participate were to gain skills and earn funds for their student organizations. Documents revealed that NHCC utilizes participation funding for student clubs in organizations. In the case of new students, the primary reason for attending the student leadership program was to meet new people.
Figure 7. Reasons Why Students Attended the SLP

Additionally, student participation surveys also revealed how many participants were active in other student engagement activities. Figure 9 shows that 90% of returning NHCC SLP students were engaged in the life of the college, most often through student clubs and organizations. Of the 50 participants, 54% of the students participated in student clubs and organizations, and fifteen percent participated in intercollegiate athletics. Ten percent of all NHCC SLP students indicated that they were not involved in any engagement on campus. Only eight percent of all participants received work-study through financial aid, and thirteen percent of all students participated in civic engagement or mentor programs. Unfortunately, NHCC only tracked officers and not all participants of the student clubs and organizations, so there was no data to show how many new students became involved on campus after participating in the program.
Completed surveys from participants also revealed that students felt more connected to the faculty and staff that conducted the workshops. Although there was no specific survey question, several students made comments about feeling more confident about having a “resource on campus” or a “mentor.” Rosch and Stephens (2017) conducted a study for the campus involvement effectiveness in the prediction of gains in leadership capacity associated with students participating in a leadership program. Rosch and Stephens (2017) found that the identification of a faculty/staff mentor by students may be an essential component of leadership growth.

Survey responses and NHCC Student Life documents revealed that most students participated in both SLP certificate programs over a two-year window. Coding results from the surveys identified that a primary reason students participated in the program was to meet and connect with other students at the college. Involvement theory defines a highly engaged student is one who interacts with the college community, spends considerable energy on studying, and
participates actively in student life (Astin, 1999). The theory emphasizes the importance of active student participation in the learning process. The theory is based on the premise that the more involved a student is in their education, the more successful they are. The NHCCSLP Student Life documents indicated that the program was intentionally designed to promote the core elements of involvement theory. A thorough desk audit of all NHCCSLP documents revealed that there was no data available that indicated whether an SLP participant was more successful, as the theory suggests.

Throughout this theme, student participants identified a personal growth or benefit as a motivating factor for participating in the program. The data aligns with the self-determination theory, which represents a macro theory associated with personal inspiration and character (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). The self-determination theory establishes a technique for motivation by considering what regularly encourages an individual, rather than reasoning of motivation as a unitary suggestion (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Under the self-determination theory, the quality of motivation affects the quality of the person’s habits and activities. The three presumptions of the self-determination theory—energetic engagement in development, the natural desire for growth, and universal psychological requirements (Ryan & Deci, 2000a)—usually exist in student leaders, and they cause skill and knowledge development. Many students also stated that challenge by choice was critical to their learning and understanding. Data also revealed that more than 76% of eligible students chose to participate in the program for a second year. Overall, this theme outlined that 97% of the students who participated in the NHCC SLP had an intrinsic motivation to do so.
Theme 2: Experiential Learning

As part of the summative program review, the researcher reviewed and coded fifty surveys that were completed by students who participated in the NHCCSLP. Out of the fifty surveys, 100% of the participants identified at least one of the three experiential learning components as being critical to their growth and development. The three primary experiential learning components of the NHCCSLP are:

- Interactive workshops
- Low ropes course
- High ropes course

The premise of the NHCCSLP was to provide students with hands-on experiences that allowed them to think, process, react, and reflect. Critical to all three experiential learning components were an overview before beginning any exercise, and a debrief at the end of each exercise. Surveys were completed at the end of each student leadership program. Notably absent from all NHCCSLP material was any lecture-style learning, except for guest speakers. Program documents indicated that the lack of lecture-style learning was intentional. The SLP consisted of two certificate tracks, and each certificate track was composed of three experiential learning workshops designed specifically for that certificate program. Each certificate track consisted of three experiential learning activities, including low and high ropes courses. Although the data reflected tweaks and minimal changes from 2014 to 2018, the overall goals and objectives of each component remained intact.

Subtheme 1—Workshops. The experiential workshops delineated the NHCCSLP certificates. A review of all program material confirmed that each certificate, Emerging Leader and Engaged Leader, contained three unique workshops, and each workshop was
offered sequentially to build on the previous one. Students were able to participate in only one certificate program per year. Each individual workshop consisted of a unique lesson plan with targeted learning outcomes. A central component of the lesson plan was the overview and the debrief. All workshops were facilitated by staff and faculty from NHCC. Student surveys reflected that students found the hands-on experiential learning workshops favorable (Figure 9 & Figure 10).

![Bar chart showing student satisfaction levels for Pathways, Mass Pass, and Saboteur workshops.]

*Figure 9. Emerging Leader Workshops*
Figure 10 shows the workshops and the ratings from the engaged leaders’ certificate.

![Bar chart showing ratings for workshops]

**Figure 10. Engaged Leader Workshops**

Of the completed surveys, 46 contained positive comments about the format of the workshops. One student stated, “the workshops were so much better than I expected,” another said, “I love that we were not sitting and listening to people talk at us.” Several surveys included statements about the hands-on workshops and how they helped students put the learning into context. Additional student feedback included one student who wrote, “this was so much more than I expected. I learned so much about myself and others by participating in activities.”

**Subtheme 2—Low Ropes Course.** The NHCCSLP placed a high emphasis on experiential learning. One critical component of the experiential learning offerings at the NHCCSLP was the low and high ropes courses. A review of the NHCCSLP itineraries from 2014 to 2018 showed that the low ropes course was the first experiential learning exercise that students participated in.
when arriving at the camp. The high ropes course is the last experiential learning activity in which students participated.

The NHCCSLP embraced a challenge by choice philosophy, which allowed students to choose whether to participate in activities. All student surveys reflected a 100% participation rate in the low ropes exercises. Collectively, the low ropes course was one of the highest-rated activities among students. One question on the survey asked, “How did low ropes course relate to your leadership development?” Student responses were focused on the role the low ropes courses played in helping students feel connected to other students. Participants universally expressed the benefit of “meeting new people.”

Several respondents also commented about how the low ropes courses allowed them to understand team and group dynamics differently. One student stated the following “it helped me understand how important it is to work as a team to complete complex tasks.” Another commented, “I learned a lot. I learned that leaders face challenges and that it is helpful to have a common goal.” Several students mentioned how the low ropes course helped them improve their communication skills. One student said they learned that “only one person should speak at a time, and that I need to listen more.” Critical thinking skills were captured in several student responses, including students writing about the importance of “having a plan before you start something” and “thinking outside of the box.”

Throughout the entire theme, students identified the benefit of learning and hearing from their peers. Students also spoke about the importance of hands-on activities. The two components that students most valued were the workshops and the low ropes course. Conversely, the surveys reflected a 68% participation rate for the high ropes course, which was far lower than the 100% participation in the other two components. Student participants
were asked, “How did the high ropes course relate to your student leadership development?” Survey results showed that 16 out of the 50 participants opted out of the high ropes course. The students that opted out often referred to their fear of heights, “I did not do it because I am afraid of heights.” One student who opted out stated, “I now know that being a leader is not always about doing but also about supporting and encouraging others even when you cannot do it yourself.” Overall experiential learning was a theme that resonated throughout all of the survey results.

**Theme 3: Intentionally Building Learning Outcomes into Co-Curricular Activities**

Dugan et al. (2011) studied the effects of different individual leadership experiences of college students. They found that leadership experiences varied significantly based on the intentionality of learning outcomes and the pedagogical strategies used (Dugan, 2011). A review of all NHCCSLP documents revealed that the program had been modified throughout the years based on feedback from participants and facilitators. The most recent change to the program was in 2014, when it began to offer two certificate tracks. The two certificates, the emerging leader certificate, and the engaged leader certificate, each consisted of three workshops. The examination of NHCC Student Life planning documents revealed that all NHCC student life programs had intentional learning outcomes embedded in their descriptions. Additionally, the NHCCSLP materials reflected that the order of the learning exercises within the program was deliberate and critical to the overall learning because one workshop built on the previous one, concluding with student participants writing a summative self-reflection of the entire program.

The emerging leader certificate focused on small group development. It aimed to help students learn how to become a productive member of a team. The engaged leader certificate allowed students to explore their leadership styles, traits, and characteristics. Each
certificate included three workshops each. Figure 10 shows the workshops and the ratings from the emerging leaders’ workshops.

The preworkshop script for each activity also included the objective and learning outcomes for each workshop. Several surveys reflected positive feedback on the overview activities. Comments from the survey included “the overview before each exercise was beneficial and helped me understand what we were trying to do.” One student stated that they wish their “classes could be like the workshop.” Several students commented that it was beneficial to know the learning outcomes for each exercise. One stated, “knowing the goal for each workshop helped immensely.”

The conclusion of each exercise consisted of a series of open-ended and reflective questions. Program documents emphasized that the concluding/debriefing questions intended to allow students to reflect on the exercises. The documents stated that the goal was to help students critically think about what happened in the workshop and how their actions helped or hindered the team. Students identified the questions at the end of the exercise as an essential part of the workshop. Comments from student surveys revealed that students not only reflected on the workshops but also found the debrief beneficial. One student stated, “my thought process was challenged, and I learned more about myself in the debrief than I ever have before.” Another student wrote, “Wow, do not change anything about the workshops, especially the questions. It tied everything together.” The surveys reviewed reflected several comments to support the notion that the debrief exercises were beneficial to the learning process. Other notable thoughts from the surveys included students liking how the workshops built on one another.

In the responses from 50 surveys, students ranked the soft skills they learned from participating in the student leadership program (Figure 11). The students’ surveys identified
personal growth as the most significant thing they learned from participating in the retreat. It is important to note that personal growth was not recognized as a soft skill by employers, and is not widely considered a soft skill. The next two areas students identified were critical thinking and communication, albeit in a different priority than the employer surveys.

Figure 11. Soft Skills Learned by Students at NHSLP

Throughout this theme, student statements and program documents showed the linkage between the intentionality of the program curriculum and student learning. Documentation revealed that the program was modified throughout the years to align the curriculum with the program outcomes better. Student surveys and comments reflected how the program was built in steps with each building on the previous. Most student participants were able to distinguish and demonstrate an understanding of the soft skills taught.

Summary

Co-curricular programs are designed to give possibilities for students to develop the skills required for success within the workplace (Dungy & Peck, 2019). The most effective
chance of success is through an alternative discovering experience that happens across both
class and co-curricular activities (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013). The outcomes of the Project
CEO study indicated that many students who took part in co-curricular programs regarded
their experiences as being crucial for the advancement of soft skills required for success in
the workforce (Griffin, 2016; Peck et al., 2017). These research findings align with findings
by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (2017) in *Engagement and
Employability: Integrating Career Learning Through Co-Curricular Experiences in
Postsecondary Education*. Because the study was conducted by six experts across nine
co-curricular programs and recorded exactly how these programs advance the skills most
desired by companies, this specific publication is advantageous. The findings of the National
Association of Student Personnel Administrators (2017) supported the belief that
co-curricular programs enhance students’ work readiness.

This chapter provided an overview of the method of analysis, with examples of how
coding and thematic creation took place. The chapter then went on to describe the three main
themes and two subthemes that arose from the data. The themes directly responded to the
purpose of the study, which was to determine how participants in the New Hampshire
Community College Student Leadership Program perceived the program to have helped them
develop soft skills.

Theme one, *Student Engagement*, outlined the connection between student participation
and their motivation through the lenses of Involvement Theory and Self Determination Theory.
Theme two, *Experiential Learning*, captured the relationship between experiential lesson plans
and student learning, specifically around soft skills. Theme three, *Intentionally Building*
Learning Outcomes into Co-Curricular Activities, reflected the connection between intentional lesson planning in co-curricular activities and soft skill development.

Chapter five interprets the findings of this study and answers all research questions while referring to the outcomes outlined in chapter four. It outlines how the results may be of use to individuals within NHCC and to all stakeholders associated with the organization by tying the results tightly to the larger body of literature, knowledge, and practice. Finally, chapter five presents recommendations for action and further study and finishes with an articulation of the significance of the study.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was a summative program evaluation of the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program (NHCCSLP). NHCCSLP was designed to improve soft skill development in college students through co-curricular programs, specifically student leadership programs. The study evaluated two fundamental aspects of the NHCCSLP: first, to understand how the NHCCSLP increased soft skill development among the program participants, and second, to understand how the NHCCSLP program impacted student participants’ sense of preparedness to enter the workforce at the time of their graduation.

Chapter 5 presents the researcher’s interpretation of the themes chronicled in chapter four. Additionally, this chapter provides conclusions based on the comprehensive examination of the summative evaluation’s findings. Also, utilizing the results outlined in chapter 4, chapter 5 answers the research questions. Finally, chapter 5 includes suggestions for implications for theory, practices, and contributions to literature, and concludes with recommendations for future research.

Review of the Study

This study examined how co-curricular activities, specifically the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program (NHCCSLP), provided students with training in soft-skills, which are critical abilities that employers seek (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). Beyond soft-skill development, employers have also identified leadership as one of the most sought-after experiences for prospective applicants ranking after internship experience and major (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018; Marques, 2013). To address these concerns, the New Hampshire
Community College (NHCC) developed a student leadership program aimed at enhancing the development of soft-skills and leadership among students (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). The purpose of this program evaluation was to explore how the New Hampshire Community College leadership program contributed to soft-skill development.

New Hampshire Community College (NHCC) is one of seven schools within the Community College System of New Hampshire. The Student Leadership Program (SLP) was started in 2009 and offered on an annual basis. The SLP is part of the NHCC Student Success Initiative. SLP has two distinct tracks: the emerging leader track, and the engaged leader track. To best prepare students to meet the needs of the local workforce, New Hampshire Community College developed a Student Success Initiative that intentionally embedded soft-skill development into all non-curricular programs (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). One component of the Student Success Initiative was the student leadership program (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). The program consisted of an annual retreat and encouraged participants to become actively involved in student clubs (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019).

**Interpretation of Findings**

The NHCC SLP was developed as a part of the NHCCC Student Leadership Initiative. The objective of the summative program evaluation was to discover if the NHCCSLP contributes to the soft skill development of student participants. The study contributes findings about the role co-curricular programs play in helping students develop the skills they need to enter the workforce successfully. The study fills a gap in the research
on the role of co-curricular programs in soft skill development. Two research questions guided this summative program evaluation:

RQ1: How do participants in the New Hampshire Community Student Leadership Program perceive the program to have helped them develop soft-skills?

RQ2: Do students who participated in the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program feel prepared to enter the workforce at the time of their graduation?

In studying the documents associated with the NHCC SLP, three rounds of descriptive coding were used. The coding process allowed for the development of analytic memos, which supported a more in-depth examination of the codes and emerging categories. The researcher conducted a code and category comparison among and between the data points and determined connections and patterns between codes. The analysis of codes and categories led to theme generation. The generation of themes supported a thorough summative evaluation of the student leadership program and led to findings.

The thematic analysis process revealed that student participants had very similar experiences with some slight differences in their perceived outcomes. Students elaborated on the benefits of being off-campus and the importance of connecting with other students, faculty, and business leaders. Although students did not directly relate those connections with networking, the student responses indicated that they understood the benefits of peer to peer interaction. Overall, the researcher was able to narrow all of the collective codes into three overarching themes. Table 3 outlines the themes and subthemes resulting from the analysis of the NHCCSLP documents. A description of each theme, subthemes linked to data, and applied to the theoretical framework of the study, see Table 3 on page 60 of this document. This section below captures the research question and summarizes the results.
Question One

To understand how students perceived the NHCCSLP program to have helped them, the researcher conducted a desk review of the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program, utilizing documentation in relation to those students who participated in the program between 2014 and 2018. Materials used included student leadership evaluations from ten randomly selected students from each year between 2014 and 2018 of the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program, and Student Life documents from between 2014 and 2018 relating to the Student Success Initiative, student leadership co-curricular activities, and the Student Leadership Programs.

All fifty randomly selected student participants’ surveys indicated that the students perceived the NHCCSLP to have helped them develop at least one soft skill. Ninety-two percent of all of the surveys reviewed showed that participants developed more than one skill.

Figure 12. Soft Skills Learned by Students at NHSLP
Students identified critical thinking and communication as the primary soft skills they developed. Student participant surveys placed a high emphasis on experiential learning. One highly rated area on surveys was the low ropes course. A review of the NHCCSLP itineraries from 2014 to 2018 showed that the low ropes course was the first experiential learning exercise in which students participated when arriving at the camp. Several respondents also commented about how the low ropes courses allowed them to understand team and group dynamics differently.

Although not specific to the research question, the data revealed that choice played a critical role in both participation and learning outcomes. The NHCCSLP embraced a challenge by choice philosophy, which allowed students to choose whether to participate in activities. All student surveys reflected a 100% participation rate in low ropes exercises. Additionally, the results indicated that the workshops and activities with intentionally embedded learning outcomes were more effective in soft skill development.

The examination of NHCC Student Life planning documents revealed that all NHCC student life programs had intentional learning outcomes embedded in their descriptions. Additionally, the NHCCSLP materials reflected that the order of the learning exercises within the program was also deliberate and critical to the overall learning because one workshop built on the previous one. The SLP concluded with student participants writing a summative self-reflection of the entire program.

The evaluation also revealed a second critical component to the NHCCSLP program, which was the certificate workshops. The emerging leader certificate focused on small group development and focused on helping students learn how to become a productive member of a team. The engaged leader certificate allowed students to explore their leadership styles,
traits, and characteristics. Each certificate included three workshops. Data revealed that students found the pre- and post-workshop briefings critical to learning. The pre-workshop script for each activity also included the objective and learning outcomes for each workshop. Several surveys reflected positive feedback on the overview activities.

The conclusion of each exercise consisted of a series of open-ended and reflective questions. Program documents emphasized that the concluding/debriefing questions intended to allow students to reflect on the activities. The documents stated that the goal was to help students critically think about what happened in the workshop and how their actions helped or hindered the team. Students identified the questions at the end of the exercise as an essential part of the workshop.

Question Two

The second research question stated the following: Do students who participated in the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program feel prepared to enter the workforce at the time of their graduation? To answer this question, the researcher reviewed the New Hampshire Community College Student Leadership Program and Student Life documents from between 2014 and 2018 relating to the Student Success Initiative, student leadership co-curricular activities, and the Student Leadership Programs. Additionally, the researcher reviewed and coded ten random graduation surveys from each of those years. After a thorough review of the coding results, the researcher was unable to find any usable data or link to the NHCCSLP on the graduation surveys. The research reviewed all graduation surveys from 2014 to 2018 and found no identifying information on whether graduates participated in the student leadership program. Based on the lack of data
on graduation surveys, the researcher was unable to answer research question two, specifically, whether the student participants felt prepared to enter the workforce at the time of graduation. Data does suggest that student participants felt ready to enter the workforce at their completion of the student leadership program. This was an area where additional research needs to be conducted.

**Finding One**

Student participants identified skills other than the soft skills identified by employers as the most significant benefit of the program. Surveys from student participants identified self-confidence and meeting new people as the two most beneficial components of the program. During the coding process, the researcher classified these and similar elements as personal growth. Twenty-four percent of students identified personal growth as the primary benefit of the program. At 23%, critical thinking was a close second.

In reviewing SLP documents, personal growth skills are not identified as a critical component of the SLP program. Additionally, the researcher could not find any intentional learning outcomes associated with personal growth, as defined and coded by the researcher.

This finding aligns with the premise of the self-determination theory, which represents a macro theory associated with personal inspiration and character (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). The self-determination theory establishes a technique for motivation by considering what regularly encourages an individual, rather than reasoning of motivation as a unitary suggestion (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Under the self-determination theory, the quality of motivation affects the quality of the person’s habits and activities. Future studies of the NHCC SLP program could explore the benefit of making friends and gaining self-
confidence (quality of motivation) impacts students learning and developing soft skills (quality of habits and activities).

**Finding Two**

The NHCCSLP lacks data needed to assess the program and learning outcomes fully. Data collected and coded from student participant surveys immediately following the SLP does indicate that student participants did feel prepared to enter the workforce at the time completed the program. However, the researcher reviewed all graduation surveys from 2014 to 2018 and was unable to find any way to identify which graduation surveys were completed by SLP participants as there was no identifying information as to whether graduates participated in the student leadership program. Because there was no identifiable linkage between SLP participants and the graduation surveys, there was no way to determine if SLP students felt better prepared at the time of their graduation.

The desk audit of SLP documents revealed that there was a lack of data in other key areas as well. After a thorough review, the researcher was not able to find any input from employers beyond the initial survey that was conducted before the SLP beginning. This is an area where more research is needed, specifically as to whether employers feel that SLP students are better prepared to enter the workforce. The audit also discovered that no surveys or follow up specific to soft skill development was conducted with students after they completed the program. The lack of data presents opportunities for future studies. Furthermore, it may hinder NHCC from accurately assessing the impact of the program.

**Implications**

Community colleges have a responsibility to contribute to the communities they serve (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017). Many employers believe that colleges
are not adequately preparing students for jobs (Johnson, 2011). To address this problem, the New Hampshire Community College student affairs professionals worked to intentionally embed soft-skill development lessons into the student leadership program (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). This study aimed to provide a comprehensive summative program evaluation of the NHCCSLP. The goal of the program was to better prepare students for success in the workplace through the intentional embedding of soft skills into the co-curricular programs (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). The NHCCSLP was developed in response to local graduate/employer experiences and prior studies conducted by the Lumina Foundation and the National Association of Colleges and Employers, showing that graduates lacked the skills most sought after by employers.

As technology evolves, students continue to evaluate colleges based on how academic and co-curricular programs can help them to secure a well-paying job (Selingo, 2017). Therefore, it will be critical for colleges to evolve to meet student needs. (Hullinger, 2015). Likewise, employers will continue to push colleges to produce students who are better prepared for the workforce (Drucker, 2014). Pinto and Ramalhelra (2017) showed that high academic performance combined with participation in co-curricular activities resulted in higher employability.

Implication #1: Building Soft Skills Through Co-Curricular Programs

The first implication in this study was using the co-curricular program to build soft skill development in students. One of the primary roles of co-curricular programs was to complement the learning that happens in the academic setting. On the other hand, involvement in co-curricular activities combined with a modest academic performance resulted in lower job
employability, but nearly similar positive results in terms of time management and learning skills. The findings of the Pinto and Ramalhelra’s (2017) study highlighted the prominence of academic efficiency combined with co-curricular activities and how it could be a valuable method to improve soft-skill development, thus reducing the barriers graduates face when trying to enter the labor market.

By intentionally building soft skill development into co-curricular activities, colleges can better prepare students for the skills needed in the workplace. NHCCSLP had intentional learning outcomes embedded in their descriptions. NHCCSLP student participants indicated that they developed soft skills as a result of the program.

**Implication #2: Soft Skills Are Critical for Workforce Preparedness**

The second implication of this study was that soft skill development is a critical component in preparing students to enter the workforce. For more than 50 years, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has surveyed hiring managers to gather their perspectives on the skills that are most critical for workplace success (Mackes, 2017). The annual survey asked employers which characteristics they looked for in new hires, and consistently, the top ten responses were all considered soft-skills (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). Soft-skills, often known as interpersonal or people skills, are subjective skills and are widely transferable from one job to another (Burns, 1997; Robles, 2012). Soft-skills include communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and other skills that are more personality-oriented (Connell, 1998). Burns (1997) and Robles (2012) assert that soft-skills are often more sought after because they are harder to teach, and most employers prefer to train employees on the hard/technical skills specific to their company.
One of the areas studied in previous research was the debate between academic credentials and training students in practical skills such as soft-skills. The results of their findings support the notion that academic qualifications alone do not guarantee job placement (Chell & Athayde, 2011). Although higher education in the United States has not universally adopted a model for soft-skill development, there was some research on soft-skill development in specific academic programs (Nealy, 2011; Talgar & Goodey, 2015). Pinto and Ramalheiro (2017) showed that a student’s high academic performance, combined with their participation in co-curricular activities, results in higher perceived employability.

This study expands upon a study conducted by Campus Labs, Project CEO (Griffin, 2016), which provided evidence regarding the impact that co-curricular programs had on soft skills identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. The goal of the Project CEO’s study was to gain an understanding of how students developed soft skills through co-curricular programs (Griffin, 2016). The NHCCSLP summative program evaluation results suggest that student leadership programs can play a vital role in helping students gain soft skills.

**Recommendations for Action**

The study’s findings and conclusions suggest that additional research is needed on how co-curricular activities can help students gain the soft skills desired by employers. These findings were supported by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (2017) in *Engagement and Employability: Integrating Career Learning Through Co-Curricular Experiences in Postsecondary Education*. The findings supported the role that co-curricular programs enhanced job readiness. The need for higher education to prepare students for the workforce was highlighted in a survey conducted on behalf of the Lumina Foundation (2013),
where over 89% of the business leaders felt that college graduates did not have the soft-skills required to be successful in the workplace.

NHCC hoped the SLP would help students gain the skills local employers identified as critical. After completing the summative program review, the researcher offered the following four recommendations regarding how the NHCCSLP program can improve their outcomes.

**Recommendation 1: Enhance Data Collection**

The size and scope of this study were limited to the NHCC SLP. Data from the NHCC indicates that the student leadership program has been effective in helping students develop soft skills, but the data was limited. One example of limited data included the lack of a comprehensive list of all students who have participated in co-curricular activities. Graduation data was another area that needed improvement. As of 2020, there was no way to capture whether or not a student engaged in co-curricular activities or specifically the NHCC SLP program.

Beyond the NHCC SLP initiative, additional data and research should be conducted across all co-curricular programs. Expanding the scope and size of the study should yield a greater understanding of the role that co-curricular activities play in soft skill development. Future research should also explore how many community college students get involved in co-curricular programs. One possible research question could be, do community college co-curricular programs have the reach to impact soft skill development.

**Recommendation 2: Connect the SLP to Other NHCC Student Leadership Initiatives**

The desk review revealed that the NHCCSLP had year-round activities before 2013. Their data did not show why the program was modified. The 2014–2018 program consisted of a three day, two-night retreat. Although the data showed that students comprehended the material
and achieved the learning outcomes, the short duration limits the student’s ability to practice and master the skills. Student Life documents showed that the SLP program was part of a larger Student Leadership Initiative. Still, data did not show any connection between the SLP program and any other SLI. Connecting the SLP weekend retreat to other student life programs that run year-round would provide students with the opportunity to practice the skills they learned at the retreat.

**Recommendation 3: Assess the Long Term Impact of the NHCC SLP**

In surveys conducted at the end of the program, students that participated in the NHCCSLP indicated that they felt better prepared for the workplace. The desk audit suggests that students were not contacted about their progress after they completed the program. The lack of data in this area resulted in Research Question 2 not being able to be answered. Moving forward, data on how students feel about their preparation for the workplace at the time of graduation will be critical to program enhancements and assessments. Employer data and evaluation was also an area where the program could be enhanced. At the time of this study, there were no documents that captured or assessed employer feedback once the program was started.

Further research is needed to measure the long-term effects of students who participated in the program. Future research may include the following:

- The academic outcomes of students who participated in the NHCCSLP
- Employability of students who participated in the NHCCSLP
- Employer assessments of students who participated in the NHCCSLP
Recommendation for Future Study

Higher education’s focus on hard skill development has not prepared students with the soft-skills needed in the workforce (Ellis, Kisling, & Hackworth, 2014; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). In a survey conducted on behalf of the Lumina Foundation (2013), over 89% of the business leaders felt that college graduates did not have the soft-skills required to be successful in the workplace.

Many soft-skills can be gained through participation in a wide variety of co-curricular programs (Dungy & Peck, 2019). Smith and Chenoweth (2015) stated that leadership (a trait that involves soft-skills) was a learning outcome for many business school undergraduates. Yet, they also recognized that teaching leadership was challenging (Brungardt, 2011). The results of the Smith and Chenoweth (2015) study showed that students engaged in co-curricular student organizations believed that they had more leadership traits and behaviors as compared to those students who were not involved in co-curricular student organizations.

In this study, the researcher examined the NHCC SLP. The NHCC SLP's goal was to better prepare students for success in the workplace by intentionally embedding soft-skills into their co-curricular programs (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). The student leadership program can be duplicated at other higher education. It was recommended that further studies be administered on the NHCC SLP, to dive deeper into the program. Table 4 suggests questions for future studies.
Table 4

*Suggested Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Gathering Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did SLP participants graduate at a higher rate than non-SLP participants?</td>
<td>Quantitative: Collect institutional research data: The graduation rate of students who participated in SLP vs. graduation rate of students that did not participate in SLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the co-curricular programs that are best suited for soft skill development?</td>
<td>Qualitative Summative program evaluations of all NHCC co-curricular programs to compare to the results of this study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the long term impact of the student leadership program on participants’ job preparedness?</td>
<td>Qualitative: Focus Groups/Interviews of past participants and their employers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can community colleges use co-curricular programs to prepare students for the workforce?</td>
<td>Qualitative Utilizing interviews and case studies on how community colleges can get more students involved in co-curricular activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do community college students engage in co-curricular activities? Can community colleges</td>
<td>Qualitative Utilizing Goal Content Theory as the theoretical foundation for the study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Given the projected shortage of trained workers and the demand for workers to possess more soft-skills (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018), there is a need for co-curricular programs to include soft skill development intentionally. Research shows that community and commuter colleges have fewer co-curricular activities than four-year and residential institutions (Albert, Pettys, & Wolfer, 2018; Mertes, 2015). In New Hampshire, higher education’s role in preparing students for employment is critical to the economy and workforce development (Gittell, 2017). An unprepared workforce could have dire consequences for any region, but this is especially the case in New Hampshire because of an aging population and income-tax-free system (Gittell, 2017). The State of New Hampshire projected that by 2025, more than 31 percent of the state’s total population would be aged 60 years or older. This percentage will increase to 34 percent by 2035 (New Hampshire Employment Security, 2018).

This study served as an example of how co-curricular programs can impact student skill development and prepare students for the workforce. This study contains several limitations, including the small sample size, as it was limited to students who participated in the student leadership program at New Hampshire Community College in New Hampshire. It did not include students from other regions of the state or the country (New Hampshire Community College, personal communication, November 9, 2019). This study also did not capture all of the co-curricular or soft skill development programs that are held at NHCC. Specifically, it does not include the noncredit WorkReadyNH program, which was aimed at assisting underemployed or unemployed New Hampshire citizens. The lack of employment data was a significant limitation that should be addressed in future studies.
Future studies should explore whether the percent of community college students that participate in co-curricular activities is large enough to impact change. Additionally, future research could include examining other types of co-curricular programs such as intercollegiate athletics, student mentorship programs, student organizations, and volunteer/civic engagement programs. Future researchers should build upon the findings in this study which link student engagement and the Self Determination Theory. Specifically, researchers should explore how Goal Content Theory, a micro theory of Self Determination, impacts student involvement and participation.

Conclusion

The mission of many community colleges is to provide quality, accessible, and affordable education (Dunn & Kalleberg, 2016). Core to that mission is their purpose of providing a trained and qualified workforce by increasing educational attainment for their students, regardless of their backgrounds (Dunn & Kalleberg, 2016; Lumina Foundation, 2013). As of 2017, there were over 1,100 community colleges that served roughly 41% of the undergraduates in the nation (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017).

The emphasis on preparing students to enter the labor market has led to colleges developing integrated academic and co-curricular programs (Peck et al., 2017). At NHCC, the need for the institution was compounded by the projected shortfall of trained citizens to meet the workforce needs.

The findings in this study support how co-curricular programs can help prepare students for the workforce. The motivation behind this research stems from the National Association of Colleges and Employers data showing the skills employers desire most. This study was rooted in the desire to improve and enhance soft skill development in higher education. Through a
summative program evaluation of the NHCCSLP, this study intended to explore the link between co-curricular activities and soft skill development.

Moving forward, it is essential to distinguish between extracurricular activities and co-curricular activities. Co-curricular activities should be based on intentional program design and include targeted learning outcomes. Additional research can be conducted on the long term benefit of soft skill development at the collegiate level. Although this study focused on student leadership development, many of the critical components could be implemented in other co-curricular activities.

This summative program evaluation highlighted several NHCCSLP strategies that could be used beyond their student leadership program. Key takeaways from the research include the importance of building learning outcomes into co-curricular programs; the benefits of challenge by choice lessons; and the impact that experiential learning has in regard to student engagement. Although not intended as part of the study, data suggested that students who participated in the program persisted at higher rates. The findings also revealed that students identified that the neutral location, off-campus, as being critical to learning and meeting other people.
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