

Postsecondary Participation in SkillsUSA

What are the added values of having a SkillsUSA chapter?

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INTRODUCTION

This qualitative case study explored how participation in SkillsUSA, a career and technical student organization (CTSO), influenced community college students' preparedness for the workforce and connection to campus. The study also explored how alumni perceived the influence of SkillsUSA on their program of choice and career choices. Participation in SkillsUSA influenced students' work choices, initiative, and confidence in overcoming obstacles, while access to hometown labor markets shaped perceptions of occupational choices. Participants also reported benefitting from a supportive campus community. While participation in SkillsUSA influenced some alumni to pursue a career and technical field (CTE), all alumni gained more knowledge about CTE fields and considered themselves to be advocates for CTE. This research is important because SkillsUSA not only helps graduates and students develop technical and soft skills but also brings the additional value of connecting students to the community college context.

KEY POINTS

- » Students and alumni gained more knowledge about CTE fields and job opportunities, indicating that students and alumni expanded their work choices and skill transferability beyond their program of study and geographic areas.
- » Students and alumni met and were supported by peers, instructors, and administrators through their SkillsUSA involvement. This highlights the importance of campus connections made outside of coursework.
- » Students commented about wanting to remain at the community colleges to participate and maintain eligibility in SkillsUSA competitive events, suggesting an area to explore for retention efforts.
- » Students continued their involvement in SkillsUSA, even after completing their degree or certificate, by taking online community college classes. This indicates participants' willingness to participate and brings additional enrollment to the community colleges.
- » There was integration between curriculum and SkillsUSA chapters, which is important as CTSOs can be considered intra-curricular activities.
- » While winning competitions was meaningful, students and alumni were more reflective about personal growth and overcoming obstacles. Alumni were able to apply lessons they learned from SkillsUSA into work or educational settings.

THE PROJECT

Approximately 48% of all job openings through 2024 will require applicants to be skilled technical workers (National Skills Coalition, 2017). These skilled technical workers perform functions that are critical to innovation, health care, infrastructure, and economic growth in the United States (U.S.). Before the worldwide coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, states were facing a shortage of workers to fill these jobs that require education beyond high school but less than a four-year degree (National Skills Coalition, 2020). While the shortage is different due to increased national unemployment, the shortage will continue if the nation is not preparing its citizens for these jobs.

Community colleges provide individuals training for these jobs through CTE. Community colleges offer CTSOs to help improve the career readiness of students seeking skilled-technical jobs requiring certificates and degrees. CTSOs are considered intra-curricular activities, where curriculum and activities are integrated throughout the curriculum by trained professionals with additional opportunities outside the classroom setting (Talbert et al., 2007). CTSOs are partners with academics providing the use of math, English, and other academic concepts. Although CTSOs are 90 years old and receive state and federal support (Zirkle & Jeffery, 2019), researchers have primarily studied CTSOs at the secondary level rather than postsecondary education. Understanding the experiences of SkillsUSA members will assist leaders in making decisions to support students and prepare them for the labor market. This qualitative study focused on SkillsUSA, a CTSO that has a growing postsecondary division. It is known for its competitions in which students demonstrate hands-on occupational and leadership skills at state and national levels, in addition to professional development, community service, and leadership experiences.

The researcher gathered data in fall of 2019 from two community colleges in North Carolina through interest questionnaires, interviews, SkillsUSA membership 2018-19 administrative data, and U.S. Census Bureau data. The primary mode of data collection was semi-structured interviews lasting 30 to 60 minutes. There were 31 total interview participants (13 students, 10 advisors, and 7 alumni, and 1 alumnus/advisor) (see Appendix Tables 1-3). To supplement interviews, the researcher referred to U.S. Census Bureau data to provide information about demographic, economic, and education characteristics of the counties where the student participant and home communities are located. County demographics, educational attainment levels, income levels, and poverty levels were compared to state and national averages. Resumes from student and alumni interview participants were used to triangulate information about work, education, and SkillsUSA experiences referenced in the interviews. Seven students and three alumni submitted resumes. The researcher also conducted observations at the week-long SkillsUSA National Leadership and Skills Conference and wrote field notes to provide additional context for interview preparation. Data from interviews were coded and analyzed for themes. Basic descriptive analysis was used for SkillsUSA member comparisons to the overall student body populations (see Appendix Tables 4 and 5) and hometown and county profiles from the U.S. Census Bureau data. Quotations from the interviews with students, advisors, and alumni were selected to highlight the findings.

A key theme from the interviews was that students were learning about other jobs, opportunities, and career options besides their individual field of study. Taylor said: **“...just gives us a broader view of all the potential jobs...the imagination is the limit...so that definitely opened my eyes up.”**

Elijah described how SkillsUSA influenced him to go into entrepreneurship when he initially thought he wanted to be a chiropractor. **“I think the big one was...changing what I wanted to do with my life basically.”** Marcie remarked: **“...there’s things out there, you just have to go and look for them. But there’s also things in your local community that you wouldn’t think about.”** While participation in SkillsUSA influenced some students regarding their program of study, all participants learned about a variety of jobs and discovered soft skills that could transfer to various professions.

Many students, alumni, and advisors described the relationships they established across campus as part of their SkillsUSA experience. Gatlin recalled: **“Whenever I was at [community college] I knew a lot of different advisors from very different fields...would listen to me.”** Boone expressed: **“...a lot of moral support and involvement from the advisors at the community college, very active and trying to get students to participate...very active in ensuring the students have a positive experience of participating in the organization.”** Ivy noted that it was not just peers forming relationships with peers: **“It gives us an opportunity to further develop our relationship with the students too....you have lots of conversations, and you get to know more about the students and their backgrounds, their lives, and they get to learn more about us.”** Students and alumni developed relationships with peers and advisors across the institution that they normally did not see during their regular coursework. Being on campus and feeling connected is important because social and academic integration is critical to student success. Faculty engagement is also important for student learning and program completion (Stout, 2018).

Another finding was that some participants felt that SkillsUSA participation encouraged them to stay enrolled in or continue a program. Ivy noted: **“...for students who may be struggling maybe it’s getting down to the end of their career as far as at the college and their thinking was it really worth it? Well, if I stay in and I can go [to] Skills...there’s possibility of winning...I think that gives them that sense of drive.”** Callen made a similar comment: **“...that would make me want to stay to be able to just put that on a resume so an employer can see it.”** SkillsUSA provided a connection to the campus that made them excited to remain at the community college, which is important when discussing retention efforts.

Students and alumni also wanted to stay involved in SkillsUSA after finishing their program of study. Zayd explained: **“I have seen individuals who wanted to be a part of SkillsUSA but have moved on to a four-year institution. So what we would do is still take an online class...so that we can still be a part of SkillsUSA.”** This shows the value students placed on SkillsUSA. Students stayed involved in SkillsUSA by enrolling in online coursework and receiving college credit from a four-year university at the same time.

Participants were also reflective in how SkillsUSA pushed them outside their comfort zone and toward confronting obstacles. Emmett disclosed: **“I’d wear flip flops, have holes in my jeans, I wasn’t necessarily the most presentable person, let alone the most employable person in the world. But SkillsUSA pushed me to be something better.”** Students are developing the personal, workplace, and technical skills through SkillsUSA that are needed to navigate the labor market.

There was evidence to support the relationship between academics at the community colleges and SkillsUSA chapters. Students noted the incorporation of the SkillsUSA Framework in classroom

projects and assignments. The SkillsUSA Framework highlights personal, workplace, and technical skills grounded in academics, provides a common language for students to articulate what they have gained from participation, and assesses their skill development (SkillsUSA, 2020). Gatlin remarked: **“...SkillsUSA with the framework is an integral part of the classroom. It’s not co-curricular. It’s not extracurricular. It’s integral. And no matter what classroom you go into....All of those can relate back to essential elements in the framework.”** Erin agreed: **“...Even if a student doesn’t necessarily participate in SkillsUSA, they’re still receiving the training and they’re still receiving that Framework. Everything’s based on that Framework even if they don’t participate.”** Industry relevance is being brought into the classroom and students are developing multiple skills demanded by employers.

Finally, an unexpected finding was how alumni, including those who did not choose CTE as their career field, see themselves as advocates for CTE. Selena believed she had the capacity to bring awareness to other people about CTE. **“It starts this whole conversation, what career technical education is and how Skills is trying to close the gap...I can be that person to bring awareness to other people.”** SkillsUSA encouraged alumni to think about CTE from a broader perspective.

FOR DECISION MAKERS: IMPACT ON POLICY AND PRACTICE

Decision makers who are interested in continuing to promote participation in SkillsUSA and build students’ skills should consider the following:

- » Continue the momentum from when the national competition ends in June to when practices start up again in the fall to keep students engaged throughout the year. Colleges recognized students involved in competitions, especially medalists, but there could be ways to share student successes across campus. For example, a celebratory dinner or gala in the summer or early fall would recognize the achievements of students and advisors and support fundraising efforts. Alumni, local employers, and Board of Trustee members could be invited.
- » Find ways to engage student populations that have different obligations on their time but may not be able to commit to competing at the state and national level. Exploring the chapter’s Program of Work or chapter structure to examine the professional development, community service, and leadership offerings may provide ideas for expansion or revision to keep students engaged in other ways besides competitive events. SkillsUSA provides a meaningful experience for students even if they do not participate in competitive events.
- » Offer creative career strategies, such as entrepreneurial training, to help students create their own jobs or start part-time businesses for additional income purposes. Several students commented that their SkillsUSA participation was a catalyst for them to start their own businesses. Interacting with local, small business centers would provide additional networking opportunities for students and support students who want to remain in their community after graduation.
- » Explore ways SkillsUSA could be used as part of admissions recruitment strategies. Some students were involved in SkillsUSA through high school chapters or dual enrollment programs and may be interested in continuing at the postsecondary level. High schools with SkillsUSA chapters in the surrounding geographic area could be identified to examine matriculation numbers and targeted admission efforts.
- » Expand chapters to four-year institutions to provide opportunities for students wanting to develop their technical, workplace, and personal skills. Alumni wanted to continue SkillsUSA

- participation past the community college level.
- » Continue the integral relationship between curriculum and SkillsUSA. Students noted the incorporation of the SkillsUSA Framework in classroom assignments, which develops the personal, workplace, and technical skills demanded by employers. Establish connections with non-CTE departments because SkillsUSA benefits students from all fields, not just CTE-related fields.

CONCLUSION

Participation in SkillsUSA not only developed students' and alumni's work choices, initiative, and confidence, but participation also encouraged connections across the community college. The results provided evidence that students are able to learn about other career fields in addition to their program of study. This differs from prior research which has focused more on the influence of the CTSO on students' selected programs of study. The research also found evidence to support that there is an integral relationship between the CTE program and SkillsUSA. This has been seen in prior research at the secondary level but not the postsecondary level. Policies and practices should aim to include students from non-CTE fields and find ways to include students with multiple time demands as all types of students can benefit from participation. While there is still more to learn about postsecondary participation, SkillsUSA is making a difference in campus connections and workforce preparation of community college students. This impact brief was written during an unusual time in our nation's history with the COVID-19 spreading across the U.S. SkillsUSA North Carolina and SkillsUSA National Office cancelled their 2020 conferences. This new reality will require chapters to interact with members in virtual spaces and set new goals. The time may allow for revision and implementation of changes the chapter has been considering but has not had the time to accomplish.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Maldonado, L. G. (2020). Postsecondary Participation in SkillsUSA: What are the added values of having a SkillsUSA chapter? Raleigh, NC: Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research.

FURTHER READING

- Association for Career and Technical Education. (2020). Career and technical student organizations. Retrieved from <https://www.acteonline.org/professional-development/high-quality-cte-tools/career-and-technical-student-organizations/#tab-id-1>
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The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at NC State's College of Education develops and sustains exceptional community college leadership committed to advancing college access, the social and economic mobility of their colleges' students, and the economic competitiveness of their regions. The Center conducts and disseminates research to address current and emerging student success challenges facing community college leadership and policymakers in North Carolina and beyond.

APPENDIX

Table 1
Student Participation Information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Status	Program of Study	Expected Graduation	Duration of SkillsUSA Involvement
Fred	18	Male	Full-Time	Diesel and Heavy Equipment Technology	May 2021 or 2022	5-6 Semesters
Braden	19	Male	Full-Time	CNC Machining Technology	May 2021	3-4 Semesters
Callen	19	Male	Full-Time	Diesel and Heavy Equipment Technology	May 2021	5-6 Semesters
Ruth	19	Female	Full-Time	Engineering in Robotics, Aviation, and Mechatronics Technology	2022	More than 8 Semesters
Colin	20	Male	Full-Time	Applied Engineering Sciences	May 2020	2 Semesters
Marcie	24	Female	Part-Time	Architectural Technology	2020	3-4 Semesters
Hannah	28	Female	Part-Time	Architectural Technology	May 2020	3-4 Semesters
Elijah	18	Male	Part-Time	Marketing with a focus on Sales	May 2021	5-6 Semesters
Riley	18	Male	Full-Time	Mechatronics	2022	2 Semesters
Taylor	19	Male	Full-Time	Computer Integrated Machining Technologies	May 2020	2 Semesters
Kenzie	20	Female	Full-Time	Photographic Technology	May 2020	7-8 Semesters
Jillian	22	Female	Full-Time	Advertising and Graphic Design	2020	3-4 Semesters
Erin	31	Female	Part-Time	Accounting	May 2020	7-8 Semesters

Note: All were enrolled in an associate degree program except for Riley who was enrolled in an apprenticeship program.

Table 2
Alumni Participant Information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Status	Program of Study	Graduation	Duration of SkillsUSA Involvement
Lyle	19	Male	Full-Time	Communication	Unknown	7-8 Semesters
Selena	19	Female	Full-Time	Arts	May 2019	5-6 Semesters
Harper	21	Female	Full-Time	Graphic Design	May 2018	3-4 Semesters
Emmett	21	Male	Full-Time and switched to Part-Time	Entrepreneurship	May 2016	7-8 Semesters
Gatlin	22	Male	Full-Time	Science	2016	More than 8 semesters
Zayd	38	Male	Full-Time	Psychology and Political Science	May 2018	3-4 Semesters
Anderson	25	Male	Full-Time	Diesel and Heavy Equipment Technology	2015	2 Semester
Boone	38	Male	Part-Time	Architectural Technology	May 2012	2 Semesters

Note: All graduated with an associate degree.

Table 3
Advisor Participant Information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Duration of SkillsUSA Involvement
Beckett	28	Male	7-8 Semesters
Jasper	45	Male	5-6 Semesters
Ivy	46	Female	7-8 Semesters
Celia	54	Female	More than 8 Semesters
Sky	56	Female	5-6 Semesters
Asher	64	Male	More than 8 Semesters
Anderson	25	Male	Less than 1 Semester
Axel	56	Male	More than 8 Semesters
Darby	60	Female	5-6 Semesters
Bishop	unknown	Male	1-2 Semesters
Bradford	unknown	Male	More than 8 Semesters

Table 4
Characteristics of Community College A’s SkillsUSA Members and Overall Student Body

	Student Participants	SkillsUSA Student Members ^a	Overall Student Body ^b
Gender Identity			
Male	50%	65%	44%
Female	50%	35%	56%
Race/Ethnicity Identity			
White	67%	73%	68%
Hispanic	33%	14%	12%
Black or African American	0%	4%	7%
Asian or Pacific Islander	0%	4%	7%
Other/Unknown	0%	4%	6%
American Indian	0%	1%	<1%
Age			
24 or younger	83%	77%	78%
25 or older	17%	23%	22%
Programs of Study Represented	6	45	50

Note: Includes students who were enrolled during 2018-2019 academic year.

^aSource: Community College A administrative data. ^bSource: IPEDS data.

Table 5
Characteristics of Community College B’s SkillsUSA Members and Overall Student Body

	Student Participants	SkillsUSA Student Members	Overall Student Body
Gender Identity			
Male	57%	79%	59%
Female	43%	21%	41%
Race/Ethnicity Identity			
White	100%	77%	85%
Hispanic	0%	9%	8%
Black or African American	0%	2%	3%
Other/Unknown	0%	11%	4%
Mean Age	21	21.5	24.6
Status			
Full time	71%	56%	65%
Part time	29%	44%	35%
Programs of Study Represented	5	17	35

Note: Includes students who were enrolled during the 2018-2019 academic year.

Source: Community College B administrative data.