Today, women fill nearly 50% of the jobs in the U.S. economy. While women are making progress in many careers once considered male only, they are still underrepresented in the male-dominated Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) careers, filling only 25% of available STEM jobs. The problem is not a lack of interest in STEM subjects, but a “leaky pipeline” that develops early in adolescence. By the eighth grade, half as many girls are interested in STEM careers as boys. Even after graduation from college, women with STEM degrees are twice as likely to leave a science or engineering job than men with similar degrees. Numerous studies have documented why women avoid or drop out of STEM education and careers, including lack of self-efficacy, lack of role models, lower behavioral persistence, family obligations, loss of self-efficacy, and gender stereotypes. However, there are very few studies about the experiences of women pursuing automotive degrees at a university or careers in the automotive industry.

To begin filling this gap in the literature, this qualitative study captured the experiences of women who chose a non-traditional career in automotive technology at one Midwestern university, and sought to uncover what made them seek this career and persist in it despite the historical odds against their success. Lent, Brown, and Hackett’s
(1994) Social Cognitive Career Theory was used as a lens for this study. Twelve comprehensive interviews with women in the automotive career pipeline were conducted. Three were current students in bachelor’s degree automotive programs, and the remaining nine were graduates of such programs working in the automotive field. The resulting ten major themes and sixteen sub-themes detail the females’ experiences from the time they chose automotive as a career until the present day.

Primarily, it was disclosed that almost all participants indicated an external factor influenced them to choose an automotive career in the first place, with a majority of the influencers being male family members. A bulk of the participants considered other career paths prior to ultimately choosing automotive. Once automotive was chosen, many changed their major within automotive, but remained committed to the field. Because automotive is a male-dominated field, many participants reported being the only female in their automotive classes or at their place of employment. There were many reports of participants having to prove to others their knowledge of and commitment to their chosen automotive career. Some had difficulty with interviewing while seeking work, but a vast majority reported an overall positive view of their work experience. All participants said they received support from family, particularly fathers. Conversely, many reported that at least one or more of their parents was not supportive. There were accounts of support from faculty advisors at the university, and support from people and supervisors in the workplace. While most experienced some degree of gender bias and/or discrimination either in school or at work, the vast majority said that they would choose career an automotive career path again.