

SENSE OF BELONGING FOR SKILLSUSA PROFESSIONALS OF COLOR:

A CASE STUDY

by

Tjazha Mazhani

(Under the Direction of Ginny Boss)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe the experiences of professionals of color in SkillsUSA. In this study, four professionals of color shared their experiences in SkillsUSA. A focus group was conducted, along with a document analysis. The study explored the following research questions: How do professionals of color in SkillsUSA describe their work environment? How do professionals of color in SkillsUSA talk about experiences and resources that influence their desire to stay? How do SkillsUSA professionals of color perceive their interactions with other staff members? What might organizational documents reveal about SkillsUSA's efforts to create a sense of belonging for staff of color? The study identified barriers to persistence and retention related to visibility concerns, lack of mattering to others, leadership matters, and integration of DEI commitments.

INDEX WORDS: SkillsUSA, CTE, CTSO, sense of belonging, retention, diversity, DEI, underrepresented race, professionals of color

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my cousin Zibo Bantsi. I remember the countless days when I would be at the upstairs desk working on this dissertation while you were at the downstairs desk working on your undergraduate degree. It saddens me that you didn't get to finish yours or see me finish mine. Rest in peace Zibo.

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Thank you to SkillsUSA for allowing me to conduct this research. Thank you to my research participants for being open and transparent in your commentary. I believe in SkillsUSA and the work of CTSOs, and I hope this study helps spur change to make them more inclusive organizations for everyone.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Vocational education has long existed in this country and worldwide in various forms, including apprenticeships (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). To address unemployment and, in particular, the shortage of skilled labor, vocational education as a formal education training program in schools emerged as a solution to these problems in an increasingly industrialized society in the late 19th century (Gordon & Schultz, 2020; Hanford, 2014; Steffes, 2020).

Vocational education was once seen as only geared towards lower-income students or students with academic problems; although some of this viewpoint persists, there is now more acceptance that vocational education provides broad appeal for students to get high-skilled careers (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Hanford, 2014; Rosen & Molina, 2019). Vocational education is now commonly known as career and technical education (CTE), and similarly, vocational student organizations are now named career and technical student organizations (CTSOs) (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). The name change is a result of the “social stigma” (Malkus, 2019, p. 3) surrounding the term “vocational education,” which is often viewed as a regressive step instead of the opportunity for continued education for fulfilling careers.

In the 2019-20 school year, nearly 11 million students were enrolled in CTE programs in the United States on both the secondary and postsecondary levels covering 16 career clusters, 79 career pathways, and 1800 career specialties (Gordon & Schultz, 2020; *PCRN: State Profile - National Summary*, n.d.). The National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education (2013, as cited in Gordon & Schultz, 2020) listed these 16 career clusters as most

commonly associated with CTE education: Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources; Architecture and Construction; Arts, Audio/Video Technology, and Communications; Business, Management, and Administration; Education and Training; Finance; Government and Public Administration; Health Science; Hospitality and Tourism; Human Services; Information Technology; Law, Public Safety, Corrections, and Security; Manufacturing; Marketing; Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics; and Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics.

Several legislative markers in the United States helped fortify CTE parameters and funding into law (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). The Smith-Hughes National Vocational Education Act of 1917 served as the first major federal legislation providing funding for CTE, initially focusing primarily on funding agriculture and the trades (Gordon & Schultz, 2020; *SkillsUSA Member Handbook: Making the Most of Your Membership*, 2020; Steffes, 2020). Public Law 81-740 chartered Future Farmers of America in 1950, and although it only focused on one CTSO, it is credited as the first federal legislation tied to vocational student organizations (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). The Vocational Education Act of 1963 recognized CTSOs as critical to the mission of CTE, “this law was important because it recognized CTSOs as an integral part of classroom instruction. The law also recognized CTSOs as legitimate recipients of federal and state grand funds for the purpose of providing leadership and support to vocational student organizations” (*SkillsUSA Member Handbook: Making the Most of Your Membership*, 2020, p. 25). Today, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 2018, and its various reauthorizations in previous and subsequent years, is the leading vehicle for funding CTE and CTSOs (Fiscus, 2008; Gordon & Schultz, 2020).

CTSOs, like most other student organizations, provide opportunities for student leadership training, implementation of local activities, peer bonding, and community

involvement. CTSOs also focus on CTE that can be implemented in the classroom or a co-curricular environment through chapter activities and skills development through CTE career competitions (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). Most CTE instructors incorporate CTSOs into their classroom instruction; thus, they are a critical part of the education (Gordon & Schultz, 2020).

Each CTSO is guided by a national office that sets general parameters and policies surrounding the organization and opportunities for national competitions and conferences (“About,” n.d.). SkillsUSA, as a CTSO, has a national office that operates its activities and programs throughout states. A state liaison exists to implement SkillsUSA’s national guidelines and additional state policies for local chapters to operate under (“State Association Directors,” n.d.). The state liaisons for the various CTSOs in a state, including SkillsUSA, are often managed through departments of education or related workforce boards (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). SkillsUSA state offices implement state competitions that are qualifiers for participation in national competitions (“SkillsUSA Championships (Career Competition Events),” n.d.). SkillsUSA competitions allow students to showcase their skills in over 100 competition categories, from leadership competition, such as prepared speech and job interview, to skilled and technical science competitions, such as culinary arts and welding (“SkillsUSA Championships (Competition Descriptions),” n.d.).

There are 11 CTSOs federally recognized by the U.S. Department of Education in policy (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). In this study, I explored one CTSO, SkillsUSA, which focuses specifically on trades and technical fields (Gordon & Schultz, 2020) and hosts competitions that cover all 16 CTE career clusters. National Future Farmers of America (FFA) is the largest CTSO; however, it primarily focuses on only one CTE cluster area (Gordon & Schultz, 2020).

SkillsUSA is the second largest CTSO and has a broad focus on all 16 CTE career clusters; thus, the results from this study are more easily transferrable to any CTSO (Fiscus, 2008).

Lack of racial diversity is common in CTE (Gordon & Schultz, 2020) and thus brings about particular challenges for professionals of color in organizations such as SkillsUSA. In fact, none of the eight CTSOs currently recognized by the National Coordinating Council for Career and Technical Student Organizations are currently led by an executive director that is not White (“Executive Directors,” 2021). There may be more diversity in the student population of CTSOs as the nation is diversifying. However, there is a lack of significant change at the middle and top levels of organizations such as SkillsUSA.

There are approximately 62 SkillsUSA state directors due to some states having separate secondary and postsecondary state associations, and currently, a small minority of these state directors are professionals of color (“State Association Directors,” n.d.). In this research study, I explored the experiences of these professionals of color. The area most directly influenced by the executive director is the national office staff which has seen an increase of professionals of color following a July 2020 National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity (NAPE) equity audit of SkillsUSA (*SkillsUSA State of the Association 2021*, 2021). There are approximately 43 national staff members, most of whom are not professionals of color. Due to the DEI efforts (see Appendix F; *SkillsUSA DEI Policy*, 2021), there has been a more concerted effort to hire more professionals of color at the national office. This study aimed to gather the experiences of state directors and national staff members of color and uncover additional ways the organization might improve to retain professionals of color long term.

Problem, Purpose, and Research Questions

The effect of CTSOs on students has been researched by many (*National Research Center for Career and Technical Education*, n.d.). However, few studies focus on the professionals that manage these student organizations at the state and national levels. This study focused on SkillsUSA specifically as it has grown to the second largest CTSO, existing in all 50 states and several territories of the United States (Fiscus, 2008). As the second largest CTSO, SkillsUSA is a compelling case site for studying professionals of color and may provide critical information that can be extrapolated to other CTSOs with similar challenges. According to Bruening et al. (2001, as cited in Gordon & Schultz, 2020), CTE teachers are 90% white, 4% African American, and 3% Hispanic. The problem is that similar staff demographics are unavailable, and little is known about what the work environment is like for staff of color at SkillsUSA. This study is significant because it may provide essential information about crafting an environment that may retain and attract staff of color to SkillsUSA.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to describe the experiences of professionals of color in SkillsUSA. This group of professionals has received little attention in the literature. It is important to research them because professionals of color remain largely underrepresented in CTE literature despite the rising numbers of diversified student populations (Gordon & Schultz, 2020), which lends to the focus of this study. As efforts continue to recruit diverse students into CTE, recruiting and retaining professionals of color is also important to provide opportunities for students to see models of success that can uniquely encourage their persistence (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). In this study, I explored the following questions:

1. How do professionals of color in SkillsUSA describe their work environment?

2. How do professionals of color in SkillsUSA talk about experiences and resources that influence their desire to stay?
3. How do SkillsUSA professionals of color perceive their interactions with other staff members?
4. What might organizational documents reveal about SkillsUSA's efforts to create a sense of belonging for staff of color?

Research Paradigm

This study is framed through the constructivist paradigm as a case study of SkillsUSA professionals of color. In the constructivist paradigm, people create meaning for their environment, often based on their own social background and perspective (Creswell, 2014). Constructivism is associated with qualitative research, and this study will use qualitative methodology through a case study research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to gather information from participants on their perspectives as SkillsUSA professionals of color. The case study of SkillsUSA professionals of color will provide insight into their experiences and information that other CTSOs can utilize.

Operational Definitions

Below are operational definitions of terms and concepts I have used throughout the dissertation related to my literature review and methodological processes.

- CTE: Career and technical education, formerly known as vocational education, which focuses on trade areas.
- CTSO: Career and technical student organizations which focus on CTE academic areas.

- DEI: Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that help address areas of difference for organizations, including those related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other areas.
- National Staff: Employees of a CTSO at the national level.
- Staff Members: Term used in this study to refer to both state and national staff of a CTSO.
- State Directors/Staff: State-appointed leadership for a CTSO in a state or territory in the United States; they are typically employees or contractors of the local Department of Education or workforce agency.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Although this study attempts to provide an overview of the experiences of SkillsUSA professionals of color, there are limitations to acknowledge. SkillsUSA professionals of color's experiences can vary greatly by the state/territory in which they primarily work. There may be local, and state influences outside of the study's scope that might have impacted the work of these professionals. Each state or territory has its own values, resources, and varying levels of institutional support depending on whether state staff members are employees or contractors, which may result in varying experiences for SkillsUSA professionals of color.

Another potential limitation was my professional proximity to those I interviewed. Despite my measures of trustworthiness, they may have answered in ways they thought I wanted to hear. Additionally, I serve on the DEI taskforce, and it may have been difficult for participants to view this study as an independent endeavor to the taskforce's work and not suspect that the study was being commissioned as part of the taskforce. Participants might have been distrustful of the taskforce and hesitant to share honestly if the study was associated with the taskforce's

work. I took care to use my University of Georgia accounts to solicit participation in the study in an attempt to ensure separation from my professional work at SkillsUSA.

A delimitation of this study was that it focused on state staff and national staff only and did not include local staff. There are other professionals of color in SkillsUSA, including teachers, advisors, technical committees, and national board members. For the purposes of this study, these groups were not considered participants. State and national staff were chosen because they have the most consistent interaction and training by the national organization structure and programs.

Summary

Studies on CTSOs have primarily focused on students (*National Research Center for Career and Technical Education*, n.d.). Broader research on CTE has often focused on teachers and professional development related to their retention (Gordon & Schultz, 2020; *National Research Center for Career and Technical Education*, n.d.). There has been limited research on professionals that work with CTSOs from a management level, and particularly professionals of color. This study aims to help address a gap in the literature by focusing on the experiences of SkillsUSA professionals of color. According to Gordon & Schultz (2020), further research on ethnic and race-related issues in CTE is necessary to close the research gap that exists. As more students of color enter CTE, the recruitment and retention of professionals of color become increasingly important for these students to have role models. State and national staff set the programmatic agenda for the organization and supervise students in various roles, including as state officers and national officers (“National Officers,” n.d.).

In this study, I explored the experiences of professionals of color in SkillsUSA. In Chapter 2, I provide a summary of literature surrounding organizational culture, mentorship, social network groups, and SkillsUSA's history and mission. In Chapter 3, I describe case study as the research design for this study. In Chapter 4, I provide the findings from the research. In Chapter 5, I discuss recommendations for future practice.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

CTE literature centers around professional development for CTE teachers (*National Research Center for Career and Technical Education*, n.d.); there is little research on staff members who support CTE and often run these programs from an administrative level. However, many of the diversity and equity issues surrounding CTE teachers also extrapolate to issues that staff experience. The significant gap that exists between CTE teachers, a group that remains predominantly White, and an ever-diversifying student population (Ahmad & Boser, 2014; Gold, 2020; Gordon & Schultz, 2020) also exists within the staff of most CTE programs and CTSOs who remain primarily White. A significant difference for CTE institutions compared to other higher education institutions is that the line between academic and student services is blurred, with a significant overlap of staff. Student services staff in CTE programs may have originated from teaching, joined directly from working in the industry, or come from a traditional student affairs background. This lack of standardization of backgrounds makes the professional development of staff even more critical (Bottoms et al., 2013). Professionals entering the education field without the proper professional development “may lack the knowledge, skills, and confidence required to plan, deliver, and manage a challenging, engaging, and meaningful learning experience for students” (Bottoms et al., 2013, p. 3) and may also “lack the skills to address student diversity and special needs” (Bottoms et al., 2013, p. 5).

The unique challenges for CTE institutions are the lack of a standard training program for professionals requires a rigorous professional development program to help fill the gaps.

Meaningful professional development opportunities for CTE teachers can help increase retention in the beginning years of teaching (Drage, 2010; Ruhland & Bremer, 2002), and a similar sentiment may be true for CTE professionals of color. Ahmad and Boser (2014) found that teachers of color leave education at higher rates than their White counterparts. To date, little is known about the retention rates of staff of color in CTE, particularly those who oversee CTSOs; however, broad trends in postsecondary education suggest professionals of color have high attrition rates. The research that exists has primarily focused on teachers. Through this study, I explored the experiences of professionals of color in CTSOs. The literature review will focus on organizational culture, mentorship, and social networking groups as central to creating meaningful experiences for professionals of color.

Organizational Culture

A combination of policies, procedures, norms, and leadership expectations set by everyone sets organizational culture (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Kochan, 2013). The culture can be established and heavily influenced by the management at the top of the organization, but often the interactions of members within and the rituals they espouse also heavily influence organizational culture (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Kochan, 2013). Both the tangible and intangible behavior in an organization heavily influences the cultural impact of the organization on its members, in particular, professionals of color (Kent et al., 2013). The culture of many higher education organizations can heavily rely on and extensively reward independence as a value (Kent et al., 2013), thus providing a culture that may result in isolation for many professionals of color. Many CTSOs are already physically spread out among many states, which can exacerbate this issue.

As new employees join organizations, it is important that leaders are open and frank about organizational culture, including diversity. While it is important to allow new professionals an opportunity to form their own opinions (Janosik et al., 2003), they must also know that there are support mechanisms for issues they may encounter. As experienced members of the organization, it is important to challenge conversations around organizational fit and the implications for cultural diversity (Thomas, 2001; Winston & Creamer, 1997). New professionals of color in an organization can easily be labeled as not fitting into the organization; experienced professionals of color should challenge this to ensure diversity is respected in the organization. Similarly, discussion around assimilation often presumes that there should be no differences between people of color and White people (Blake-Beard et al., 2008).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs remains one of the most widely used models in human resources; it includes social belonging as one of the most important categories for the satisfaction of an employee (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Sense of belonging refers to one's connectedness to the organization and feeling valued by the organization (Strayhorn, 2019). Members must feel that they are important to the organization, that they matter, and are accepted by the organization (Strayhorn, 2019). Organizations must investigate if the current organizational culture provides opportunities for a sense of belonging for professionals of color.

A sense of belonging can positively influence retention and persistence among professionals of color (Strayhorn, 2019). In situations where professionals of color are a minority, the need for a strong sense of belonging to the organization is even higher (Strayhorn, 2019). An environment that is not supportive of professionals of color can cause situations where these professionals feel forced out of the organization (Strayhorn, 2019). Institutional

commitment to diversity efforts can help create a positive sense of belonging for professionals of color (Hussain & Jones, 2019).

There are informal group norms that exist in any organization (Bolman & Deal, 2013). It is important to know these and how to interrogate how they may affect professionals of color. Conducting an examination of the rituals and ceremonies associated with organizations and in particular, if these have an adverse effect on professionals of color is important. If negative effects on professionals of color are discovered, the organization will need to negotiate feelings of loss among other members of the organization that may have long-held attachments to these norms (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

Negotiating organizational culture, group traditions, and even humorous stories retold to new professionals is important to ensure there are no adverse effects on professionals of color (Bolman & Deal, 2013). In large nationwide CTSOs, a lot of the experiences of professionals of color may be impacted by local and national influences. It is important to find out the challenges that impact the professionals of color and implement any changes to organizational culture necessary to provide a more comfortable experience for all members (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Mentorship is an important part of building an organizational culture that provides opportunities for professionals of color to receive support (Kochan, 2013).

Mentorship

The lack of support and coalition building upon entering an organization can lead to difficulty retaining professionals of color. A strong mentorship program is one type of professional development practice that ensures new staff feels supported (Cooper & Miller, 1998; Ruhland & Bremer, 2002). A balance between providing skill-based career knowledge and

providing personal and emotional support is necessary for a successful mentorship program, the latter of which can be crucial when dealing with professionals of color (Bryant-Shanklin & Brumage, 2011; Redmond, 1990).

Simply providing job-specific instruction without a mentoring relationship is an insufficient model for supporting professionals of color. Professionals of color's connectedness to their mentor on a personal level where racial challenges are discussed prove a more successful model (Bottoms et al., 2013; Thomas, 2001). According to Bryant-Shanklin and Brumage (2011), "mentors can assist in developing strategies to assist minorities and women in confronting and overcoming social and organizational cultural barriers in higher education organizations" (p. 46). This is a crucial connection in helping professionals of color navigate the organizational culture and obstacles to advancement within the organization (Thomas, 2001).

It may not be possible to provide every mentee with a mentor of the same race. Even when a mentor is not of the same race as the mentee, acknowledgment of race is essential to making the mentee of color feel valued and that their concerns are acknowledged (Kent et al., 2013; Thomas, 2001). Research results on the racial matching of mentors have been mixed (S. Blake-Beard et al., 2011; Kochan, 2013; Thomas, 2001). Cross-racial mentoring can suffer from what Thomas (2001) referred to as *protective hesitation*, where a deeper beneficial relationship is not cultivated because both the mentor and mentee are worried about broaching sensitive topics such as racial barriers in the organization or perceived stereotypes of a mentee. However, ultimately it may not be possible to provide exact race matches in organizations that do not have a large number of experienced professionals of color to accomplish such a feat. Thus, proper training and support are critical for mentors, especially those assigned a mentee of color.

A critical part of the mentor relationship is ensuring the mentee of color has access to the power dynamics of the organization; thus, a match in a different race may be all that is available if there are not professionals of color already at middle to high levels of the organization (Murrell et al., 2008). In large and complex nationwide organizations, a majority of the mentoring relationships may happen electronically as mentors and mentees may be several states apart. These electronic mentoring relationships (Blake-Beard et al., 2011) must be nurtured the same regardless, and the same attention to racial match or cross-race matching should be observed. It is particularly important in this type of organizational structure that professionals of color feel support from the national organization through programs such as mentoring, especially if they are in a more hostile local environment. Another opportunity to provide meaningful cultural connections for employees may be through social network groups or affinity groups.

Social Network Groups

Social network groups or affinity groups based on race can have a lasting impact, particularly on professionals of color (Blake-Beard et al., 2008; Kohli, 2019). These groups provide opportunities for open discussions on issues of common concern and support among professionals of color. Murrell et al. (2008) stated that “people of color often develop two complementary networks: one set of relationships with Whites who may provide access to resources and opportunities, and another set of relationships with people of color who provide psychosocial and emotional support” (p. 289). Professionals of color often have to move between two worlds at work, transitioning between the dominant organizational culture and tending to their own racial culture (Johnson-White & Hollingsworth, 2005). The creation of social networking or affinity groups for professionals of color could help create those opportunities for sharing and mutual support.

Many organizations experience a lack of racial diversity on staff and executive levels due to a revolving door for new professionals of color, many staff of color leaving feeling unsupported and not acknowledged, and the few that do stick around perhaps feeling used for diversity-specific initiatives to serve as the face only of diversity in the organization (Thomas, 2001). There can be an “invisible tax” that professionals of color feel when asked to represent communities on projects with no additional compensation or recognition for such work (Gold, 2020). This invisible tax can lead to feelings of being a token for the organization; these professionals of color may feel on hyper-display and under extreme pressure for optimal performance at all times, which may lead to feelings of further isolation (Abdullah et al., 2020; Johnson-White & Hollingsworth, 2005). These social affinity groups can help provide opportunities for professionals of color to connect with one another and help share the emotional and perhaps actual workload with their peers. Positive interactions with diverse peers can help increase the sense of belonging for a professional of color (Hussain & Jones, 2019). The conversations in these social affinity groups can include how, when, or even if to address incidents that cause racial discomfort. This skill of discernment becomes one well-honed by professionals of color who advance in many organizations (Johnson-White & Hollingsworth, 2005).

Social affinity groups can go through four main phases: awareness, affiliation, access, and advancement (Douglas, 2008). Awareness of these groups is important for both members of these identities and the larger community at the organization to make them a part of the organizational culture. Shared communication of areas of mutual concern can create strong group affiliation for members. Access to networking opportunities becomes an important function of affinity groups. As these affinity groups become embedded in the culture of the

organizations, opportunities for advancement can arise through the training and confidence building these shared communal spaces can provide. SkillsUSA does not currently have affinity groups but can create new opportunities for professionals of color in the organization.

SkillsUSA History and Mission

SkillsUSA was founded as the Vocational Industrial Clubs of America (VICA) in 1965 and changed its name to SkillsUSA in 2004 (*SkillsUSA Member Handbook: Making the Most of Your Membership*, 2020). At its inception in 1965, the focus was on youth participation, but shortly after, it expanded to include a postsecondary division in 1965 (Gordon & Schultz, 2020). SkillsUSA has grown to the second largest CTSO, existing in all 50 states and several territories of the United States (Fiscus, 2008). Focusing on SkillsUSA provides opportunities to examine the culture of a large CTSO that has a broad reach to professionals across the country.

The SkillsUSA mission is to “empower its members to become world-class workers, leaders, and responsible American citizens” (*SkillsUSA Member Handbook: Making the Most of Your Membership*, 2020, p. 12). To this end, SkillsUSA implements a framework that develops its members’ personal, workplace, and technical skills (*SkillsUSA Member Handbook: Making the Most of Your Membership*, 2020). The SkillsUSA framework was implemented in 2016 after surveying hundreds of business and industry partners to find out what their new employees were lacking that SkillsUSA could supplement (“SkillsUSA Framework,” n.d.).

Figure 1*SkillsUSA Framework***SkillsUSA
Framework**

Note. The SkillsUSA Framework has three main components and 17 essential elements that fall under these sections (“SkillsUSA Framework,” n.d.). Copyright 2016 by SkillsUSA. Reprinted with permission.

SkillsUSA operates in three divisions: middle school, high school, and college/postsecondary. There is a maximum of two state associations per state or territory, one for secondary institutions, including middle school and high school membership, and another for postsecondary institutions; some states have one combined association to serve both secondary

and postsecondary membership (*Bylaws of SkillsUSA, Incorporated*, 2019). These state associations are led by state staff consisting primarily of a state director who receives training from their state agency and the national SkillsUSA organization. The state director serves as the liaison between the state and the national organization, ensuring policies and procedures are followed and implementing state activities and qualifying events for national activities. This dual responsibility of the state director to the local state governing body and the national SkillsUSA organization provides unique challenges for recruiting and retraining professionals of color in these positions. The inability to have a standard training process and supportive structures in the varying states creates challenges that the national office needs to address. The national office typically does not have any involvement in the hiring or appointment of state directors as that is the responsibility of the state department of education or workforce board under which SkillsUSA resides. However, the national office becomes involved in the onboarding process and during their tenure.

SkillsUSA is managed nationally by national staff and a board of directors. SkillsUSA currently employs approximately 43 national staff members (“Headquarters Office,” n.d.). Like most other CTSOs, SkillsUSA is primarily managed at the state level by the state’s Department of Education or similar community college/technical education board in a state, with a few managed by workforce or labor boards (*Bylaws of SkillsUSA, Incorporated*, 2019; Fiscus, 2008). SkillsUSA currently has approximately 62 state directors (“State Association Directors,” n.d.). Local chapters are chartered locally through the state and national organizations to operate primarily in schools.

Summary

Addressing the retention of professionals of color for SkillsUSA requires looking into the entire pipeline from students of color who eventually become teachers of color and, in some instances, become staff of color overseeing entire CTE programs and CTSOs. In order to have these mentors in place to help guide new professionals of color in organizations such as SkillsUSA, there needs to be a concerted effort to resolve the retention issues (Troupe, 1993). Among the many suggestions for future CTE educators, one of particular importance to this study is to “provide support for more ethnic minority doctoral students in CTE to ensure a future pool of talent for research on ethnic (as well as other) issues in CTE, and to ensure future role models” (Gordon & Schultz, 2020, p. 212). There is a lack of research on CTE programs and CTSOs concerning professionals of color. This study focuses on one such CTSO, SkillsUSA, and the experiences of professionals of color in the organization.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was framed through the constructivist paradigm as a case study on the sense of belonging for SkillsUSA professionals of color. In qualitative research, a case study focuses on a specific phenomenon that occurs in a particular system with a restricted boundary (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). SkillsUSA is a specific CTSO with a limited number of professionals of color to examine as a case. For this study, I used an instrumental case study design. *Instrumental case study design* allows researchers to refine theory through the exploration of a phenomenon (Stake, 1995). As such, the focus is not on the case itself but leverages the case to bring deeper and contextual richness or theory or theoretical frameworks. Using instrumental case, researchers explore the case's context and detail ordinary activities in order to situate the lived experience of the phenomenon explored through a conceptual lens (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). In my study, I explored the sense of belonging for professionals of color in CTSOs, within a specified case of SkillsUSA.

This case study focused on the experiences of SkillsUSA professionals of color through the examination of documents and a focus group. Transferability is key to setting this study as an instrumental case study (Kekeya, 2021). The goal is to provide an accounting of the experiences of professionals of color that can be transferred to other CTSOs to help shape organizational experiences and programs for professionals of color in similar organizations. The instrumental case study provides an opportunity to be used beyond the case and offers transferrable information for similar organizations (Stake, 2006).

In this study, I explored the following questions:

1. How do professionals of color in SkillsUSA describe their work environment?
2. How do professionals of color in SkillsUSA talk about experiences and resources that influence their desire to stay?
3. How do SkillsUSA professionals of color perceive their interactions with other staff members?
4. What might organizational documents reveal about SkillsUSA's efforts to create a sense of belonging for staff of color?

Data Collection

I conducted this study in the United States, in the states and territories that have a SkillsUSA state association. The national office for SkillsUSA is currently located in Virginia, with additional staff that work remotely from across the country on behalf of the national organization. The participants for the study were three state directors and one national staff member.

I recruited and selected participants who identified as SkillsUSA professionals of color. These professionals were staff of either the state or national organization. In order to participate in the study, professionals identified as a member of an underrepresented race. A recruitment email (see Appendix A) was sent to SkillsUSA staff members to solicit participation. Gatekeepers are important in gaining access to the right participants, as they can help grant access to the study to occur and help reach out to the necessary sampling pool (Jones et al., 2022). The main gatekeeper for SkillsUSA is the national Executive Director, who used her influence to encourage participation by the desired sampling pool. The national Executive

Director sent the recruitment email to national staff members and made an announcement about this study at a state director's conference.

Although there is no direct reporting structure to the national Executive Director for state staff, the Executive Director does wield an important level of influence as the top position in the national organization. As a state director, I do not professionally report to the Executive Director; however, there is an informal role where the Executive Director does set the programmatic priorities for the national organization and, as a result, a majority of my state activities as well. The national Executive Director is a direct position of employment authority over national staff; thus, their support was of significant help in gaining participation from national staff for the focus group. The Chief Diversity Officer had access to many documents and the history of the organization that was able to provide necessary information for document review. I have a pre-existing relationship with the Chief Diversity Officer due to my work on the DEI taskforce.

This study began with institutional review board approval by the University of Georgia and SkillsUSA. Participants received a consent form (see Appendix B; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) prior to participation, outlining details about the study and their rights as participants. Participants were recruited using the recruitment email (see Appendix A) and through a conference announcement. The methods of data collection were a focus group and a document review. Four participants participated in the focus group, three of whom were state directors and one national staff member. The collection of data from multiple sources created a more holistic picture of the case (Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2017).

Documents

Document review provided information on the organization's past and how it has addressed issues related to SkillsUSA professionals of color. There are some documents that were publicly available, including general history of the organization (*Front Page*, n.d.). Other documents were gained from the Chief Diversity Officer and the national Executive Director. Documents alone were not necessarily accurate descriptors of what occurred; thus, they were used in collaboration (Bowen, 2009) with focus group data from SkillsUSA professionals of color.

Documents that were analyzed include demographic data, employee handbooks, hiring processes and policies, mentor guide, state director's association constitution, and DEI policies and statements (see Appendix F). There was prior collection of demographic data (Bowen, 2009) that was reviewed, though it was limited to student data. Document review is particularly important to case study research as it helps provide a robust descriptor of the case and provides a documented timeline of transformation points in the case (Bowen, 2009).

Focus Group

A focus group was the other data collection method that was used. The focus group occurred on September 1, 2022, virtually on the Zoom platform. The focus group had a semi-structured format, beginning with broader, more informal questions and progressing to a more specific structured questioning (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This semi-structured format allowed for additional probing as the moderator to encourage more conversation (Adams, 2015). The focus group protocol (see Appendix C) was informed by the sense of belonging framework and the research questions.

Sense of belonging refers to the “social support” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 28) one receives in a setting; it becomes even more heightened for those of color (Strayhorn, 2019). The lack of sense of belonging can bring about feelings of isolation and a chilly climate (Strayhorn, 2019). This served as the framework under which the focus group protocol (see Appendix C) was formulated. The research questions also served as the guiding themes through which the focus group protocol was developed. Each research question yielded several more specific questions for the focus group protocol (see Appendix C).

The goal of the focus group interviews was not consensus but allowed for the opportunity for discussion on varying experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The focus group allowed for group brainstorming and idea sharing sparked by another participant’s viewpoint (Adams, 2015; Smithson, 2007). In order to gain the perspectives of SkillsUSA professionals of color, a focus group was optimal to allow for this sharing of viewpoints and opportunities for deeper conversation generated from group ideas. Alternately, there can be times when a focus group can prove uncomfortable for a participant if they do not want to share in a room with peers (Smithson, 2007), so the consent process (see Appendix B) for the focus group allowed participants to remove themselves from participation. No participants opted to remove themselves from participation.

As the moderator, I provided the guidelines surrounding the focus group discussion (see Appendix C) and encouraged honest feedback from participants (Smithson, 2007). When a particular conversation took longer than expected, as the moderator, I was prepared with the order of importance of questions to be asked so that critical questions got prioritized (Adams, 2015). Focus groups are small in nature, with typically less than a dozen participants; this focus group had four members participating, so it was manageable (Krueger & Casey, 2015). After a

recruitment email (see Appendix A) was sent and a recruitment announcement made, focus group participants self-selected if they were state or national staff of SkillsUSA who identified as professionals of color. The specific race of participants is not shared as to protect the anonymity of participants since the numbers are so few.

Participants were informed that while the focus group session was recorded for note-taking purposes (see Appendix C), their anonymity would be honored in the published results (Breen, 2006). It was critical in the data analysis stage to ensure the accuracy of captured conversations through the data collection process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is best achieved when done simultaneously as the data collection (Baxter & Jack, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The focus group protocol (see Appendix C) was created with the sense of belonging framework in mind. Thus I went into the focus group session looking to identify themes that aligned with the core elements of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Themes were gathered and coded as the study progressed, initially in the focus group session through notes and then later through listening to the recording. Document analysis was used in collaboration with the focus group, primarily after the conclusion of the focus group, to provide opportunities for comparison and corroboration of themes (Bowen, 2009).

In analyzing focus group data, Krueger and Casey (2015) suggested focusing on the frequency of comments, the extensiveness of discussion around a particular topic, the intensity of discussion at certain points, the specificity of comments, keeping track of larger themes and big ideas, and knowing when comments are critical to the study even if they do not reoccur. The participants in the study were mostly familiar with each other; thus, they often corroborated each

other's thoughts and openly disagreed when they felt differently, as there was a comradery amongst the group. The participants were also familiar with me as the moderator, so there was a sense of comfort in the discussion. As the moderator and the data analyst, I listened for the full sense of conversations, including vocal inflections and intense feelings (Krueger & Casey, 2015). As the moderator, I analyzed data at the moment and probed for additional clarity and details where needed (Krueger & Casey, 2015). I conducted additional focus group analysis soon after the completion of the session by listening to the session recording and beginning transcription (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Effective management of the various sources of data is critical in case study research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I used the recording and notes taken during the focus group session to help keep track of themes that emerged from data analysis. There is an overwhelming amount of data in a case study; proper management and analysis were particularly critical to ensure the final case study accurately captures what is necessary for a thorough case study.

Yin (2017) suggested beginning data analysis with a review of the research questions first, then working to find the answers in the data collected. I created the focus group protocol (see Appendix C) with the research questions at the forefront; thus, I was able to find the answers in the data collected. As I analyzed the data, I was guided by the research purpose and answered the research questions I set to begin the study. Most of the document analysis involved documents that were either created or updated after the 2020 global protests surrounding racial justice. Thus most documents are more recent in development. The significance of this global reckoning and its impact on the organization is important reasons behind when the change occurred in organizational documents (Yin, 2017).

The use of multiple methods of data analysis helped provide reliability to the findings of the study (Bowen, 2009; Yin, 2017). The data analysis helped provide a complete summary of the case to include themes derived from the various methods, any quotations that were significant, and any findings that were unforeseen (Breen, 2006).

Protection of Subjects

I used pseudonyms to protect the identity of all participants. This was important to ensure the privacy of the participants of the study. Although the identity of the organization, SkillsUSA, will be known in the case study, the anonymity of participants was crucial to ensure no unintended backlash at the state or national offices where they work and to ensure no other negative consequences as sensitive topics relating to race were discussed. While it is desirable to have both the case and subjects known in case study research (Yin, 2017), it was more important in this case to gain honest feedback from participants than to jeopardize any employment factors for participation in such a study. Ultimately, there are not enough professionals of color that work as state directors or national staff for SkillsUSA to provide additional details without risking their anonymity. Thus participants are identified by pseudonyms and how long they have been involved with the organization, and no further identifiers.

Trustworthiness

The study's importance is critical as there have been few studies covering the experiences of professionals of color in CTSOs, and the focus on SkillsUSA as the 2nd largest CTSO adds valuable data to the academic field. The use of multiple data collection methods, a focus group interview and document review, provides sufficient thoroughness to the study. The frequency of

a theme among various data collection methods helps to substantiate the reliability of the data (Breen, 2006).

Member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) were implemented to have participants verify some findings to ensure accurate representation of participant feedback. Member checks (see Appendix D) involved the researcher sharing their interpretation of the data with the participants so they can verify the accuracy or provide additional clarity (Baxter & Jack, 2015). As I am both the data collector and data analyst, implementing member checks was helpful in reducing bias by soliciting validation of the results from the participants (Birt et al., 2016). Member checks, though, can come with drawbacks, including disagreements between the researcher and participant on a theme that has emerged, a participant changing their original commentary, or consistent minor spelling/grammar corrections (Carlson, 2010). Thus, it was important to set clear parameters around the member checking process, specific timelines for responses, and expectations for transcription (Carlson, 2010). At the conclusion of member checks, a record of response rates (see Appendix E) was provided in the study to add to transparency and credibility (Birt et al., 2016). None of the participants provided any edits or feedback during the member check process.

Ethical practice is critical in conducting research. Lichtman (2013, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) suggested that qualitative researchers should be clear about their role and any relationship to the subjects in the study. My interest in this case study comes from my own experiences with CTSOs. I was familiar with the participants of my study as I worked alongside them in my role. I am a professional of color who has served as a state director for SkillsUSA since 2016. Upon starting the role as state director, I quickly realized that I was one of the few professionals of color in the organization, which fueled my interest in this research topic. There

appeared to be a revolving door of the few professionals of color in the organization, so I wanted to investigate the sense of belonging for professionals of color in SkillsUSA. The literature (Hussain & Jones, 2019; Strayhorn, 2019) highlights sense of belonging as a central motivating factor affecting retention and persistence within organizations, and this case study explored that in SkillsUSA.

My identity in my professional career as a SkillsUSA professional of color is important and provides a layer of comfortability for the participants, but it is also important to be explicit about this identity in the research as I am a professional peer to many of the subjects in the study. I worked to ensure that I was not biased or had preconceived notions about what the research ultimately showed (Yin, 2017). I worked to remain open to the data that was provided to me, even if it disproved any potential biases that may exist. I was aware at all times of how I moderated discussions or asked questions to ensure the least amount of bias possible. I worked to ensure a clear distinction of this study from any other work SkillsUSA may be doing in relation to any ongoing DEI initiatives by ensuring requests for participation came from my University of Georgia affiliated accounts as opposed to any affiliated with my job. The separation of this study from any official work of SkillsUSA was stated in the requests sent to participants.

Summary

This case study focused on the experiences of SkillsUSA professionals of color. Document analysis and a focus group were the main sources of data in this study. Participants for this study were state and national staff members of SkillsUSA who self-identified as professionals of color. The protection of the anonymity of participants was critical. The

information gathered, and themes that emerged from this study may be transferrable to other CTSOs.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS/RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of professionals of color in SkillsUSA. Participants in the study were SkillsUSA state directors and national staff members who identified as a member of an underrepresented race and participated in a focus group. I asked the participants questions about their history with SkillsUSA, interactions with other professionals in SkillsUSA, their sense of belonging to the organization, and suggestions for retention of professionals of color in SkillsUSA (see Appendix C). I also conducted a document analysis on demographic data, employee handbook, hiring processes and policies, mentor guide, state director association constitution, and DEI policies and statements (see Appendix F). The themes identified through this process centered around the barriers to persistence and retention related to visibility concerns, mattering to others, leadership matters, and integration of DEI commitments.

Participants

There were four participants in the focus group. Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of participants. Three participants serve as state directors for SkillsUSA who identify as professionals of color. One additional participant also identified as a professional of color and worked for the SkillsUSA national office. Two participants have served in their roles for less than 2 years, while the other two participants have been with SkillsUSA for several years. The participants were familiar with each other, and with me as the moderator; thus, there was comfort and ease of open communication in the focus group session.

Table 1*Participants*

Pseudonym	Years of Service
Alex	Under 2
Parker	Under 2
Riley	More than 2
Ken	More than 2

Visibility Concerns

A theme that emerged from the data analysis is the barriers that exist to retention of staff of color tied to visibility. The lack of visibility of people of color in staff at every level of SkillsUSA can be a barrier to retention of professionals of color. Parker notes the lack of presenters of color at a recent state director conference facilitated by the national staff, “I was looking at the people who presented at our professional development. I was saying well, there may have been one person, I’m not sure, of color...I could be wrong. but I think for every level from the top to the bottom we have to be intentional.” Alex notes the potential barrier as an opportunity for change, “not seeing someone of my caliber on the national [level] could be a road block for some. For me, it makes it a challenge for me to make certain that I’m the one to get there.”

Even for those as motivated for change, like Alex, it still presents potential barriers for moving forward. Alex alternatively points out:

But just sitting back, looking, it almost makes it apprehensive to say, will you be accepted? Even if you try to move forward, because all I saw for every presentation for

each region there wasn't [many people of color] as far as I could tell. I just go back and say is it because the [national office] is not in control of the state director at each state like with me. They couldn't control the fact that I was [a person of color] who was brought in as this role, that means they probably can't control that at any other state. So that limits them, or maybe that should make them say because we're not getting the state representation of the diversity we're going to ensure that we have the diversity on the national level, but just seeing that lack does kind of make you apprehensive about trying to move forward to that higher level.

Riley expresses similar sentiments to Alex about the lack of diversity on national staff:

You probably met [one person of color on national staff at the state director conference], so he's probably the only person that you've seen that was. But outside of that everybody else [facilitating at the state director conference] is probably, you know, Caucasian and that that's an issue for me, too.

Despite some structural barriers that exist to prevent SkillsUSA as a national organization from selecting representation on each level, there should be more effort to ensure more diversity where the national structure has control. The hiring of state staff is done by state education or workforce boards, but once in the organization there are structures for advancement that the national office controls and can provide more leadership on the matter.

Mattering to Others

Peer interactions, whether formal or informal, leave an impression on professionals of color and their perceived sense of belonging. A theme that emerged is the lack of mattering to others, in particular with peer interactions. Parker says of peer interactions in SkillsUSA, "what

always bothers me is that you know you're so nice and sweet when we're in the meeting. But if I see you in the hallway then you don't speak, or you act differently, then that makes me feel like our interaction was just a business transaction." Alex, on the other hand, views those informal interactions from a different perspective than Parker. Alex says:

I guess for me I'm opposite, I look at it like this...I go to work, I put in my eight hours, I go home...And if you do see me on the street and you don't want to speak, I appreciate this because at work you're showing me your professional side. Outside of work you're showing me your personal side of who you really are so I'm okay if you don't speak me outside, because that's who you are.

However, in the formal meetings Alex does recall repeated interactions that left an unpleasant impression:

[An] interaction that I took away from SkillsUSA that I did not like was inside the [state director conference] sessions, when we were put in groups, it was almost like I was a child in one instance, and I pulled myself back because I know me, especially when I'm put in that predicament, I'm going to let you know I'm not a token. I'm here, because I have the qualifications and the skillset to be here. And on three different occasions with three different individuals on our leadership team...I had to really assert myself to say hey, I'm not a child. In one of the sessions it was almost "shut up, be quiet." That's almost what I got...the first time it happened I was like okay, that's that person. The second time it happened I'm like okay, it's that person. The third time I'm like okay is this the culture of this organization? When we get into these sessions it's like I'm supposed to sit back and allow them to take lead, like I'm not supposed to have a voice. Because it was three prominent individuals that were always called on in the sessions, it

made it seem like they were part of the leadership team. That they felt like it was okay to do that. I didn't get that from the national board, it was totally different even outside of the sessions it was totally opposite. If I went to someone from the national office, it was okay. But some of the other state directors who are leading some of the groups and sessions, it was almost like okay you're just here because you're here but please understand your place is how I took it.

Ken expresses similar sentiments:

I agree that in regards to other state directors, there is not a comradery spirit of everybody's on the same team and we all have the same mission. It's written in stone, it's the golden rule, but nobody really follows it. You can definitely tell the cliques, certain groups of state directors that are just to themselves. I've been a state director for several years and there are some that sit on the state director board that have never spoken to me, they could come up to a table and talk to other people and would not even say hello or how are you doing [to me]. It is especially a major problem, when you have a [leadership role]. When you are not a personable person...When you are in a leadership role, you need to be able to reach out and interact with the people that you're representing.

An area that emerged from the document analysis that is meant to serve as a support system for state directors is the mentorship program. The same issues of lack of comradery and inclusion felt by the professionals of color also impacts their experiences with the mentorship program. Alex serves as a state director for two other national student organizations and was not provided a mentor in those other organizations, thus in that aspect Alex feels that SkillsUSA is ahead of other organizations. Alex believes that their SkillsUSA mentor was matched based on the state organization similarities primarily. The SkillsUSA Mentor Guide focuses on mentorship

pairing based on “region, division, similarities between state associations and personalities” (see Appendix F; “*SkillsUSA Mentor Guide*,” n.d.). There are no considerations for personal factors such as race listed currently in the SkillsUSA Mentor Guide (see Appendix F).

The participants in the study did not feel that the current setup of the SkillsUSA mentor program is most beneficial to its members. Parker says “I think that I’ve gotten some beneficial information. [But] I almost feel as if I was a bother, that you know it’s very surface at times.” Ken similarly says, “my experience with having a mentor was not very helpful to my journey as a state director, and that being honest, because I think the individual probably was too busy running their own state than to try to help someone else.” The SkillsUSA Mentor Guide suggests communication with mentees every two weeks, there however does not appear to be any follow up from the national office to ensure this occurs (see Appendix F; “*SkillsUSA Mentor Guide*,” n.d.). The SkillsUSA Mentor Guide offers loose guidelines (see Appendix F; “*SkillsUSA Mentor Guide*,” n.d.) for the program, stricter procedures may be necessary to provide a fulfilling experience in particular for professionals of color searching for often deeper connections than the current structure provides.

Leadership Matters

Another emergent theme is the need for strong leadership from the national organization and the need for equitable opportunities of leadership advancement for professionals of color. There are areas of strong current leadership from the national organization and other opportunities for stronger support of professionals of color. The SkillsUSA national office and national board do not have direct control over the hiring of state directors; however, the national

SkillsUSA organization can do more where it can control in order to expand opportunities for leadership within the organization. Alex says:

I guess I go back to being optimistic that they are working with what they are given. As far as they do not select who the state directors are in each state, but they try to work with them the best that they can. Can they include more at the national level, at the regional?

Well I guess I don't know how the regional are selected but I think because they're probably voted in by us, then typically you're going to somewhat identify with the person who you relate more to. So I wonder about the rare representation we have currently, either they saw something in them as a person or they identified we need a token person in this position. Because if it's always voted in on the regional level or national level, then we [people of color] are outvoted in number at the regional level and at the national level of the organization. So if that's the way it works, unless there's no bias, then you'll never see us elevate to those positions. When I started thinking those thoughts, I said to myself they are working with the state directors that they have so that's why you don't see more of you in those roles. But my thing is, what are they going to try to do, try to entice us, or change procedures to ensure that some of us can elevate or be voted into those roles. Because for me, if it always relies on a vote, then we're never going to get there unless they have a sidebar conversation because we are always going to be outvoted. Even if I have the skillset, because of certain encounters I had with certain individuals, I feel like my skillset will still be overlooked because of the color of my skin. So therefore I don't think even a vote would be fair to get me there, because if you have three people that in their mind have already voted against me then I'm never going to get to that position that I think I should be or anyone else of color should be.

Mechanisms for advancement within the organization as a state director are based on popular vote (see Appendix F; *SkillsUSA State Directors Association Constitution and Bylaws*, 2018) and professionals of color remain in the minority, thus there will remain a feeling of a structural barrier to advancement. SkillsUSA needs to investigate alternative means for advancement of professionals of color. Parker adds that there needs to be more transparency in the hiring and advancement of SkillsUSA positions:

We need to make sure we have more representation, at the head. And you know one is good but one is not enough. And I want to see somebody who looks like me, we were overjoyed to see one of us get elected but if you have five people on the board, then I don't see why three of them can't be African American. Now honestly I don't know how you get to the national office. I don't know if they're hired, there's interviews, but I keep going back to we need more people at the national level making decisions. How are you making decisions about your commitment to multicultural issues and diversity if your national office is not multicultural and diverse? So where are you getting this information from? How are you making these decisions? We have got to be intentional and one is not good enough.

There are state director peer interactions that appear to be problematic for many of the focus group participants. In contrast to the feeling of being left out often by other state directors, the national leadership does appear to be contributing more positively to attempt to create a sense of belonging for professionals of color. Alex shared:

[At state director's conference] there was a table of [people of color] and we felt some type of way, and the [national leadership] came and sat down at our table...it felt like it was their way of seeing the division and knowing it was their role to kind of pull it out.

Being the only [person of color] in certain instances in my life, I've never had that person at the top seem like they identified that and realize that it's part of their capacity, part of their job to kind of eliminate that division and bring all of us in.

Parker adds, "A lot of us sat with each other, you know everybody wants to be comfortable. We want to be relaxed, and I think it was a great comfort for us to have each other. Because you didn't know if you could go and sit at another table right, you didn't know if you're going to be welcome because that was not necessarily the tone." Alex and Parker agree that they hope that spirit of inclusion from top leadership in SkillsUSA will trickle down to everyone else, including other state directors.

The overall climate of SkillsUSA is not particularly welcoming to professionals of color. Parker describes the climate of SkillsUSA as "tense." They continue, "I think it's kind of tense. You know I almost think it is surface, I almost think that they're not acknowledging that the cultural climate may be an issue. It definitely exists and it definitely needs some work." Ken alternately views the cultural climate as "very foundational and evolving." Ken said:

Just in the past few years with new leadership at the top, there has been such a shift on focus of DEI, inclusiveness, and equitable practices. So I think that the board is very supportive of moving forward with the work so I have hope. But it's going to take a lot of work from the national staff to the state directors, and that is where the meat of the work will be done. Because that's where frankly, a lot of the issues probably lie.

DEI Commitment

A stronger integration of the DEI commitments is another theme from the data. A 2021-2022 demographic study of SkillsUSA students found that 50% identify as White, 30% as

Hispanic or Latino, 12% as Black or African American, 3% as Asian, 2% as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 2% as Other, and 1% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (see Appendix F; “*SkillsUSA 2021-22 Demographic Basic Student Chart – Percentages*,” 2022). The diversity of the staff members that work with these students should reflect similar demographics. In the focus group session, Alex suggests that “every student that’s a part of [SkillsUSA] should be able to identify with somebody on that national board. I don’t see that.” There is not currently that parity between student diversity and staff diversity, but incremental changes are happening in the organization.

Riley thinks back on their SkillsUSA experience over the years:

Years ago...SkillsUSA was still kind of a segregated place for a lot of [people of color]. It wasn’t friendly for a lot of us and I’ll tell you through my time. I’ve only seen three African Americans serve on that national board... I made a couple of scenes about it, like come on, man, you know you got nobody else here that looks like me, somebody’s got to say something and after a while I guess it got heard because of other things that were happening, and people started really saying wait a minute, wait, you got a problem here. You need to bring more people in so now it’s gotten more diverse, but a couple of years ago it wasn’t.

There have been some demographic change in staff, but not enough to match the diversifying student population yet.

The document analysis revealed a renewed sense of commitment surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion. After the 2020 global reckoning related to the racial justice movement, several new documents and edits were implemented in SkillsUSA. The revised edition of the

SkillsUSA Employee Handbook for national office employees includes the addition of the new DEI Policy (see Appendix F; *SkillsUSA Employee Handbook*, 2021). That DEI policy includes a set of commitments and responsibilities that staff and other members, including students, at every level are supposed to adhere to. These include having a responsibility to “respect the humanity of each person at all times” (see Appendix F; *SkillsUSA DEI Policy*, 2021). Due to the varied nature of the employment and supervisory responsibilities of the various members of SkillsUSA, many of these policies appear to be vague in nature to have the broadest reach as to try not to conflict with any local or state policies and laws that may exist depending on the parties involved.

There are more direct and specified policies related directly to national staff, an area where the SkillsUSA national office has more direct supervisory and disciplinary responsibilities. The new hiring procedures for the SkillsUSA national office employees include a focus on advertising with career boards, professional associations, and affinity groups that service diverse populations to attempt to garner diverse candidates (see Appendix F; *SkillsUSA Hiring Processes and Policies*, 2021). The interview process for candidates will include up to three interviews; after the first interview SkillsUSA will reassess final candidates for diversity and include at least one DEI-focused question in the final interviews. Specifically, the SkillsUSA Hiring Processes and Processes (see Appendix F; 2021) state, “if diversity is absent as compared to the original candidate pool, consider the questions and evaluations taken to this point to determine if a biased result has occurred” (p. 2). These are primarily internal documents for use at the national office only.

Although SkillsUSA has outlined several hiring procedures in its documents, including the *SkillsUSA Hiring Processes and Policies* (see Appendix F; 2021), there appears to be a lack

of knowledge of these processes. If the very people that could be searching for advancement opportunities are not aware of policies to increase diversity in the organization, that can discourage them from applying for any open positions that may exist at the national level.

Organizational Documents

The procedures for hiring national staff and election processes for state directors to the board of directors and state director's association boards should be evaluated. Through the document analysis, there is the beginning of an infusion of DEI in human resource policies for national staff (see Appendix F; *SkillsUSA Employee Handbook, 2021*; *SkillsUSA Hiring Processes and Policies, 2021*), but the change in diversifying national staff still has a long way to go. For state directors, it already feels like an uphill battle to try to get votes for advancement in the organization, as the current SkillsUSA State Director's Association Constitution and Bylaws (see Appendix F; 2018) dictates when met with a chilly cultural climate that is not welcoming to professionals of color who feel they will always be outvoted due to being in the minority of state directors. Participants in the study suggested SkillsUSA reevaluate using solely an elections process for all their advancement opportunities as that may limit professionals of color volunteering to run for election in an organizational climate they view as discouraging.

State-level documents were not used in this study due to varying state policies and ownership of these documents requiring multiple site approvals that were not feasible in the time frame of this study. National-level documents (see Appendix F) were used, such as the State Director's Association Constitution and Bylaws (2018) and SkillsUSA Employee Handbook (2021), as they are owned by the national office that served as the site of this study and provide common documents for all participants. State and national staff work alongside one another

throughout most of the year, covered by many of the same procedures, and ultimately serve under the same organizational culture and values set forth by the national board of directors.

Summary

The document analysis showed that there are some strides being made at the national office for SkillsUSA headquarters employees. However, the focus group revealed that there remains to be much work left to be done to implement these changes to actualize more diversity in the staffing demographics at the national office. Furthermore, the challenge is even greater when it comes to opportunities for state directors who are not directly hired by the national office. The structures surrounding retention for state directors and some advancement opportunities can, however, be impacted by the national office, and there are some suggestions illuminated by the study that can be implemented.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

There are few studies that focus on the professionals that manage career and technical student organizations at the state and national levels, especially professionals of color. As the student population continues to diversify (Gordon & Schultz, 2020), it is increasingly important to retrain and attract professionals of color to organizations like SkillsUSA. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of professionals of color in SkillsUSA as a case study framed through the constructivist paradigm.

In this study, I explored the following questions:

1. How do professionals of color in SkillsUSA describe their work environment?
2. How do professionals of color in SkillsUSA talk about experiences and resources that influence their desire to stay?
3. How do SkillsUSA professionals of color perceive their interactions with other staff members?
4. What might organizational documents reveal about SkillsUSA's efforts to create a sense of belonging for staff of color?

Sense of Belonging

There are four core elements of sense of belonging in particular that are highlighted in the findings: sense of belonging takes on heightened importance in certain contexts, sense of belonging is a consequence of mattering, social identities affect sense of belonging, and sense of

belonging engenders positive outcomes (Strayhorn, 2019). The state and national staff that manage CTSOs are located in various states and territories. Sense of belonging takes even more heightened importance to these staff members as the national organization can provide a sense of community.

The focus group revealed that there is a lack of professionals of color in visible roles in the organization, thus making it more difficult to envision oneself as advancing in the organization. There are varying social and political obstacles that may exist at the state level, so these professionals of color often see the national organization as the opportunity for advancement to regional and national levels, but only if they feel secure within the organization. The infusion of DEI commitments in the varying organizational documents of SkillsUSA is helpful in providing opportunities for these staff members, but they must be more openly discussed so that everyone is aware of these advancements. As a professional of color in SkillsUSA who also serves on the DEI Taskforce, I found that I was unaware of the existence of some of these documents and procedures, which impacted my readiness to consider upward mobility in the organization.

The findings of this research study showed that professionals of color in SkillsUSA describe the SkillsUSA environment as tense but also evolving towards a more inclusive environment. There is a chilly climate for professionals of color, though they remain optimistic about the changing direction of the organization, mainly led by select national leadership that makes a concerted effort to provide a warm environment for professionals of color. There is a strong culture that creates hostility and cliques within the organization and can isolate staff members of color; this needs to be tackled by the national organization to create a better environment. There are often preexisting cliques and a lack of acknowledgment of professionals of color in group meetings leading to them feeling alienated.

The focus group spoke openly about often feeling more comfortable with national staff than with state director peers. The DEI imperatives that are often mandated at the national office level for national headquarters staff are not currently as infused in state director training. This is perhaps where there can be a significant gap between the openness of national staff as opposed to state director peers. Professionals of color must feel that they matter to all involved in the organization; thus, more work is critical to ensure that peer relationships are not pushing professionals of color away. The organizational culture for SkillsUSA seems to be mostly set and reflected through peer relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Kochan, 2013). SkillsUSA professionals of color spoke about not feeling valued by others in the organization as equally qualified professionals (Strayhorn, 2019); this can negatively affect the sense of belonging for these professionals of color.

Professionals of color who are state directors and national staff members do not always feel welcomed or able to progress to higher levels within SkillsUSA. The current State Director's Association Constitution and Bylaws (see Appendix F; 2018) that manage the advancement of state directors rely heavily on an election process amongst peers. However, if peer interactions are the most negative experience for professionals of color, there needs to be a reexamination of this process to engender more positive outcomes for professionals of color, as there is a lack of trust that candidacy for election will be fair.

Recommendations for Practice

The SkillsUSA mentorship program, as it currently exists, has room for growth in taking into consideration the cultural needs of state directors in matching with someone who will acknowledge the racial challenges of the position (Kent et al., 2013; Thomas, 2001). The

mentorship program that currently exists for SkillsUSA does not have a DEI focus in the implementation of the program. The SkillsUSA Mentor Guide (see Appendix F; *n.d.*) does not specify mentorship pairing on anything related to the racial or ethnic background of participants.

The career-specific matching that is currently provided is just one of the areas needed for a successful mentorship program; for professionals of color, there should be a connection to their mentor on a personal level where challenges, including racial ones, can be discussed (Bottoms et al., 2013; Thomas, 2001). This does not require an exact match by race as this may not be possible with limited numbers of diverse mentors; however, mentors should all be trained and able to acknowledge the race of their mentees as part of their mentoring relationship (Kent et al., 2013; Thomas, 2001). Even more critical to attempting to disrupt some cliques that exist in the organization and to provide encouragement for higher ascension, providing mentors who have the experience and connections for disrupting the power dynamics of the organization by engaging mentees of color in spaces that they are not traditionally invited (Murrell et al., 2008).

Although I was assigned a mentor upon my entry as a state director based on my state association type, it was a peer relationship outside of the formal mentoring process that proved most fruitful for me as I was more comfortable being open with them about racial incidents that occurred as we had more prolonged opportunities to form a trusting relationship. This personal friendship also allowed me the opportunity to permeate some cliques that, as a person of color, I would not have been as welcomed in without the intentional introduction by a White peer who could vouch for me. The opportunities for mentors to relate and become more familiar with each other on a personal level are more difficult due to location differences, but this is a critical piece to creating a beneficial mentor relationship for professionals of color. I additionally made my own connections with fellow professionals of color as we often found each other to create

informal relationships with each other and would often commiserate on any racial challenges we experienced.

There are no specific programs for professionals of color that were noted by any participants; this is an area that SkillsUSA may want to consider adopting. The creation of social networking or affinity groups by SkillsUSA could help provide a support system for professionals of color, allowing opportunities for mutual support. Some focus group participants talked about feeling that they may be used as a token if they advanced to higher levels in the organization, a common feeling among professionals of color (Abdullah et al., 2020; Johnson-White & Hollingsworth, 2005). Creating opportunities for professionals of color to not feel alone or as if they are the “token” is critical for a positive sense of belonging.

SkillsUSA can provide opportunities for positive interactions with diverse peers that can help create a stronger sense of belonging (Hussain & Jones, 2019). One study participant, Alex, spoke to the need for additional training for all professionals, “DEI needs to be infused into every training program if it isn’t already at SkillsUSA. Training on DEI even for us as state directors so we are mindfully working with our students and our advisors that we have that focus in our mindset when we are doing things on our state level.” Ken concurs and adds, “there needs to be a real in-depth and intrusive DEI training for state directors. What we did at the [state director’s conference] was great, but we really need something to challenge the way state directors think, act, and program.” Parker suggests that outside guidance may be needed, “we also need some [outside] facilitators that can come in and do training on a regular basis. The [few people of color] at the national office do a great job, but we need somebody other than them that can come in and do this training. We need people to represent all the different groups.” The current training

opportunities come from within the organization; perhaps opening up to outside facilitators can help further challenge all professionals.

Summary

“We have to start somewhere. And for me, I want to start with you all recognizing that I have the same knowledge, skillset, and talent to bring to the table to affect change across this organization and students across the nation, as far as what we are doing in this organization.”

(Alex)

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of professionals of color in SkillsUSA. This study identified that SkillsUSA professionals of color see some areas of hope and progress while dealing with a lot of challenges and potential barriers to their feeling a sense of belonging to the organization. A critical part of this, as Alex stated, is to truly feel that opinions and contributions are recognized in the organization as equally valuable. Ken takes it a step further in their analysis:

I agree with [Alex], but I would say we probably have more experience within the work and although this work, in particular, we may be new to, I think our skillset and knowledge as a community of individuals can be so beneficial in moving the organization forward. I think, when certain individuals see African Americans involved, it's almost as if oh they don't know, let's help them kind of thing. But when we look at the trades, our population, our ethnicity group has been ruling the trades for many years. You know when we even go back to thinking about slave times, we were working in carpentry and plumbing, just things like that has been going on for centuries. That kind of work originated with our population. So I think there definitely needs to be some work in terms

of training individuals on how to interact and best ways and best practices to go about working with each other. There needs to be a review of the national board and the state director's board. And a real DEI training for state directors and national staff, we all could benefit from it and it would really force us to talk about issues. So many times when we are at our various conferences, there are issues but people don't know how to talk about it so it goes unspoken of and we have the same issues year after year. To be able to be in a space where we really got to have conversations where we may hurt people's feelings but it is how we move forward.

The unique experiences of professionals of color can help to enhance all CTSOs due to their rich perspectives. In turn, embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion will help provide a more open culture that can help to break down barriers for the retention of professionals of color.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Email

Hello,

I am a Doctoral candidate in the Student Affairs Leadership program in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia. I am asking you to take part in a research study entitled Sense of Belonging for SkillsUSA Professionals of Color: A Case Study. The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of professionals of color in SkillsUSA.

You're eligible to be in this study if you are a SkillsUSA State Director or SkillsUSA National Staff member who identifies as a person of color from an underrepresented race.

Your participation will involve a focus group interview and should only take about 60-90 minutes. The publication of the final study will include anonymous information and pseudonyms as to not identify any participants.

If you are interested in participating or would like additional information about this study, please feel free to contact Tjazha Mazhani at tmazhani@uga.edu or 678-576-8099. This study is under the supervision of Faculty Advisor Dr. Ginny Boss who can be reached at ginnyboss@uga.edu.

Thank you for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Tjazha Mazhani

Appendix B

Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

CONSENT FORM

SENSE OF BELONGING FOR SKILLSUSA PROFESSIONALS OF COLOR: A CASE STUDY

Researcher's Statement

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the research study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Ginny Boss
Counseling and Human Development Services
ginnyboss@uga.edu or (470) 578-3124

Co-Investigator: Tjazha Mazhani
Counseling and Human Development Services
tmazhani@uga.edu or (678) 576-8099

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study is to describe the experiences of professionals of color in SkillsUSA. The problem is that little is known about what the work environment is like for staff of color at SkillsUSA. This study is significant because it might provide key information of how to craft an environment that may retain and attract staff of color to SkillsUSA.

If you are interested in participating in the research study, please read the additional information on the following pages, and feel free to ask questions at any point.

Eligibility

You are eligible to be in this study if you are a SkillsUSA State Director or SkillsUSA National Staff member who identifies as a person of color from an underrepresented race.

Study Procedures and Time Commitment

You will be asked to participate in a virtual focus group interview that lasts 1.0 to 1.5 hours. I will provide several prompts to start discussion on topics related to your experience as a SkillsUSA professional of color.

Risks and discomforts

There is a possibility that your participation in this research study may cause you to have an emotional response. There might be discomfort with providing honest feedback for an organization in which you are employed. Your anonymity will be preserved in the publication of this research study to ensure that you are not identifiable.

If anyone feels discomfort and needs to speak with a professional, The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration National Helpline is 1-800-662-HELP (4357) and provides information service in English and Spanish. This service provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations.

Benefits

The benefit of this research study is to provide insight into the experiences of professionals of color in Career and Technical Student organizations and provide information that can help increase their sense of belonging to Career and Technical Student Organizations. There is no direct benefit to participants.

Audio/Video Recording

The session will be recorded for transcription and analysis. The transcription will use pseudonyms to provide anonymity. The recording will be stored in a locked and password protected file and will be retained until the end of the research study. Once the study is completed, the recording will be discarded.

Privacy and Confidentiality of Records

The researcher will uphold confidentiality throughout the research process. Pseudonyms will be used to help maintain confidentiality. Any identifiable information will not be used in the published results. The information collected in this research study will not be used or distributed

for further research. The researchers will not release identifiable results of the research study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law. The internet is insecure and there is no absolute guarantee of confidentiality.

The information will not be used or distributed for future research.

Focus Groups or Other Group Activities

Prior to beginning the focus group session, confidentiality will be stressed to all participants. Even though the investigator will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future.

Participant rights

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this research study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Incentives/compensation for participation

None

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in the research study is voluntary and you may choose not to participate at any time. You may choose to stop participating in the research study at any time. If you decide to withdraw from participation, any information collected from you up to the point of your withdrawal may be kept as part of the research study and analyzed.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

Appendix C

Focus Group Protocol

Introduction:

Hello. My name is Tjazha Mazhani and I am a doctoral candidate in the Student Affairs Leadership program in the College of Education at the University of Georgia. Thank you for agreeing to be part of my research study. I am conducting a case study on the sense of belonging for SkillsUSA professionals of color. You should have reviewed and signed the consent form prior to this session but I can answer any questions you may have before we begin. You are free to leave at any time if you no longer wish to participate.

I am going to ask you various questions regarding your experiences in SkillsUSA as a professional of color. There are no correct answers to anything that is asked. Please answer honestly as your experiences are valued. Please try to speak one at a time to ensure that we can hear what everyone is saying clearly. Please respect the confidentiality of others in this group. I will be sharing information anonymously and using pseudonyms. This session will be recorded to assist in accurate transcribing of your answers. You will have the opportunity to review the findings of the research before publication, if you wish to do so.

Prompts:

- Why did you join SkillsUSA?
- What do you enjoy about being a SkillsUSA member?

- As a SkillsUSA professional of color, what are your experiences within the organization?
- How meaningful are initiatives like the mentorship program as a SkillsUSA professional of color?
- What do you feel are barriers, if any, to the retention of professionals of color in SkillsUSA?
- Please describe some programs or initiatives for professionals of color in SkillsUSA that you are familiar with.
- Describe the interactions you have experienced with other professionals in SkillsUSA, both White professionals and other professionals of color.
- Please share experiences that have made you feel like you belonged/mattered to SkillsUSA.
- Please share experiences when you felt that you did not belong/matter to SkillsUSA.
- What recommendations do you have for SkillsUSA to improve the SkillsUSA experience for professionals of color?
- What resources can SkillsUSA provide to help professionals of color feel supported?
- How would you describe the cultural climate of SkillsUSA?
- How would you describe SkillsUSA's commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity?
- Is there anything else that we have not discussed that you want to add to the discussion?

Conclusion:

Thank you for participating in today's focus group. Do you have any questions or comments you want to share before we conclude? As a reminder, there will be opportunities for

you to verify information discussed today prior to publication of the study, if you wish to do so.

Thank you for your time!

Appendix D

Member Check Email

Hello. Thank you for the information you provided during our recent focus group. The findings are attached for your review and comment. I ask that you review the transcript and ask for clarification where necessary.

For confidentiality your information will be coded as SkillsUSA respondent (INSERT NUMBER). All other name, title and geographic locations will be changed accordingly in the final report.

We appreciate your time in this step of confirming the accuracy of the data. The accuracy of your responses are important to this study.

Please send any questions or clarifications by (INSERT DATE) to Tjazha Mazhani at tmazhani@uga.edu or 678-576-8099. This study is under the supervision of Faculty Advisor Dr. Ginny Boss who can be reached at ginnyboss@uga.edu. Thank you!

Appendix E

Member Check Responses

Pseudonym	Response Received
Alex	No changes received
Parker	No changes received
Riley	No changes received
Ken	No changes received

Appendix F

Document Analysis Summary

Document	Summary
SkillsUSA 2021-22 demographic basic student chart – percentages (2022)	Most recent demographic data showcasing student racial backgrounds for the 2021-22 year
SkillsUSA DEI Policy (2021)	Lists DEI commitments and responsibilities of SkillsUSA members
SkillsUSA Employee Handbook (2021)	National office employee policies and guidelines, newly revised to include inclusive language and policies
SkillsUSA Hiring Processes and Policies (2021)	Lays out processes for hiring including advertising in areas that serve diverse candidates and assessing at every stage of the interview process for diversity
SkillsUSA Mentor Guide (n.d.)	Overview of the mentor program including the mentorship pairing process
SkillsUSA State Director’s Association Constitution and Bylaws (2018)	Overall procedures for the state director’s association including officer positions and elections processes