DIVERSE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH A CAMPUS WOMEN'S CENTER: RE-IMAGINGING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

Women's and gender equity centers (abbreviated as women's centers) were first established in U.S. universities in the 1960s and currently number in the multiple hundreds across all types of higher education institutions in the country. Women's centers play a vital role in providing high impact, culturally responsive student engagement; however, research on women's centers is often informal and infrequent, leading to a dearth of knowledge about the efficacy of student engagement efforts. Women's centers, and the feminist movement from which they arose, have historically excluded the voices and experiences of women of color and other marginalized identities. While centers are evolving to serve and attract a more diverse student population, there is little research on how students experience these spaces, particularly students from systemically marginalized background and identities. Utilizing feminist research theory, Black feminist thought, and intersectionality as framework, I conducted a qualitative study to learn about the experiences of fourteen students from diverse backgrounds who were highly engaged with one campus women's center. Findings revealed that participants' identities impacted and informed the ways they experienced feelings of belonging and exclusion during their women's center engagement. Participants also reported myriad developmental benefits received from their engagement. Recommendations for policy and practice are presented to make the women's center more culturally responsive and structurally supportive of a diverse student population. Implications for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: women's and gender centers, feminist theory, Black feminist thought, intersectionality, diverse student population, culturally responsive student engagement

Dedication

To my mother, Karen, and my grandparents, Sara and Bill, thank you for instilling in me a love of learning, and a drive to leave the world a little better than I found it. I would not be who I am without your love.

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First, thank you to the individuals who participated in my study and trusted me with their stories and experiences. I am so grateful for all you shared with me, and I hope that you see yourselves authentically reflected in these pages.

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Chapter I

Introduction and Rationale

Background

Student engagement is a vital part of student retention and persistence to graduation. Effective student engagement includes high-quality out of classroom experiences that increase students' sense of belonging as well as providing learning opportunities which benefit their development and maturation while also preparing them for life after graduation (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1993; Kuh, 1995; Tinto; 2000). The U.S. college student population is more diverse than ever before and it is the responsibility of higher education institutions (HEIs) to provide culturally responsive engagement opportunities that reflect the diverse populations these institutions are serving (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Berger & Milem, 1999; Cabrera et al., 1999; Chang et al., 2006; Harper & Antonio, 2008; Harper & Quaye, 2015; Museus et al., 2020; Pendakur et al., 2020; Quaye, 2008). Campus women's centers play a vital role in providing engagement, support, and resources for students at institutions across the country, and have a responsibility to do so in a culturally responsive way.

Women's and gender equity centers (abbreviated as women's centers) were first established in U.S. universities in the 1960s and currently number in the multiple hundreds across all types of higher education institutions in the country (Goettsch, et al., 2019; Marine, 2011). Although the population of women in higher education has more than doubled in the last four decades (United States General Accounting Office, 2000), the need for these centers has not dissipated (Bethman et al., 2019; Byrne, 2011; Kasper, 2004; Marine, 2011; Vlasnik, 2011; Vlasnik, 2016). According to Goettsch et al. (2015) the "legacy of gender inequity continues to shape the college experience, despite women now being the numerical majority on most

campuses" (p. 489). Many of the same issues that spurred the founding of women's centers continue to be barriers for current students. Ongoing problems such as sexual violence, sexual harassment, chilly classroom climates (particularly in the STEM fields), and unequal pay persist (Goettsch et al., 2019). In addition to tackling these enduring issues, today's women's centers also provide programming and education around leadership, service, body positivity/body image, healthy masculinities, and a number of other growing topics geared to serve the diverse needs of our student populations (Bickford, 2019). The breadth and depth of services and programs that women's centers are providing students and other constituents has grown exponentially since their inception (Bickford, 2019; Vlasnik, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

Women's centers play a vital role in providing high impact, culturally responsive student engagement; however, research on women's centers is often informal and infrequent, leading to a dearth of knowledge about the efficacy of student engagement efforts (Carter et al., 2019; Kasper, 2004). Kasper (2004) explained that women's centers often measure the success of their programming by participation numbers (p. 191). While participation is certainly important, those numbers do not give any indication to how students experienced a program or event. Carter et al. (2019) affirmed the importance of evaluation for women's centers that is "truly comprehensive" and can be used to "develop future plans aligned with both the centers' missions and the missions and strategic plans of the institution within which they are situated" (p. 109). Research that seeks to understand students' experiences with the women's center would be one important piece of such assessment, but is quite scarce (Bonebright et al., 2012; Dela Peña, 2009; Murray & Vlasnik, 2015; Murray et al., 2014; Salsbury and MillerMacPhee, 2019).

Women's centers, and the feminist movement from which they arose, have historically excluded the voices and experiences of women of color and other marginalized identities (Collins, 2009). Many women's centers were established during the second wave of the feminist movement and have historically been perceived as spaces for White, straight, cisgender women (Bethman et al., 2019; Bonebright et al., 2012; Vlasnik, 2016). While centers are evolving to serve and attract a more diverse student population, there is little research on how students experience these spaces, particularly students of systemically marginalized background and identities (Bonebright et al., 2012; Dela Peña, 2009; Murray & Vlasnik, 2015; Murray et al., 2014; Salsbury & MillerMacPhee, 2019). It imperative that centers prioritize the voices and experiences of students from diverse backgrounds. Unfortunately, women's center research focused on diverse students' experiences is almost nonexistent (Salsbury and MillerMacPhee, 2019). Understanding systemically marginalized students' experiences with the women's center can equip staff to better evaluate how effectively they are serving the needs of a diverse student body.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to give space and voice to marginalized students' experiences with the women's center. This study will focus on the voices of students that are highly engaged with the women's center as mentors or interns. Historically, the voices of the marginalized have been excluded from the U.S. feminist movement, which primarily privileged the experiences of White, cisgender, heterosexual women (Collins, 2009). While feminism has more emphasis on intersectionality presently, there is still a lot of work to be done to amplify the voices of marginalized individuals. As women's centers grew out of the feminist movement, they also have a responsibility to do this work. Women's centers have a responsibility to provide culturally

responsive student engagement opportunities that represent and celebrate a diverse student population. Understanding how minority students experience the women's center is an important step in ensuring high quality student engagement. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do students from systemically marginalized identities and backgrounds decide to commit to high engagement with the women's center?
2. How do students from systemically marginalized identities and backgrounds who are highly engaged with the women's center describe their experiences?
3. How do these students see their engagement with the women's center contributing to their development?

Delimitations

This study is delimited to one campus-based women's center. It is further delimited to the experiences of students who identify as belonging to marginalized backgrounds and identities and have participated in the women's center as an intern or mentor for at least one year. As a qualitative research study my research is future delimited by the small number of participants. Qualitative research is not intended to be generalizable, but with thick, rich description readers can discern if findings are applicable to other sites. Lastly, participation in this study is voluntary, and individuals may volunteer because of specific experiences they have—whether positive or negative. Even with these delimitations this research will be a valuable contribution towards an under-researched area of study.

Limitations

The breadth and scope of this study are limited to one research site and fourteen participants' experiences. Although qualitative research is not meant to be generalizable, I hope this study inspires other women's centers to explore their own sites in similar ways. This study is

also limited to alumni who engaged with the center as a mentor or intern for at least one year. Students who have other types of roles and experiences with the women's center can still provide valuable data and would be an important population to include in future research. The data and results of the study are limited by how willing my participants were to share with me their authentic and honest experiences. And lastly, the study is limited by my own researcher bias. I have worked in women's centers for over a decade and have my own experiences and opinions at those sites. I have made efforts to limit my bias by engaging in regular journaling and self-reflection through the study.

Significance of the Study

Higher education institutions have a responsibility to the students they serve to provide high quality culturally responsive engagement opportunities that can give a diverse student population the sense of belonging so vital to retention and persistence to graduation. Campus-based women's centers have the same responsibility but have almost no available literature documenting students' experiences engaging with those centers. This study will begin to fill in the large gap in this area of study, and hopefully inspire other institutions to engage in similar types of research.

Organization of the Capstone Proposal

Chapter two provides an explanation of the conceptual framework of the study, feminist research theory, as well as an overview of the relevant literature. Chapter three outlines the study's methodology. Chapter four provides an analysis of the data gathered and is organized by major themes. Chapter five answers the research questions based on the data and provides recommendations for policy and practice and implications for future research.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

In the literature review I provide an overview of the conceptual framework of my study, including feminist research theory, Black feminist thought, and intersectionality. Following that I review the relevant literature including student engagement, culturally responsive student engagement, and situate the role of women's centers in providing culturally responsive student engagement opportunities.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of a research study guides the philosophical, epistemological, methodological, and analytical decisions of a researcher (Adom et al., 2018). This structure is a necessary component of quality research and helps ensure research trustworthiness (Hays & Singh, 2012). The research questions I am exploring in my study are:

1. How do students from systemically marginalized identities and backgrounds decide to commit to high engagement with the women's center?
2. How do students from systemically marginalized identities and backgrounds who are highly engaged with the women's center describe their experiences?
3. How do these students see their engagement with the women's center contributing to their development?

My chosen conceptual framework provides vital structure to how my study explores these questions.

My conceptual framework incorporates feminist research theory and Black feminist thought. I provide a brief history of the U.S. feminist movement and feminist pedagogy to give

context on the emersion of feminist research theory and campus women's centers. Black feminist thought evolved in response to the historical exclusion of women of color from feminist research. Black feminist thought and intersectionality contextualize my understanding of feminist research theory and how I see it guiding my methodological choices. Following this, I explore other relevant literature related to student engagement with women's centers.

Feminism and Feminist Pedagogy in Higher Education

Women's centers grew out of the U.S. feminist movement and the inclusion of feminist pedagogy and women's and gender studies in higher education. This section provides some historical context to help situate the emersion of women's centers within the history of the feminist movement and the evolution of feminist research theory in academia. Feminism is a term that has different meanings for people depending on their backgrounds, identities, and experiences. Within the United States, three waves of feminism are generally outlined over the last century, however these waves are critiqued for privileging the needs and experiences of White women (Collins, 2009; Lorber, 2012). The first wave took place in the late 19th century and early 20th century and focused on women gaining the right to vote, and other personhood rights such as owning property. The second wave began around the 1960s and focused on women gaining control of their bodies, reproductive rights, equality in the workplace, and equality in the home. While White women generally defined and controlled first and second wave feminism, third wave feminism made an effort to be more inclusive. Third wave feminism, which was first recognized and theorized by scholars in the 1990s, is "built on multiracial/multiethnic feminism, standpoint feminism, and postmodern feminism" (Lorber, 2012, p. 305). Third wave feminism does not hinge on the belief that women share common experiences simply because of their identity as women. Although the basic premise of feminism

began with the belief that women deserved equal treatment with men, feminism has been expanded to focus on gender inequality in relation to other types of oppression and ways to fight various oppressions simultaneously.

Feminist pedagogy in the United States grew out of the second wave of the feminist movement in the late 1960s and 1970s (Lorber, 2012, p. 3). The values of the second wave are what Lorber (2012) refers to as liberal feminism, which focused on workplace and household equality and reproductive justice, among other issues (p. 28). Feminist pedagogy found its origins in the consciousness-raising groups that formed during the second wave (Weiler, 1991). These consciousness-raising groups, “began to form more or less spontaneously in northeastern and western U.S. cities in late 1967 among White women who had been active in the civil rights and new left movements” (Weiler, 1991, p. 456). From these groups, the feminist movement birthed an academic discourse that eventually found a place for itself in higher education. Bondy et al. (2015) explained how the feminist movement of the 1970s gave “feminist scholars” the opportunity to “[establish] themselves in universities” where, “feminist pedagogy […] emerged as way for educators to ‘walk the talk,’ that is, to bring their philosophical, political, and—to use bell hooks’ term—gender justice ideals to the classroom” (p. 2). Feminist pedagogy began as the academic extension of second wave feminism and the rallying cry that *the personal is political*.

The feminist movement and feminist pedagogy both affirm the value of personal experience and its political implications. The personal experiences of women were historically undervalued or denied, and many of the issues that feminists were focused on (such as interpersonal violence) were historically seen as personal or family matters on which the law should not encroach. Thus, the feminist focus on personal experiences being political issues was especially radical. Weiler (1991) described the value of experience within the early

consciousness-raising groups which, "focused on the discussion of shared experiences of sexuality, work, family, and participation in the male-dominated left political movement. Consciousness raising focused on collective political change rather than on individual therapy" (p. 456-7). This emphasis on experience has continued to be an important component of feminist pedagogy. Jackson (1997) affirmed its value in feminist pedagogy saying, "Feminist theories of education centralize the experiential, disputing the boundaries which can often make border crossings between theory and practice so difficult" (p. 465). Although feminist pedagogies can differ widely in their values and practices, experiential knowledge is an important aspect of feminist educational environments.

Mohanty (1990) asserted that experiential knowledge is, "a crucial form of empowerment for students—a way for them to enter the classroom as speaking subjects" (p. 193). Experiential knowledge is an important part of learning because the oppressive structures that govern our lived experiences are inextricable from the classroom itself (hooks, 1994). Hooks (1994) affirmed, "racism, sexism, and class elitism shape the structure of classrooms, creating a lived reality of insider versus outside that is predetermined, often in place before any class discussion begins" (p. 83). Experiential learning is a central component of feminist educational spaces, both in classrooms and beyond, and is central to the missions of many women's centers.

Intersectionality is a necessary component of feminist pedagogy that was originally absent in the second wave feminist movement but has since been recognized by Black feminist scholars (Crenshaw, 1987, 1991; Collins, 2009). Bondy et al. (2015) defined intersectionality within feminist pedagogy as, "requir[ing] the use of multiple categories of analysis, including purposeful reflection on how those categories intersect, work in conjunction, or grind against one another uneasily" (p. 3). Within feminist pedagogy, intersectionality has been "embraced" as a

"central category of analysis" (Wånggren & Sellberg, 2012, p. 544). Wånggren and Sellberg (2012) stated, "feminist academics have been acutely aware of the limitations of gender as a single analytical category" (p. 544). They go on to assert, "If feminism includes an intersectional and dissensual perspective, keeping itself aware of the various points of entry into the various kinds of oppression, a feminist classroom should ideally also become just that" (Wånggren & Sellberg, 2012, p. 545). Intersectionality is a vital part of any feminist analysis, and particularly with my choice of research site being a women's center. The U.S. feminist movement has historically privileged the experiences of White, straight, cisgender women, and in conjunction campus-based women's centers have also been viewed as spaces for that dominant group (Bickford, 2019; Collins, 2009). Given feminism's history of excluding the voices of women of color, LGBTQ+ folks, and other marginalized minorities, it is imperative that intersectionality be central to my analysis to give space to those voices that have been historically invisibilized.

Feminist Research Theory

Feminist research theory (FRT) is the natural progression of feminist pedagogy within the academy. Like the feminist movement, this research grew out of the need to center the voices of those that were left out of traditionally male-centered positivist research (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012). FRT pushes back against the positivist belief that a researcher can be fully objective or unbiased, or that there is one singular Truth to uncover (Hays & Singh, 2012; Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012). Instead, a feminist researcher understands that their positionality is an active component of their study, and that self-reflexivity is an ongoing necessity during the research process. Transformative research, like FRT, understands that there are multiple, valid truths to be learned, and that those truths can contradict one another (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Feminist research theory, much like the feminist movement, originally promoted a more

monolithic conceptualization of women, assuming a shared experience based solely on gender. Now more feminist researchers have an intersectional understanding that recognizes that unique experiences of an individual across numerous areas of one's identity (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012). Black feminist thought is an extension of feminist research that has pushed FRT towards an intersectional lens that can better amplify the voices of individuals that feminism has historically left out (Clemons, 2019; Collins, 2009).

Black Feminist Thought

Feminist research theory has historically excluded the voices of women of color and Black feminist thought (BFT) evolved to make space for those voices (Collins, 2009; Clemons, 2019). Although BFT has grown out of the diverse perspectives of many different Black women writers and thinkers, Collins (2009) coalesced BFT into a critical social theory and identified the distinguishing features that make BFT unique. Black feminist thought endorsed the value of lived experience in meaning making, recognized the importance of dialogue to create knowledge, promoted an ethic of caring and the ethics of personal accountability (Collins, 2009; Clemons, 2019). As with the feminist slogan *the personal is political*, BFT recognizes that lived experiences inform our understandings of the world and are vital research data. A Black feminist epistemology recognizes the qualitative research process as a dialogue. The interviewer and interviewee are both subjects, not subject and object, and the interview is a meaning making process that takes place between both parties. BFT also adopts an ethic of care which prioritizes the needs and comfort of the research subject. Lastly, BFT encourages personal accountability for the researcher through self-reflexivity, reminding one to reflect on their privileges and positionality throughout the research process (Collins, 2009; Clemons, 2019).

Feminist research theory and Black feminist thought comprise the conceptual framework of my research study and inform my methodology and philosophy as a researcher. Intersectionality is a vital component of these theoretical backgrounds and stems from the writings of women of color throughout history who recognized their unique positionality across multiple oppressed identities (Anzaldúa, 1987; Combahee River Collective, 2006; Cooper, 1892; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris & Patton, 2019; Collins 2009; Collins; 2019, Collins & Bilge, 2020; Wells-Barnett, 1995). Intersectionality has also had a complicated history in academia and has not always been applied in a liberatory way (Haynes et al., 2020; Museus & Griffin, 2011; Strayhorn, 2017). In the next section I discuss a brief history of the term and how I apply it to my research.

Intersectionality

History of the term

Intersectionality as a concept has a long history in the rhetoric of Black, indigenous, and women of color writers, thinkers, and activists (Anzaldúa, 1987; Combahee River Collective 2006; Cooper, 1892; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Harris & Patton, 2019; Collins 2009; Collins; 2019, Collins & Bilge, 2020; Lorde, 2006; Wells-Barnett, 1995). Academics have historically credited Crenshaw (1989) with "coining" the term intersectionality (Collins, 2019). Crenshaw (1989, 1991), a legal scholar, adopted the term intersectionality to identify the specific experiences of African American women who are uniquely affected by both racism and sexism. Crenshaw (1989) used intersectionality to explain how the single category axis traditionally used in anti-discrimination legal cases erased the experiences of Black women whose "intersectional experience[s] [are] greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (p. 140). She pointed out that much discrimination legal doctrine privileged the experiences of White women in sexism cases,

and the experiences of Black men in racism cases—not recognizing that those experiences only represented a subset of the populations affected by racism and sexism.

While Crenshaw (1989, 1991) may have introduced academia to the concept of intersectionality, its essence existed in the writings and teachings of Black feminists, Civil Rights leaders, and other women of color intellectuals for many decades prior (Anzaldúa, 1987; Combahee River Collective 2006; Cooper, 1892; Harris & Patton, 2019: Wells-Barnett, 1995). Cooper (1892) critiqued the Black leaders of the Civil Rights movement nearly 100 years prior to Crenshaw (1987) for ignoring the voices and experiences of Black women. Black women were being left out of the Civil Rights conversation and their experiences were often an afterthought when it came Civil Rights issues. Cooper (1892) asserted, "Only the Black Woman can say, when and where I enter [...] then and there the whole Negro race enters with me" (p. 31). Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1995), a women's suffrage activist, critiqued both the White women leaders of the women's suffrage movement for their racism and the Black male leaders of the Civil Rights movement for their sexism. Anzaldúa (1987) wrote about the borderlands she experienced both physically and psychologically at the intersections of the different cultures and identities which existed within and around her. And the Combahee River Collective (2006) stated, "we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see […] that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (p. 412). These and other writers and thinkers knew that intersectionality, by whatever name, was necessary for contextualizing the lived experiences of women of color and other marginalized individuals. These scholars and intellectuals laid the groundwork for Crenshaw (1987, 1991), and intersectionality has gone on to be explored in nearly every discipline imaginable, with some adaptations remaining truer to the original intent of the term than others (Harris & Patton, 2019).

Harris and Patton (2019) critiqued the misappropriation of intersectionality in higher education research. The authors reviewed ninety-seven articles that used the term and found that over half of the articles did not cite any women of color in connection to intersectionality. In addition, many of the articles described intersectionality on the micro-level without acknowledging the systemic power structures that perpetuate domination and oppression. These choices depoliticize intersectionality, turning it into a buzzword that can be invoked while ignoring the, "liberatory praxis, […] social movements, scholarly contributions, and the women of color whose lives are fundamentally responsible for articulating intersectionality" (Harris & Patton, 2019, p. 366). The interdisciplinary application of intersectionality can be powerful, but only if scholars use the concept in ways that stay true to the liberatory and political origins of the term.

Defining Intersectionality

Collins (2009) defined intersectionality as the ways that one's identities (including, but not limited to, race, gender, and sexuality) intersect to create unique experiences. She affirmed that "oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type" (Collins, 2009, p. 21). While intersectionality refers to the types of oppressions one experiences, Collins explains that the matrix of domination refers to "how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized" (Collins, 2009, p. 21). According to Collins (2009), within society, domination uses differences that are ascribed social meaning to reinforce the power structure of one group over another. A matrix of domination will include various forms of oppression based on the individual but always contain four "interrelated domains of power, namely, the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains" (Collins, 2009, p. 294). Similar to the domains of power explained by Collins (2009), Crenshaw (1991) presented three areas of intersectionality:

structural, political, and representational. Both theorists contextualized intersectionality by expanding beyond one's individual identities to explain how those identities are situated within oppressive structures. In my research I consider the intersecting identities of the subjects in terms of how their identities inform their experiences with the women's center and how their experiences are situated within the oppressive structures that shape our world.

Intersectionality in Higher Education Research

Higher education research has traditionally relied on single-axis analyses to understand students' experiences (Haynes et al., 2020; Museus & Griffin, 2011; Strayhorn, 2017). Research that relies on a single identification factor cannot fully capture the experiences of students and can lead researchers to make inaccurate conclusions that also leave students without the resources they need to thrive. Intersectional research recognizes the unique positionality of an individual and understands that a person's identities cannot be disconnected from one another. Intersectional frameworks produce research that more accurately reflects the diversity of the populations being studied while also giving voice to the experiences of the most marginalized individuals (Museus & Griffin, 2011). In addition, intersectional frameworks lead to a fuller understanding of inequality, particularly how individuals' converging identities create unique experiences (Museus & Griffin, 2011).

Intersectionality has been a missing element of much higher education research that informs our understandings of how students experience college. Astin's (1984) inputs, experiences, outcomes (IEO) model is considered a flagship model to understand college impact. However, this and other models fail to recognize that students' environments and experiences are not power neutral. Duran et al. (2022) explained that "environments and experiences are always shaped by inequitable distributions of power. These environments and experiences are designed

to oppress minoritized populations, especially those with multiple minoritized identities" (p. 154). Astin's (1984) IEO model is most useful when considered through an intersectional lens.

Jones and McEwen (2000) multiple dimensions of identity model offers necessary complexity to the inputs and experiences of Astin's (1984) IEO model. The multiple dimensions of identity model incorporates an intersectional understanding of identity, affirming that college students' identity dimensions "cannot be fully understood in isolation" (Abes et al., 2007, p. 3). In addition, the model includes other aspects that make up an individual such as attributes and characteristics, personal experiences, "sociocultural conditions" and family (Abes, et al., 2007, p. 3). Abes et al. (2007) added another layer to this model by incorporating the concept of a filter to describe how individuals make meaning of their own identities. An individual's meaning-making capacity changes how outside influences impact one's understanding of their identity. This revised model of multiple identity dimensions is necessary contextualization to the inputs, experiences, and outcomes model. This complicates Astin's (1984) IEO model but ultimately can provide higher quality data to understand diverse students' experiences more fully, particularly the experiences of our most marginalized students. As a vital component of feminist research theory and Black feminist thought, intersectionality informs my methodology and guides the focus of my study.

Relevant Literature

Introduction

Student engagement literature informs my contextualization of campus-based women's centers in higher education institutions. In this section I explain my chosen definition of student engagement and a brief description of its characteristics. Following this I explain some of the documented outcomes of student engagement and the importance of providing culturally

responsive engagement opportunities that reflect the diversity of student populations. Next, I provide a brief history of women's centers and explain their important role in providing high-impact culturally responsive student engagement experiences and how my study informs those efforts.

Student Engagement

There is no universally agreed upon definition of student engagement, although researchers agree that it is an important part of persistence to graduation (Astin, 1993; Cress et al., 2011; Kezar, 2007; Kuh, 1993, 1995, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2015; Hausmann et al., 2007; McShay, 2017; Tinto, 2000). Some researchers put the responsibility for engagement on students, while others define student engagement by the efforts put forth by institutions. I utilize a definition of student engagement that considers both the efforts of individual students as well as those of the institution. Kuh (2009) defines student engagement as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (p. 683). This definition both acknowledges the importance of institutions taking responsibility for their part in engaging students while also recognizing students' autonomy in choosing when and how they engage during their college years.

Characteristics of Student Engagement

The main characteristics of student engagement are institutional effort, and student time and effort (Kuh, 2009). Given this, I will briefly explore each of these characteristics to better explain how they interact. I will begin with institutional efforts, because without these students would have nothing into which they could put their time and effort.

Institutional Efforts

Institutional efforts refer to the opportunities and structures that higher education institutions (HEIs) offer to encourage student engagement (Kuh 1993, 1995, 2009). Although HEIs are ranked and rated using a variety of metrics, student engagement is not used as a primary means of measuring institutional impacts. In reviewing the results from the Documenting Effective Educational Practices (DEEP) project Pike and Kuh (2005) noted that universities with similar policies and practices leading to higher levels of student engagement had a range of Carnegie classifications. This meant that some of the metrics normally associated with student engagement (school size, selectivity, etc.) were not wholly accurate predictors of effective student engagement for the institutions surveyed in the DEEP project. Based on these findings, Pike and Kuh (2005) created a typology of institutions based on student engagement.

Utilizing results from the NSSE survey (the National Survey of Student Engagement), Pike and Kuh (2005) organized HEIs into seven different types of engagement institutions. These types are: Diverse, but personally fragmented; Homogenous and interpersonally cohesive; Intellectually stimulating; Interpersonally supportive; High-tech, low-touch; Academically challenging and supportive; and Collaborative. Based on my knowledge, my research site institution would be categorized as intellectually stimulating. Intellectually stimulating institutions are characterized as having high levels of faculty engagement, higher-order thinking, and collaborative learning with peers (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Pike and Kuh (2005) affirmed, however, that there was still a relationship between engagement types and Carnegie classifications in their findings. They recommended utilizing these seven typologies alongside Carnegie classifications to fully understand institutional student engagement.

The DEEP project utilized by Pike and Kuh (2005) also informed Kezar's (2007) research on HEI's campus ethos. Kezar (2007) described ethos as "the fundamental character or

spirit of a culture" and explained that an institution's campus ethos generally has to do with themes like: "family, community, caring, student-centeredness, civic leadership, and responsibility" (Kezar, 2007, p. 13-14). Kezar (2007) researched how a campus ethos can be used to effectively foster student engagement. Successful implementation of a campus ethos that encourages student engagement requires faculty and staff to work collaboratively with students on institutional decisions. Kuh (1995) also highlighted institutional ethos as an important area of student engagement that led to positive student change. Institutions with strong ethos and high levels of engagement have close working relationships between faculty and students inside and outside the classroom.

Student Time & Effort

Students' time and effort towards engagement is a vital part of retention and persistence to graduation (Kuh, 1993; 1995; Harper & Antonio, 2008; Harper & Quaye, 2015; Tinto, 2000). Berger and Milem (1999) affirmed that students who get engaged early on during their first year of college feel more supported by their institutions and their peers and ultimately have higher rates of persistence. Kuh (1995) definitively stated, "the more time and energy students expend in educationally purposeful activities, the more they benefit" (p. 125). Fredericks, et al. (2004) identify three dimensions of student engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (p. 60). Behavioral engagement refers to a student's actions, and includes attending classes, social activities, and extracurricular opportunities. Students' positive and negative feelings about their teachers, courses, social groups, and school are all part of emotional engagement. Lastly, students who are cognitively engaged are invested in their learning, and willing to go above and beyond for academic achievement. These dimensions are intrinsically

linked but are useful in considering the aspects that go into student engagement and evaluating the spectrum of actions each dimension entails.

Tinto's (1987) theory of college student departure emphasizes the responsibility of the student to integrate into the college environment in part by disconnecting from their home environments. This model not only de-emphasizes the institutions' role in persistence, but also implies that students' ties to their pre-college communities have a negative effect on their persistence to graduation. Tierney (1999) critiqued this theory, particularly for students from minority backgrounds. Asserting that Tinto's (1987) theory requires "cultural suicide" for minority students, Tierney (1999) argued that students need "cultural integrity" to be successful in higher education. Cultural integrity recognizes a student's cultural background as essential to academic success. Rather than detrimental, students' ties to communities, family, and friends are important components that support students' college adjustment (Tierney, 1999; Cabrera et al., 1999). In addition, cultural integrity places responsibility on institutions to create a diverse and adaptable campus culture where all students are able to celebrate and affirm their cultural identities. Having culturally responsive engagement opportunities helps students foster that critical sense of belonging that is so vital for success. Research shows that student engagement can lead to numerous positive outcomes in addition to persistence to graduation.

Student Engagement Outcomes

Although many students think of the most important outcome from college as being improved career opportunities and earning potential, research points to numerous less tangible, but still impactful, additional benefits of higher education (Astin, 1993; Berger & Milem, 1999; Cress et al., 2001; Kuh, 1993; Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 2000). Student experiences outside of the classroom, which Kuh (1995) refers to as "the other curriculum" (p. 124), are equally important

to student growth and success in higher education. Kuh (1995) outlines five domains in which students experience positive change through out-of-classroom engagement: interpersonal competence, practical competence, cognitive complexity, knowledge and academic skills, and humanitarianism. These outcome domains were identified in seven areas of engagement: leadership responsibilities, peer interaction, academic activities, faculty contact, work, travel, and institutional ethos. Engagement in cocurricular activities give students the opportunity to learn leadership and problem-solving skills vital for transitioning to a career; and such activities are a better predictor of workplace success than grades (Kuh, 1995). Researchers are clear that the learning that takes place outside of the classroom is just as important to student development and should be considered an equally necessary part of the college student experience (Kuh, 1993; 1995; Harper & Antonio, 2008; Harper & Quaye, 2015; Tinto, 2000).

Kuh (1995) noted that leadership roles, internships, and work experience were the largest contributors to students' career-related skills development. Similar evidence was identified by Bonebright et al. (2012) during their evaluation of leadership development programming at the University of Minnesota Women's Center. Bonebright et al. (2012) evaluated engagement and learning from the student perspective of leadership development programming created by the University of Minnesota Women's Center in collaboration with other university offices. The authors cited unpublished data from a graduate student who conducted individual interviews with 25 participants from their long-running Women's Leadership Institute program. The participants spanned twelve years of programming and the positive outcomes included "developing increased self-confidence as a leader, building professional networks, and learning from others' experiences" (Bonebright et al., 2012, p. 90). There is a dearth of research on student experiences

in women's centers, but evidence like this shows the potential for positive impacts and the importance of exploring this under-researched area.

Not only are out of classroom experiences necessary for student success, but their timeliness is also key. Researchers emphasize that getting students engaged during their first year of college is vital for retention and persistence to graduation. Many institutions provide some type of optional first-year experience program for students, but scholars suggest that first-year engagement programs should be a requirement for all incoming students (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Berger & Milem, 1999; Tinto 2000). Berger & Milem (1999) found that students who are not involved in student engagement opportunities early in the fall semester tend to stay uninvolved for the entire school year. It is imperative that HEIs create engagement opportunities that appeal to a diverse population to get students engaged early and keep them engaged.

Culturally Responsive Student Engagement

Student engagement is an important aspect of the support needed for persistence to graduation, and to obtain the skills needed for success in a future career (Astin, 1993; Berger & Milem, 1999; Cress et al., 2001; Kuh, 1993; Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 2000). Berger and Milem (1999) noted that the students most likely to persist are those who share the "dominant values, norms, and established patterns of behavior that are already in existence on campus" (p. 661). Given this, minority students may participate in less engagement opportunities, if they feel that those opportunities are not reflective of their own values and interests. Researchers emphasized the need for institutions to create engagement opportunities that align with the diverse cultural backgrounds of the student body (Harper & Antonio, 2008; Harper & Quaye, 2015; Keels & Velez, 2020; Museus et al., 2020; Pendakur et al., 2020; Stuber, 2009). Rather than expecting

students to adapt to the homogenous culture of an institution, institutions need to diversify their own campus culture and provide forms of engagement that value and celebrate students from systemically marginalized identities and backgrounds.

In addition to the common challenges of college, marginalized student populations have additional barriers to their persistence to graduation. Students from marginalized backgrounds experience systemic oppression that complicates their ability to become meaningfully engaged in campus culture. These students may also struggle to find faculty, staff, and peers that look like them or share their experiences. Simply having a diverse student body on campus is not enough to make a campus less racist or enough to educate students, faculty, and staff about race and racism (Chang et al., 2006). Rather, cross-racial interactions require certain conditions to have beneficial outcomes. An ideal condition is to have already established an anti-racist culture and climate on campus (Chang et al., 2006). Fostering a culturally responsive campus environment requires a lot of intentional effort and interoffice collaboration at every level of the institution.

A culturally responsive campus is one that prioritizes inclusion and equity at every level, from student recruitment through graduation and alumni events, in addition to supporting and educating faculty and staff. Mauro and Mazaris (2016) referred to the practice of "capacity building" in which "staff and faculty competence around diversity and inclusion is considered a core institutional value and a key indicator of success across departments and disciplines" (p. 4). The authors asserted the need for a "fundamental paradigm shift" in higher education from a focus on equality to equity (Mauro and Mazaris, 2016, p. 6). They define equity as acknowledging "unequal access to full participation in the campus community, thus seeking acknowledgment and redress of historical barriers and creating opportunities for historically underserved groups to engage in meaningful and culturally relevant ways" (Mauro and Mazaris,

2016, p. 6). Shifting HEI policies and practices to foster equity and inclusion requires numerous systemic changes. One relatively easy change is to start having more collaboration across offices, which encourages and fosters DEI competencies for staff at every level.

A traditional HEI structure often silos staff with specific DEI knowledge and skills to one office dedicated to the impossible tasks of accomplishing all reforms related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This structure places the onus of responsibility on a small number of staff and decentralizes any DEI related initiatives so they are inconsistently enacted across campus. A capacity building model as imagined by Mauro and Mazaris (2016) would place the onus of responsibility on each faculty and staff member to have a certain level of cultural humility and knowledge related to DEI, rather than expecting a small number of staff in one office to fulfill the DEI related needs of the whole campus. This gives DEI staff the opportunity use their energies in other areas, such as inter-office collaborations. Just like other HEI offices, this would apply to the staff in women's centers.

The experiences of marginalized students in women's centers are woe-fully under-researched, one of the few examples comes from Salsbury and MillerMacPhee (2019). Salsbury and MillerMacPhee (2019) conducted informal focus groups with students of color to assess their perception of a women's center's programs and resources. The student feedback in the focus groups yielded five main themes which the authors identify as important for making the women's center a more welcoming and affirming space for non-white students. These themes were the use of, and type of, feminism employed in the women's center, the visibility of the center physically on campus as well as in terms of participating in multicultural events, representation of non-white women in the staff and décor of the center, lack of intersectionality in center programming, and a need for more interaction between center staff and multicultural

student organizations. The authors documented their efforts to take this feedback into account and the changes made to the center to make it more welcoming and inclusive of non-white students. These focus groups provided valuable insight into the impact and importance of student experiences in women's center work. Even in this informal research, the potential positive impacts of documenting and responding to student's experiences are clear. My research will begin to fill in this lacuna and provide a deeper understanding of how women's centers can meet the needs of students from systemically marginalized backgrounds and identities and make centers a more welcoming and inclusive space for all students.

Campus Based Women's Centers

Women's centers have existed on college and university campuses since the 1960s, with large numbers of centers opening in the 1970s and 1980s (Goettsch et al., 2019; Marine, 2011). Women's centers were established to help bring about equity to institutions that were originally created to serve the needs of men, specifically white, heterosexual, cisgender men (Bickford, 2019; Goettsch et al., 2015). Women's centers in higher education institutions often have a close relationship with the institution's women's studies program and some were established in conjunction with the academic discipline (Byrne, 2000). Women's centers are sometimes viewed as the activist arm or praxis of the academic theories of women's studies and feminist pedagogy. This connection is further solidified through the National Women's Studies Association, which continues to be the professional organization for women's centers' administrators.

While women's centers were originally conceived to primarily serve the needs of white, straight, cisgender women, these centers have evolved and strive to serve a diverse group of individuals who are impacted by gender-based oppression (Bethman et al., 2019; Bonebright et al., 2012). The evolution of women's centers is partly evident in the changing names of some

centers. Some examples of centers whose names have been changed or expanded to reflect the population they serve include: the Gender Equity Resource Center at UC–Berkeley, The Women's and Gender Resource Center at Dickinson College, and The Center for Women, Gender & Sexuality at the University of Massachusetts–Dartmouth (Bickford, 2019). These name changes emphasize the diversifying populations of students that such centers are serving. While some names may change, the work women's centers continue to do is just as important and salient as it was half a century ago.

Why Women's Centers Still Matter

Women's centers continue to serve a vital role in advocacy and education on HEI campuses regarding gender-based discrimination and other social justice issues. Women have outnumbered men in higher education since the 1980s, however, many of the issues that women faced on campuses during that time continue to plague women today (Goettsch et al., 2019). Vlasnik (2011) noted that even though women outnumber men in higher education, "the 'quantity' of women in higher education is a different discussion than the 'quality' of their experiences" (p. 24). Women's centers enhance students' sense of belonging while continuing to tackle ongoing issues such as sexual harassment, gender-based and interpersonal violence, discrimination, and equal pay as well as more recent topics such as body image and body positivity, leadership opportunities, and efforts to provide intersectional programming that caters to the diversity of students in colleges and universities (Bickford, 2019; Marine, 2011).

The types of programming that women's centers currently provide are as diverse as the students they serve. Some women's centers have also recognized the importance of addressing cultural concepts of masculinity and have created programs to work with male students on fostering healthy notions of masculinity (Bickford, 2019). Other centers provide programming

focused on fostering leadership in students and other constituents (Bickford, 2019; Bonebright et al., 2012). In addition to programs focused on topics like leadership and masculinities, there is an effort to serve and highlight the needs of international women in the programming being offered by women's centers. A monthly International Women's Coffee Hour is hosted by the Ohio University Women's Center in co-sponsorship with the International Student and Faculty Services which gives students and other campus populations the opportunity to socialize in a welcoming environment and practice English (Bickford, 2019). These are just a few of the types of programs that women's centers are offering and the collaborations they are creating on campuses. Although women make up the majority of students in higher education, the unique challenges women face have not dissipated, and instead have grown increasingly complex as student populations have grown more diverse (Bickford, 2019). My research will aid women's centers in understanding how to best serve students and respond to their diverse needs.

Culturally Responsive Student Engagement in Women's Centers

Women's Centers in institutions across the country provide student engagement opportunities that align with the benefits outlined by Kuh (1995) and other scholars. Kuh (1995) asserted that out of classroom experiences "presented students with personal and social challenges, encouraged them to develop more complicated views on personal, academic, and other matters, and provided opportunities for synthesizing and integrating material presented in the formal academic program" (p. 146). Although the research on student engagement in women's centers is scant, the research that does exist documents the positive impact that these spaces have on students' sense of belonging, leadership skills, and persistence to graduation (Bonebright et al., 2012; Dela Peña, 2009; Murray & Vlasnik, 2015; Murray et al., 2014). However, almost no literature focuses on the experiences of students from systemically

marginalized backgrounds and identities within campus-based women's centers (Salsbury and MillerMacPhee, 2019).

Conclusion

As with any HEI office, women's centers have a duty to provide culturally responsive student engagement opportunities that appeal to the diverse population of students served (Harper & Quaye, 2015). U.S. feminism has a long history of privileging the experiences of White, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender women, and there is still a lot of work left to be done in dismantling that privilege in feminist spaces (Collins, 2009). Given the historic exclusion of women of color from feminism and feminist pedagogy (the origins of women's centers), it becomes even more vital for women's centers to document how marginalized students are or are not being served by their efforts (Bickford, 2019). Women's centers are one such feminist space that must interrogate their own role in recreating or dismantling oppressive structures. This research study will be one small step towards women's centers better understanding their own roles, through the voices of their most important population- the students they serve.

Chapter III

Methodology

Culturally responsive student engagement is vital to fostering students' sense of belonging, encouraging persistence to graduation. Women's centers play an important role in culturally responsive student engagement, but almost no research exists exploring marginalized students' experiences with campus-based women's centers. To help fill in this gap I performed a qualitative analysis of systemically marginalized students' experiences with a women's center in a mid-sized state institution in the Southeastern United States. Using semi-structured interviews and participant journaling this phenomenological study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do students from systemically marginalized identities and backgrounds decide to commit to high engagement with the women's center?
2. How do students from systemically marginalized identities and backgrounds who are highly engaged with the women's center describe their experiences?
3. How do these students see their engagement with the women's center contributing to their development?

In this chapter I briefly discuss feminist research methods, the conceptual framework which guided my study. Feminist research methods assert that acknowledging one's positionality as a researcher is a necessary step for performing feminist research, which I expand on below. Following that I describe my research site and participant selection. Next, I discuss my data collection procedures, including the interview process and participant journaling. I will address the trustworthiness of my study focusing on the credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability of the methods used. Then I discuss ethical considerations including those

identified in feminist research. Finally, I address my data analysis process and data management plan.

Methodology Rationale

I performed a phenomenological qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews and participant journaling. Qualitative research focuses on the quality of data rather than the quantity of data (Clemons, 2019; Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell 2015). It is not concerned with presenting findings that are generalizable, but rather with deeply understanding the phenomenon being studied. Clemons (2019) succinctly explained, "qualitative research is the quest to discover meaning within a particular narrative or story with particular concern to the nuances of the story to deepen meaning and understanding" (p. 1). Because I wished to study the phenomenon of students' experiences with the women's center, I chose to do a phenomenological study. Ohito (2019) explained that a phenomenological study explores, "the essence of things as presented to, perceived by, and experienced in consciousness" (p. 3). Phenomenology allowed me to deeply explore the experiences of my participants on an individual basis. This methodology also complements my feminist research theory conceptual framework, as feminist research emphasizes the value of lived experience and intersectionality, both of which I explored in depth utilizing phenomenology (Clemons, 2019; DeVault & Gross, 2012; Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012).

Positionality

Women's centers grew out of the feminist movement taking place during the 1960s/70s and many centers had or continue to have direct ties to the women's and gender studies departments at their institutions (Bickford, 2019). Given this history as well as my own background in women's and gender studies, feminist research methods informed and guided this

study. Although there is no one type of feminist research, a basic premise is the belief in social constructionism, or the understanding that there is no one singular truth, but that our realities are all constructed by our environments and lived experiences and thus many different truths can exist simultaneously (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012). Since its inception feminist research has challenged the positivist beliefs that researchers can be objective, and that research can uncover a single verifiable truth. Feminist research affirms that a researcher cannot be completely objective, and that a researcher's mere presence can impact findings. Because researchers cannot sever ourselves from our own experiences and biases, we have a responsibility to integrate self-reflexivity into our methods to interrogate how we might impact our study. In addition, feminist researchers have a responsibility to share their positionality with participants to help build trust and to acknowledge how those aspects of ourselves impact that relationship and space. This acknowledgement of my positionality is especially important in interviews with non-White participants (DeVault & Gross, 2012).

The U.S. feminist movement and feminist thought has historically excluded the voices and experiences of women of color (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012). Recognizing that, I drew guidance for my study from Black feminist thought (BFT) in an effort to not perpetuate the harm that White feminists have historically (and presently) enact(ed) on women of color. Collins (2000) is credited with the creation of Black feminist thought, and "identified four dimensions of an Afrocentric feminist epistemology: (a) lived experience as a criterion of meaning, (b) the use of dialogue to assess knowledge claims, (c) the ethic of caring, and (d) the ethics of personal accountability" (Clemons, 2019). BFT requires the researcher to be as focused on the process for conducting research as they are with the outcome. Recognizing the holistic humanity of each participant and caring for them as such is a necessary part of the research process for a feminist

theorist. BFT also asserts the importance of researchers acknowledging their positionality with participants to build trust and honor their gift of sharing their lived experiences.

Feminist research asserts that a researcher's positionality cannot be severed from their research, and thus must be acknowledged and engaged with through regular self-reflection (Clemons, 2019; DeVault & Gross, 2012; Hayes & Singh, 2012; Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012). I am a White, (mostly) able-bodied, fat, queer, cisgender woman from an upper-middle SES background. I recognize that my White privilege directly impacts my experiences and perceptions of the world around me. I have worked in higher education for over a decade and have experienced HEIs as an undergraduate student, graduate student, instructor, and staff administrator. I am also a staff member at the women's center utilized in my research. Having worked at this center for eight years, I feel very connected to the work being done there and I would like to believe that the center is doing good work and that students are having positive experiences. As the program coordinator for one of the women's center's mentoring programs, many of my research participants previously served as mentors in the program I manage. At the beginning of each interview, I acknowledged that participants may view me as an authority figure in my role as program coordinator. After that acknowledgement I made efforts to construct a separate relationship with participants as an interviewer and researcher.

Research Site

My research site was a women's center in a state university in the Southeastern United States. The university was founded in the early 1800s and only in the most recent past has the institution begun to acknowledge the generations of enslaved individuals that built, lived, and worked at the institution prior to 1865 (Martin et al., 2018). The university is classified as a PWI (predominantly white institution) and the reported racial demographics of the undergraduate

student population are as follows: 55.7% White, 16.2% Asian American, 6.74% Black or African American, and 6.73% Hispanic or Latino with the remainder of students identifying as multi-racial, indigenous, Pacific Islander, or unknown. Approximately 74% of both faculty and staff identify as White (Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, 2022). The Diversity Dashboard operated by the university only provides demographics for racial identities, so the statistics for other types of systemically marginalized identities that students, faculty, and staff may embody are unclear.

The women's center at this institution was founded in 1989 (nineteen years after the university officially went coeducational) and has fifteen full-time staff members as well as two to three paid graduate assistants and a handful of paid senior interns. Of the current fifteen staff members, six of those staff identify as people of color. The center offers counseling services in addition to housing eight programs which all offer student internship positions: these include two mentoring programs, a body inclusivity program, a social media and marketing program, a student-run online magazine, and a program focused on gender equity. Besides utilizing counseling services, the two main ways that students commit to high engagement with the women's center are as an intern or a mentor. In addition to these roles, students engage with the center in less consistent ways by volunteering to help with specific events, attending events, utilizing the center space for studying or meetings, and taking advantage of the small food pantry housed at the center, and other resources (menstrual products, brochures, etc.).

Mentor and intern positions require a year-long commitment, and both require specific coursework which informs these roles. Approximately twenty to thirty interns and thirty to fifty mentors are involved with the center each year. There are two gender specific mentoring programs offered in the center, one for women mentoring middle school girls, and one for men

mentoring middle school boys, although both programs have also had students from gender minorities who identify outside of the gender binary involved. The mentoring position requires taking a course in the fall semester and weekly meetings with the mentees as a small group at the assigned middle school for the entire year. Weekly meetings at the middle schools include group mentoring time with discussions about various topics and one on one mentoring time that mentors use to check in with their mentees. Internship time commitments vary based on the program with which the interns are engaged. However, all interns enroll in a course together that is dedicated exclusively to interns in the women's center.

Participant Selection

Purposive sampling allows a researcher to narrow their focus on potential subjects by only selecting participants that meet criteria needed to answer the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I utilized purposive unique sampling to recruit a diverse group of individuals who were highly engaged with the women's center as an intern or mentor for at least one year and who identified as belonging to a systemically marginalized background or identity. This population represents the highest levels of student engagement with the center and thus provided rich data and allowed for thick descriptions of their experiences with the center. Former undergraduate students were contacted and invited to participate. Participants were recruited through general emails sent to lists of former interns and mentors who had since graduated from the university. Participants were asked to complete a short Qualtrics form with basic contact information and to describe their most salient personal backgrounds and identities in addition to reviewing and digitally signing the informed consent. The backgrounds or identities listed on the recruitment information included race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, citizenship status, socio-economic status, physical and/or cognitive ability, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Recognizing that individuals may identify in myriad ways, I also left the list open-ended so that potential participants were able to offer their experiences from the perspectives of other identities or backgrounds I may have overlooked.

I recruited a participant sample that represents a range of identities and experiences. Women's centers have historically been perceived as spaces for White cisgender women and that population makes up the majority of students who engage with the space (Bickford, 2019; Goettsch et al., 2019; Salsbury and MillerMacPhee, 2019). Given this, I wanted to focus on giving voice to the students whose identities are within a minority of those who engage with the women's center. I recruited fourteen participants for the study, nine of which identified as people of color, four identified as limited income, four identified as second-generation Americans, and six identified as members of the LGBTQIA community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or asexual). A full list of participants' salient identities is provided in a table in chapter four.

Data Collection

My data collection included both individual interviews and participant journaling. Below I outline the specific procedures and considerations for the interview process and for supporting participants in the journaling process.

Data Collection Procedures

My data collection process began with submitting my research study to the Institutional Review Board. Once approved, I recruited participants with general emails sent out to lists of students who had previously served as interns and mentors at the women's center. The emails included a description of the research project and a link to a short online questionnaire with the informed consent for prospective participants to complete. The questionnaire was used to gather

basic information and screen prospective participants based on their most salient identities to assemble as diverse a participant sample as possible. Eighteen prospective participants completed the questionnaire and informed consent. I emailed each prospective participant a copy of their informed consent and thanked them for their interest. These prospective participants were invited to schedule interviews, and fourteen of them were successfully interviewed.

I scheduled video call interviews during April and May 2023. I contacted participants one week prior and one day prior to their interview time to remind them of the meeting date and time and included the video call link. In addition to the informed consent, I asked participants to provide verbal consent to being recorded at the start of the interview. Interviews lasted between approximately 45 and 90 minutes. I began each interview with a description of the research study and briefly explained my concerns that catalyzed the study. I reminded participants that they could decline to answer any questions, and could stop participating at any time. I also acknowledged my positionality as a researcher and a staff member and assured participants that any relationship we may have through the women's center would not be impacted by anything they told me as study participants. I asked participants if they had any questions before beginning the semi-structured interview. Following the interview, I asked each participant to journal about their interview experience, anything else that came up for them, and any other thoughts they had. Immediately after the interview I emailed each participant a Word document with some debriefing information and journaling prompts. I asked participants to journal directly on this document, save it, and send it back to me when they were done. Twelve of the fourteen participants sent me journals.

Interviews

My main data collection source was semi-structured interviews with each participant. Semi-structured interviews provide a basic guide for the interviewer and subject to follow while making space for probing and additional questions based on the subject's responses (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The semi-structured interview process allowed me to tailor each interview to the experiences of the subject. I utilized a list of questions with no finite order. I chose to reword or exclude questions or ask spontaneous or probing questions depending on the course of each interview. All interviews were held online over video call for the convenience of participants, as very few participants were living locally. The video calls were recorded with transcription turned on. I edited and corrected each transcript after the interview was over. Recording video calls allowed me to also record and review participants' facial expressions and some body language. I took fieldnotes during the interviews as needed, but I limited notetaking during the interview process so I could focus on being fully present with each participant.

Feminist research encourages engagement in reflective interviewing that allows for collaboration between the researcher and participant. In reflective interviewing, "feminists attempt to maintain a reflexive awareness that research relations are never simple encounters, innocent of identities and lines of power. Rather, they are always embedded in and shaped by cultural constructions of similarity, difference, and significance" (DeVault & Gross, 2012, p. 10). Another important aspect of reflective interviewing is strategic disclosure on behalf of the researcher. The willingness to share personal information or information about the research study with participants pushes back against the power imbalance that is in place during a traditional interview. In particular, it is important to explicitly address identity-related power imbalances with participants as part of the interview process (DeVault & Gross, 2012; Edwards, 1990). As a

white cisgender woman, I recognized that it is crucial for me to acknowledge my privileged identities, particularly when participants did not share those identities. In addition, as a staff member at the research site, it was critical for me to acknowledge the different roles I played as a staff member and as a researcher to help set up boundaries for participants to feel more comfortable sharing their authentic experiences. Acknowledging my positionality both in terms of my identities and my role as a researcher and staff member helped build trust and rapport with participants.

In addition to sharing researcher positionality with interview subjects, Paget (1983) argued for the importance of sharing the areas of concern that are motivating the research to encourage collaboration with the participant. An in-depth interview is a meaning making process shared between the researcher and the subject. Although qualitative research is often critiqued for being less rigorous or scientific than quantitative research, Paget (1983) classified the in-depth interview as a scientific procedure used to "systematically create knowledge" (p. 69). Paget (1983) goes on to describe how the collaboration between the interviewer and the subject produces a unique body of knowledge reflective of how both parties engage in the interview process. She stated:

> What I ask and what I hear of what she [the subject] says; how I speak and when I speak; how she answers; what she says; what she spontaneously remembers; what she chooses to tell; and what continues to puzzle me about her experience of [the research topic], produce the interview (Paget, 1983, p. 79).

In the interactions between the interviewer and the subject the interview is created collaboratively, and each interview produces a unique body of knowledge that cannot be exactly replicated.

Building upon to idea of the interview as a collaboration, feminist researchers also question the ethics of the interview material and how it is used (DeVault & Gross, 2012). How does the interview subject benefit from the interview process? While I could not guarantee any direct benefits for participants, I hoped that their interview and journaling processes would provide some catharsis, and journal entries confirmed that to be true for some participants. My completed capstone will be shared with the women's center's leadership, and I hope that the experiences participants shared are utilized to inform the center's decision-making going forward. In addition, although the goal of qualitative research is not generalizability, thick description allows readers at other institutions to determine what results from the study might apply to their own centers (Hays & Singh, 2012). I hope for this study to benefit many individuals beyond myself, and to inform women's center staff at many different institutions to better care for their students.

Journaling Exercise

Solicited participant journaling can provide additional insight into participants' experiences that could be missed during an interview. Hayman et al. (2012) affirmed the value of utilizing participant journals in addition to other data collection methods to "enrich and confirm" the data collected during interviews and to "clarify data and seek responses to questions inadequately explored during the interview" (p. 28). Strategies the authors suggested to promote participation in journaling included providing potential questions and/or objectives to help guide journaling responses, limiting the journaling period, and following up with participants after the interview to check in about how journaling is going (Hayman et al., 2012).

At the end of each interview, I explained to the participant that the next step was to complete a short journaling exercise. I reviewed the parameters of the exercise with them

verbally and told them that I recommended completing the exercise within the three days following the interview. I would then ask them what a good deadline for this exercise would be for them. After ending the call, I sent the participant a follow up email thanking them for their time and included a document with the same journaling exercise parameters I discussed during the call, suggested journaling prompts, and the agreed upon deadline to complete the exercise. I requested that participants use the document provided to respond to the prompts as they wished or write anything else they wished to share in relation to their experiences and the interview. If a participant did not send me their journaling exercise by the agreed upon deadline, I would send a follow-up email asking if they had any additional questions or if there was any support I could provide. Ultimately twelve of the fourteen participants completed the journaling exercise.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is vital to producing qualitative research that is authentic and genuinely representative of participants' lived experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012). There are numerous schools of thought about addressing trustworthiness in qualitative research. Some positivist researchers believe that qualitative research is only as valid in as much as it mirrors quantitative research, while others believe there should not be any standard criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research because each research study is so unique (Hays & Singh, 2012). The most common trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research address the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study. But that standard is also critiqued for being derived from the criteria for quantitative research validity (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Although trustworthiness criteria are debated among researchers, I believe that having some standard criteria for qualitative research is important. In this section I address the credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability of my study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the validity or believability of a study. In transformative research, there is no one singular reality (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2012). Credibility in qualitative research is determined based on the reality constructed by the participants involved, and how accurately that reality has been represented by the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I used several strategies to ensure that the research findings authentically represented the lived experiences of the participants. Reflexive journaling (including recording field notes and memos) was instrumental to my role as researcher to understand my own biases, opinions, and perspectives throughout the data collection and data analysis process (Hays & Singh, 2012). I journaled during the data collection process to keep a detailed audit trail of each step of the procedure as well as before and after each interview, to record my own thoughts, preconceptions, concerns, questions, and notes for future interviews. In addition, I journaled throughout the data analysis process to keep track of my reasoning for analytical decisions and to best separate my own construction of reality from that of my participants.

Triangulation of data sources is another strategy that can help establish the credibility of a research study. Triangulation refers to using multiple forms of evidence to support and describe research findings (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). My study utilized triangulation of data sources, data methods, and theoretical perspectives. Triangulation of data sources included the use of several perspectives or participant voices in the research project. I interviewed fourteen participants, allowing me to triangulate emerging themes and phenomenon based on the experiences of all the participants. Triangulation of data methods refers to the use of more than one source of data (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I asked each of

my participants to journal after their interview so that they could further reflect on the interview questions and provide any additional details or insights that occurred to them. Triangulating my data using both interviews and journal entries increases the study's credibility. Lastly, I used multiple theoretical perspectives to explore and interpret the data. Theories from student engagement, feminist research theory, Black feminist research, and intersectionality are all utilized in my discussion.

In addition to reflective journaling and triangulation, I employed simultaneous data collection and analysis to strengthen the study's credibility. Qualitative research projects have the potential to evolve over the course of the study (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell; 2015). By analyzing data while I was collecting it, I had the opportunity to note emerging themes and potentially ask new questions or explore new avenues. Simultaneous collection and analysis can also help the researcher recognize when the data has reached saturation or redundancy, which is when no new information is forthcoming and the same responses or themes keep emerging (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell; 2015). This strategy also makes it easier to perform a negative case analysis, which is the last strategy used to strengthen credibility. A negative case analysis requires the researcher to specifically look for data that would potentially refute the current findings. This strategy minimizes researcher bias and refines emerging themes as new research becomes available.

Transferability

Transferability is derived from external validity, the quantitative research criteria which measures the generalizability of a study. Because generalizability is not a goal for qualitative research, transferability instead refers to the level of detail provided in a qualitative research project that enables the reader to determine how and if the findings are applicable to another

setting (Hays & Singh, 2012). The more detail the researcher provides, the easier it is for a reader to determine the applicability of the findings, and potentially be able to replicate a version of the study in another setting. Providing a detailed account of the research process is also known as thick description. Thick description refers to the detail given in every aspect of the study's research design and methodology, including the strategies of trustworthiness used, descriptions of each step taken during the data collection and analysis process, and descriptions of the research data included in the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). Keeping a detailed audit trail is also a strategy that strengthens the transferability of a research project. A detailed audit trail includes all the physical evidence (including digital evidence) used in the data collection and analysis process. The audit trail includes the timeline of research activities, informed consent documentation, all data collected, interview protocols, research journals, all drafts of codebooks, interview transcriptions, and any other steps and data included in the research process (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the strategies utilized to prevent researcher interference in presenting the authentic experiences of the study participants. Confirmability is incredibly important to ensure that a researcher has not imposed their own biases and views on the study and has faithfully recorded and interpreted each participant's version of reality. Reflexive journaling and negative cases analyses are important strategies for ensuring confirmability, in addition to credibility of the study. Reflexive journaling forces the researcher to engage with their own biases and preconceptions, helping them to separate those opinions from the reality presented by study participants. This awareness strengthens confirmability of the study by safeguarding a researcher from inadvertently imposing their own reality upon the experiences of

participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). Similarly, a negative case analysis helps decrease researcher bias by encouraging the researcher to look for data that refutes emerging themes. Performing a negative case analysis strengthens the confirmability of a study by ensuring that a researcher is not inadvertently collecting data that only supports specific findings.

In addition to reflexive journaling and negative case analyses, I also engaged in member checking to strengthen confirmability. Utilizing semi-structured interviews allowed me to make probes during interviews to clarify participant responses as needed. I also provided participants with summaries of their interviews to confirm that they authentically represented their experiences and voices. Lastly, I provided a draft of my analysis chapter to participants to ensure that they felt it reflected their voices and to allow for any final input or editing as they wished. Utilizing member checking strategies at three different points in the data collection and analysis process gave participants multiple opportunities to correct any data that they do not feel represented their experiences and to remove anything they do not feel comfortable with.

Dependability

Dependability is derived from reliability, the quantitative research strategy which measures the consistency of study results over time (Hays & Singh, 2012: Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In qualitative research dependability asks if the results of a study make sense given the data collected. It is debated among researchers as to whether dependability is a valid way to assess qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). However, I will address it since it is one of the four most common trustworthiness criteria used for qualitative research. To ensure dependability a researcher must provide thick description of the study and the data collected so that the reader can clearly see how they arrived at the results presented. In addition to thick description, triangulation, peer debriefing, and a detailed audit trail all strengthen dependability

of my study. My strategy for triangulation was detailed above in addressing credibility of the study. Triangulation also strengthens the dependability of a study as multiple data methods can ensure that findings are congruent with participants' experiences and reality. Triangulation of multiple data sources (having multiple participant voices) can help ensure consistency of the results by allowing the researcher to make connections between different themes emerging across participants (Hays & Singh, 2012: Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Peer debriefing was used to strengthen the dependability of my study by introducing another researcher to the data and seeing if they agree with the findings presented. By engaging in peer debriefing, my findings could be challenged, forcing me to either better explain how I got to my conclusion, or reconsider whether my findings are dependable based on the data presented (Hays & Singh, 2012). Lastly, a detailed audit trail, as discussed in transferability, strengthens the dependability of my study. The audit trail allows the reader to follow each step of the researcher's process to show exactly how they arrived at their findings. Using the strategies of thick description, triangulation, peer debriefing, and a detailed audit trail strengthens the dependability of my research study by making it easy for a reader to understand how I arrived at my findings.

Ethical Considerations

Research ethics have evolved to hold a different meaning in transformative research. In positivist research, ethics required evidence that research was objective and unbiased, and that the research experience should be value neutral for participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). As previously discussed, transformative research recognizes that a researcher can never be fully objective, and affirms that participants can benefit from research, including potentially experiencing feelings of self-empowerment, catharsis, agency, and self-advocacy through their

time in the study. Gilligan (1995) advocated for a feminist ethic of care in research that emphasizes the importance of fostering genuine relationships with participants and recognizes the interrelatedness of people. In a feminist ethic of care, ethical considerations go beyond simply avoiding harm and liability to more holistic care of the whole person that is participating in your research (Gilligan, 1995). Adopting a feminist ethic of care in my research included recognizing the relationality between myself, my participants, and the experiences they were willing to share with me. The relationships I fostered with participants are sacred. I recognized these individuals trusted me with their truth and shared with me experiences that may have positive, negative, or mixed emotions for them. It is my responsibility as a researcher to both care for the experiences they are entrusting to me and to accurately and honestly report those experiences in my research. It is also my responsibility to recognize the wholeness of each participant and be prepared to provide support during the interviews and follow up with additional resources for support as needed.

In addition to adopting a feminist ethic of care, other ethical considerations included informed consent and participant autonomy. Informed consent is the most basic of ethical considerations for any researcher (Hays & Singh, 2012). Participants must feel empowered with the knowledge they need to fully consent to participating in the study and to know they can withdraw at any time. Making sure participants understand that they can decide not to answer any questions, remove any data, or completely withdraw any time they wish without penalty is vital for participant autonomy. I provided each participant with a copy of the informed consent they signed electronically and reminded them of their rights as a participant prior to the start of each interview. In addition to getting their signature on the informed consent I also asked for participants' verbal consent at the start of the interview.

Another important step in the informed consent process was recognizing and explaining the multiple relationships I hold with many participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). I was mindful while navigating relationship building as a researcher with each participant while also recognizing that many participants already knew me in my role as a women's center staff member. Most participants had previously served as a mentor or intern under my supervision, which I made sure to acknowledge verbally. Prior to each interview I explained the nature of my different roles as a researcher and staff member. I explained that any information provided during the research process would be kept confidential and would not influence my work-based relationships with any participants. Engaging in reflexive journaling before and after each interview also helped to minimize the influence of my own bias or opinions on the data.

Protecting the confidentiality of all participants is of the upmost importance (Hays & Singh, 2012). Participants' informed consents are the only identifying documentation. All demographic information, interviews, journals, memos and coding were stored using participants' chosen pseudonyms. Published data is stripped of other potentially identifying information, in addition to deidentifying any other individuals and places mentioned in the data. The limitations to confidentiality included my duty to report child or elder abuse shared with me or if a participant was threatening to harm themselves or others. These limitations were clearly communicated to participants verbally in addition to being outlined in the informed consent document.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is an on-going iterative process that is unique to each researcher (Hays & Singh, 2012). Qualitative data analysis is cyclical and involves disassembling and reassembling data into subthemes and patterns through coding. Once data is coded and analyzed,

emerging themes can be verified in future data collection and the process begins again (Hays & Singh, 2012). Patton (2014) attests that, "The human factor is a great strength and the fundamental weakness of qualitative inquiry and analysis—a scientific two-edged sword" (p. 522). Although certain aspects of the data analysis process will change based on researcher preference and choice, some practices should always be present. Simultaneous data collection and analysis is vital to ensure the credibility of qualitative research (Hays & Singh, 2012). This process is important for identifying emerging themes and patterns for the researcher to address in future data collection. Immediately following each interview, I will memo and summarize the interview as my initial round of analysis. I will conduct interviews over Zoom and record them with transcription turned on. That transcription will be corrected following the interview and will be coded as soon as possible while my memory is fresh.

Participants' stories connected in myriad ways. For the sake of organization, I made decisions about what themes stood out to me as overarching links, recognizing that these stories could have been connected by many different themes. All the names of participants and any other people mentioned are pseudonyms, and references to any specific places or organizations have been removed. I have also avoided specifying participants' racial and ethnic minority identities when possible. Direct quotes were edited for confidentiality, clarity, and length. A participant table is included at the beginning of chapter four.

Coding

Coding is the analysis process of grouping portions of data together to identify emerging patterns and themes (Hays & Singh, 2012; Saldaña, 2021). Although various coding processes and practices are outlined in many texts (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2014; Saldaña, 2021), the codes and groupings determined by a researcher can look different

across individuals. Codes can be generated from numerous sources, including: a priori codes from existing theories or concepts, structural codes based on the research projects goals or questions, or in vivo codes taken from the participant's own words (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011; Saldaña, 2021). Coding data involves at least two cycles, for Saldaña (2021) the first cycle is for data analysis, and the second cycle is for synthesis. Similarly, my first coding cycle will focus on mining the data for information, and the second cycle will be focused on understanding how the information fits together.

My first round of coding utilized a priori codes to organize data based on broad categories (i.e. racial identity) and structural codes to organize data based on research questions (i.e. decision to get involved, experiences with women's center, development). In the second round of coding, I delved more deeply into the underlying themes in participants' experiences with the women's center, and into the types of development that participants reported. The second round of coding utilized in vivo codes to better organize participants' developmental benefits based on their own descriptions (i.e. increased confidence, awareness). A priori and structural codes continued to work best for organizing students' experiences (i.e. Othered/isolated, sense of belonging, interactions with peers).

Data Management

All research data is stored electronically on a password protected cloud storage system. Interview recordings, transcripts, and memos are organized by participant's chosen pseudonyms. Informed consents and the pseudonym key are stored in a separate folder. Per the university's policy, all records will be kept for five years after the conclusion of the study ("Retention of research records and destruction of data").

Conclusion

Although women's centers continue to play an important role in student engagement and retention, very little research exists exploring student's experiences with these spaces (Bonebright et al., 2012; Dela Peña, 2009; Murray & Vlasnik, 2015; Murray et al., 2014; Salsbury and MillerMacPhee, 2019). This study explored systemically marginalized students' experiences with a campus-based women's center. My research is guided by feminist research theory and Black feminist thought, which emphasizes that no researcher can be unbiased, and that the researcher's opinions and views need to be consistently reflected upon throughout the research process. This conceptual framework also affirms the importance of the researcher acknowledging (and reflecting upon) their positionality and caring for the holistic humanity of each participant. The study's data consists of individual interviews and participant journaling. This research will help fill in a major gap in the literature leading to better understanding of how women's centers are and are not serving students' needs.

Chapter IV

Findings

My findings will begin with a discussion of participants' experiences finding connection and how their journeys related to their intersectional identities. Within that, students who participated in their engagement virtually during the pandemic described unique experiences that I will highlight in their own section. A significant number of participants talked about how their socioeconomic status impacted their university experience in an unexpected way. Their experiences with the shifting identity saliency of this aspect of themselves and its impact on their engagement is explored in its own section. Following that is the learning and development benefits that participants reported gaining from their engagement experiences. Participants reported increased self-confidence, acquired leadership and interpersonal skills, clarified career or vocational interests and renewed sense of purpose. Most participants also benefitted from an expanded perspective due to their engagement, and that phenomenon is explored in its own section.

Pseudonym & Pronouns	**Years since graduation**	**Women's center role and years involved**	**Most salient identities (as defined by participant)**
Albus (he/him)	1-5 years	Mentor (1 year)	First generation student, limited income background, gay/queer
Alison (she/her)	1-5 years	Mentor (2 years)	Person of color, second generation American, limited income background
Bailey (she/her)	1-5 years	Mentor (2 years)	White woman, bisexual/gay
Erica (she/her)	5-10 years	Mentor (1 year)	Person of color, woman
Hannah (she/her)	1-5 years	Mentor (1 year)	Person of color
Jacqueline (she/her)	1-5 years	Mentor & Intern (4 years)	White woman, heterosexual
Jerri (they/them)	1-5 years	Mentor (1 year)	Caretaker, queer, non-binary
June (she/her)	1-5 years	Mentor & Intern (3 years)	Adopted, person of color, woman
Neil (he/him)	1-5 years	Intern (1 year)	Transgender man, second generation American, person of color
Parker (she/they)	1-5 years	Mentor (2 years)	White, non-binary, lesbian
Riya (they/them)	1-5 years	Intern (1 year)	Person of color, non-binary, queer, second generation American, raised religious
Sofia (she/her)	5-10 years	Mentor (2 years)	Person of color, second generation American, limited income background, woman
Stephanie (she/her)	1-5 years	Mentor (2 years)	Person of color
Victoria (she/her)	5-10 years	Mentor & Intern (3 years)	Person of color, limited income background

Identity and Belonging: Connecting Across (and Within) Identity

While the quality and strength of connections varied for participants, nearly every participant mentioned some positive connections made through their women's center engagement- whether with peers, youth, and/or faculty and staff. For many participants, connection was contingent upon feeling that their identities were recognized and validated by those around them. For this study identity refers to the immutable parts of oneself that impact how an individual experiences the world around them. Common salient identities participants discuss include their race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and gender identity. However other identities are discussed as well. Belonging refers to feeling connected, validated, and supported in a social group or community. In so many participants' stories their sense of belonging and identities were inextricably connected.

Identity, Belonging, and the Women's Center

Several participants discussed the unique role they felt the women's center played at the university. Participants described a spectrum of experiences in seeking connection while navigating theirs and others' identities as part of their women's center engagement. Jacqueline was involved as a mentor and intern with the women's center and described her experiences as "a breath of fresh air." The women's center provided Jacqueline perspective outside of the insular and competitive "university bubble" (a phase used by several participants). Jerri also expressed appreciation for the role that the women's center played on the campus:

> I trust the women's center more as an organization than certain higher educational areas to steer conversations and initiatives. Structurally, certain positions or offices may tend toward focusing on 'dealing' with issues rather than more productive strategies (e.g.,

> preventing, educating on, or mediating issues). And I do believe that the women's center staff interact with students in a special capacity. (Jerri- journal)

Neil, an intern, also appreciated that the women's center provided a unique space on campus that he did not necessarily see happening in many other offices. For Neil, his college experience was bookmarked by multiple tragic and traumatizing events in the area. He appreciated what the women's center offered in response to these events:

> There were a lot of awful things that happened at the university while I was there. I appreciated that the women's center held space for those conversations. Because I think that it changed my perspective that all of this was going unnoticed. I appreciated having a space to process the pain the community was going through, I appreciated that a lot. (Neil- interview)

For Jacqueline, the women's center offered spaces that were non-judgmental, caring, and seemed to exist outside of the pressures of the university. She appreciated that her engagement with the center offered her the opportunity to connect with other students that were not part of her regular social circles. Jacqueline saw the women's center as a space that attracted students looking to do good. Hannah shared a similar impression of the center. She mentioned an experience connecting with a student (outside of the mentoring program) and sharing her hopes about getting into a specific major at the university (one that requires students to apply for separately). Hannah appreciated the support and encouragement this other student gave her, despite them not really knowing each other. She described her feelings as the women's center thusly:

> I think every interaction I've ever had with anyone in the women's center has always been positive. And I can't say that for other aspects of my commitments at the university,

> which I think really speaks to the character of people that are involved with the women's center. (Hannah- interview)

Program structure was also something that participants appreciated about the center. Mentors Jerri and June both mentioned being attracted to the structure of the mentoring program offered by the women's center. They felt that some student-run community outreach opportunities did not have enough community knowledge or oversight. Jerri observed:

> How do students, most of whom have never lived in this city before coming to the university, right? How do they decide how to best interact with the non-university, community spaces? The women's center was one of those opportunities to connect with the community that wasn't being run by students, but students were very involved. And I think that was a really nice thing about it, actually. And it changed a lot of the dynamic because college students have a lot of ideas, and that's great. But I think there's a lot of disconnect to the larger community. (Jerri- interview)

Seeking belonging was a common reason that participants got involved with the women's center. Riya, an intern, transferred into the university, and struggled to find their sense of belonging on campus. The university culture left Riya feeling isolated, and like they were the only student struggling to fit in. They got involved with the women's center during their senior year and their supervisor and intern team made them feel supported and seen. Riya recalled their internship interview with their supervisor:

> I was so taken aback by her during the interview because she just really wanted to get to know me as a person and the things that I was passionate about. And I thought, you know, I think this will be a safe space for me. (Riya-interview)

Riya was excited to speak with an adult on campus who cared about their interests and was more focused on connecting than on professional formalities. Riya's intern team wrote content for an online publication. Riya was one of a few students of color who worked on the team, and they described how their positionality impacted their writing:

> My identities played a big role in my writing and the kinds of things I wanted to write about. I was one of maybe two or three people of color on the intern team. I really loved the team, and I got along well with everyone. But it just made me recognize that a lot of the things I wrote had to hold weight or be perfect. I felt that pressure, I think, compared to letting myself explore a little bit and make mistakes or write something that's not as good, you know. (Riya- interview)

Riya struggled with feeling like they had a responsibility, as one of the few writers of color, to constantly produce "something new and fresh" (interview). They affirmed that this pressure was internal and did not come from their team. Riya felt respected and validated with their intern team. Their confidence in their writing and ideas grew, in part, due to the support and encouragement from fellow intern team members. Their experience with their team was aspirational for the kind of environment they wanted to find in a future workplace. Riya reflected on their experience:

> My work at the women's center allowed me to make space for myself and validate my own identities and helped me recognize that I deserve to have a voice, even if it's very different from others. (Riya- journal)

While Riya felt accepted and cared for on their own internship team, they also observed what appeared to be favoritism or bias happening in some interactions between women's center leadership staff and students. They tried to connect with some other staff (outside of their team)

at various times and felt a disinterest from the staff in getting to know them. Riya observed that students who fit into certain boxes (more outgoing, White) were shown more attention and interest from staff leadership. And that some teams also got more praise and attention than others. They described their observations:

> I felt like for example, if you were more extroverted, or you had a lot of connections, you're very friendly with people, like the director of the women's center, for example, if you are friendly with them, and know them, or maybe if you're White, for example, and you have like common topics to talk about and things. It's easier to kind of make that sort of connection. (Riya- interview)

Riya also had some frustrating challenges dealing with the women's center leadership. While Riya was working on a special project (not directly associated with their internship), they had been told they could get some funding to cover the costs associated. When Riya tried to access that funding, they got passed around to different staff and were never able to access the support they were promised. Riya reflected on the experience:

> I became a little bit conflicted, because I felt like some of the support from women's center leadership was, like, they'll hype you up and support you once you're successful, but they won't give you the available resources to jumpstart that success in the first place. That was how I felt towards the end of my internship year. But the internship itself as a community with my fellow students was a really wonderful place. (Riya- interview)

Riya recognizes that their experiences with the women's center were overwhelmingly positive because of the personal connections they made with their supervisor and fellow interns. "Amongst the chaos of college, I think the Women's Center was the place I could reflect and process it all" (Riya- journal). However, Riya did not necessarily think that the structure of the

women's center was inherently supportive of people of color and wondered if future students may have different experiences if they are unable to make those personal connections. They explained:

> It was the specific people at the women's center who I met, my supervisor and fellow interns, that really made that experience something beneficial and positive for me personally, rather than the structural way that the women's center was set up. I'm unsure if students like me will feel structurally supported in the same way. It's more a matter of hoping that they find someone they feel they can connect to, rather than being able to concretely tell them that the women's center itself will make their experience great or give them a safe space. It is the individual people that you find that can make that experience really positive. (Riya- interview)

Riya saw a discrepancy in the structure of the center compared to the individual support and connections they made with their own team. But overall, Riya felt like their experiences with the women's center enhanced their sense of belonging at the university and gave them a place where they felt seen and appreciated. They summarize their experience thusly:

> Despite everything, the women's center had a positive impact on me rather than negative or even neutral. I think the women's center really enhanced my sense of belonging at the university because I finally felt like I had a community and I had a place where my identity and talents were appreciated, and they had a place in everything. (Riya- interview)

Riya had mixed experiences with women's center leadership and was aware that the structure of the women's center was not necessarily one that supported diverse student populations. In spite

of this, Riya recognized that the meaningful connections they built through their internship increased their sense of belonging at the university and felt, overall, like a positive experience.

Identity & Belonging with Peers

Interactions with peers are an important part of college for any student. Participants described a range of experiences seeking connections with peers, some more fulfilling than others. For Jacqueline, connecting with her peers came easily. Jacqueline described her experiences as a mentor and intern as providing her with "a support system" where she could learn in community with other students. She described the mentoring class as "having a shared experience. We could say: I don't think I'm doing a good job, you know. We could all support each other" (interview). Jacqueline felt that she and the peers she met through the women's center shared a common interest in doing good. She described the connection thusly:

> You're forced to be with people from different backgrounds and with different perspectives. But ultimately, you're all there with the best of intentions, right? No one's forcing you to mentor this girl. There's some part about you that's a good person, right? Literally every single mentor that I worked with I loved and I felt like everyone in the mentoring program was so awesome. (Jacqueline- interview)

While connecting with peers at the women's center came easily for Jacquline, others had more challenges. Jerri described less success in finding fulfilling peer connections through their women's center experience. Prior to matriculating, Jerri held a caretaker role in their family, which influenced their college experience in unique ways. Jerri described the relief of attending college away from home: "When I first got to college, it was very freeing. Because you are just in charge of yourself. And you don't have to worry quite as much about your family" (Jerri-interview). For many first-year students, college might feel like an increase in responsibility, but

for Jerri, they enjoyed (at least initially) being relieved of responsibilities they had held at home. Later in college, Jerri described feeling an obligation to take a semester off from college and resume caretaking responsibilities. However, they ultimately chose to stay enrolled at the university. Although Jerri only spoke briefly about their caretaking duties in our interview, I got the sense that Jerri felt like it was something that separated them from other students. Something that other students could not necessarily identify with or understand.

Like Jacqueline, Jerri appreciated that the women's center introduced them to students from different parts of the university. Unfortunately, Jerri did not feel completely comfortable being their authentic self within their mentoring group. Jerri described themself and their peers as "occupying different areas of the university" (interview). During their engagement as a mentor, Jerri had only recently started to come out to select people and did not feel like there was space in the mentoring group for them to share their non-binary identity. Unlike some other queer participants, Jerri did not feel comfortable enough or ready to come out to their fellow mentors. Their decision to keep their authentic self private may have contributed to feelings of disconnection.

While Jerri did not feel comfortable coming out in their mentoring group, they recalled one mentee who shared their bisexual identity with their mentor but was not yet comfortable sharing it with her own peers. Jerri was glad the group provided the youth a space where they felt comfortable talking about things they were not ready to share with their own peers. While Jerri did not make as meaningful of connections in the group as they would have liked, they did mention appreciating the community and routine that it provided. Jerri connected with one peer who was involved in a student organization that was of interest to Jerri, and with which Jerri later collaborated.

Feeling connected to, and comfortable with, fellow mentors was an important part of the mentoring group dynamic. And the connections that mentors were able to make with each other could provide benefits to their mentees as well. Stephanie's friendship with fellow mentor, Jennifer, was one such connection. Unfortunately, Stephanie did not feel that level of connection with all her peers. She felt like some of the other mentors were not interested in getting to know her outside of their responsibilities to the program. She explained:

> I definitely felt seen and acknowledged in the mentoring program. But it did feel like other mentors came to connect with you only while we were at the program. So, it felt like a job sometimes. Whereas I appreciated that with Jennifer, it wasn't like we just connected at the mentoring program. We were able to connect outside the program and have more of an authentic relationship, which I think made it better for our mentees. (Stephanie- interview)

As Stephanie mentions, the relationship she built with Jennifer also improved the quality of the relationships both women were building with their own mentees and as a small group of four. Stephanie and Jennifer and their mentees would spend time together during the mentoring group meetings, deepening the women's and girls' connections with each other. The authenticity of that connection was contrasted for Stephanie with some of the other peers in the group with whom she did not feel connected and did not seem interested in connecting with her on a personal level.

Jennifer was also one of Stephanie's first close friends at the university who was White. Their relationship provided them both with an opportunity to share their different experiences with each other and deepen their understanding of perspectives outside of their own. Like Jacqueline and others, Stephanie agreed that the experience gave her a chance to connect with

peers outside of her regular social circles. "I think the program encouraged us to be friends with people that we wouldn't have normally been friends with or heard other sides from" (Stephanie-interview).

Racial identity played a big role in interactions between mentors and with mentees. Erica described her experiences navigating the majority White spaces in her women's center engagement. Erica's experience was influenced by her seniority in her mentoring group. Being in her final year of college, Erica felt that much of the mentor class was review for her. She was also older than most of her fellow mentors, which led her to take on an unofficial leadership position in the group. This allowed Erica to feel more in control of the mentoring group, even if the mentor class occasionally left her feeling disconnected. Erica described the different dynamics between the mentoring class and her group:

> Maybe some of the things that arose in the class, felt a little cringy. But when we were in our actual group, it felt different. And maybe that's because me and my best friend, we were like: Okay, we own this meeting [laughs] and made it go how we wanted it to go. (Erica- interview)

Erica navigated between the classroom dynamics, where she had little control, to her mentoring group, where she, and her friend, were able to have more autonomy and create a space that felt comfortable for them and the mentees who looked like them. For Erica and Stephanie, both women of color, connecting with their peers took more effort. They each worked to make space for themselves in their majority White mentoring groups where they could feel comfortable.

Identity & Belonging with Youth

In addition to the obvious importance of connecting with peers, for many participants who served as mentors, connecting with youth provided an added layer of belonging and a

unique group with which identities were explored. Parker transferred into the university and was eager to find their place among their peers. Parker got involved in the mentoring program after being interested in the mentor course and reaching out for more information. Parker's first year in the mentoring program was somewhat isolating for them, as she did not feel comfortable coming out to her peers. She noted that many of her fellow mentors were engaged in a Christian organization on campus that Parker told me discriminated against LGBTQ people by not allowing them to hold leadership positions. Although none of their group members were openly homophobic, Parker felt that their choices to be in this organization spoke more loudly than words. During Parker's second year as a mentor, however, her queer identity became an asset in helping the mentors connect with their mentees. Parker recalls this shift:

> I felt like my identity turned into a strength suddenly, it allowed me to connect to the mentees in a way that some of the other people in my group kind of struggled to do. I think a lot of the mentees identified as members of the LGBTQIA community. So, we were on the same wavelength in a way that some people were not. (Parker- interview)

Parker appreciated the opportunity to connect with, and advocate for, the mentees and to feel like their own identity and experiences were valued by their peers. Parker would often suggest ways to make sure the mentoring group activities were inclusive, and they felt like their peers appreciated and respected those suggestions, which they described as very validating. Her unique positionality with the mentees increased Parker's sense of belonging in the program. Parker went from not feeling comfortable acknowledging her identity with her fellow mentors and mentees to being able to utilize her own knowledge and experience to help educate her peers and aid in fostering healthy and respectful mentoring relationships.

Bailey took on a similar role to Parker's in her own mentoring group. Being a mentor aided Bailey's own self-reflexivity and discovery that she was going through at that time. Bailey came to recognize her sexuality during college and described how her experience as a mentor contributed to her burgeoning self-awareness:

> The mentor course involved discussions on identity, and this gave me an opportunity and space to intentionally focus on the changes I was coming to terms with about myself. I actually remember the identity bubble activity clearly because it was the first time I wrote down that I was bisexual and not straight. (Bailey- journal)

The identity bubble is an activity that mentors do to think more deeply about their own identities and positionality and how those things might come into play in their mentoring relationships. For Bailey this led to a particularly significant experience, allowing her to document her newly recognized identity for the first time.

Like Parker, Bailey's mentoring group had several mentees that identified as part of the LGBTQIA community, and she found that her own identity as a gay/bisexual woman made her particularly sensitive to making sure the group activities were inclusive. Bailey explains:

> I think my identity fueled a proactive stance of looking through the materials and making sure that the language was inclusive. I remember changing one sheet to say partner instead of boyfriend. I think, honestly, the fact that I am gay helped me keep a sharp eye out for stuff like that, or language use within the group. Like, I would never say, 'Okay, ladies,' you know, I was, like, 'Alright, pals' [laughs] something very gender neutral. (Bailey- interview)

Although Bailey's identity had a big influence on how she showed up as a mentor, Bailey was very aware that she wanted to be as neutral as possible in her role and focus her energy on

prioritizing the experiences of the mentees. In those efforts, Bailey chose not to explicitly disclose her sexuality to the mentees, although she was out to her peers. There were a few times that Bailey considered sharing her sexuality, however, she ultimately did not feel that it would contribute enough to the conversation at hand to be worth shifting the focus onto herself. But she asserted that this decision did not change the version of herself she brought to the program. Bailey recalls her decision to not be explicit about her sexuality with the mentees:

> At some points I did want to share, but then I thought about the position that I was in, and I felt more comfortable keeping that part to myself to open up more space for the mentees to share about their identities. I just wanted to open up space to others. (Bailey-interview)

Bailey assured me she felt totally comfortable being her “authentic self” (interview), while also deciding not to put her sexuality in the spotlight. If Bailey referenced her girlfriend, she would refer to them as her partner. Bailey felt that although she did not explicitly disclose her sexuality, she believed the clues were there for anyone that may have been looking for them. In that way, Bailey felt that she was still providing representation for mentees who might be looking for it, without taking up the space to explicitly define her identity. Bailey reflected on how the different aspects of her identity impacted her experience, including the privilege she holds:

> I think your identity impacts most everything that you do. For me, my identity makes me more aware and active about making inclusive spaces. I wish that those spaces existed for me when I was younger, so I try to do what I can now to help others feel safe and included. I also recognize that my White privilege impacts the number of barriers I face

compared to other people who have differing identity traits. Therefore, I really value listening and using an empathetic lens to understand others before I act. (Bailey- journal)

As a White woman, Bailey acknowledged that her racial privilege greatly impacts her own experiences and understanding of the world. She recognized how her intersecting identities gave her privilege in some spaces and disadvantages in others. Bailey and Jacqueline both expressed appreciation at the opportunities the women's center provided to connect with people outside of their social circles. Jacqueline was attracted to the mentoring program as an opportunity to connect with youth and potentially provide some of the support she would have liked to receive in her adolescence. Jacqueline connected deeply with many of her peers but experienced some challenges in connecting with her mentee. Jacqueline's mentoring group her first year was majority white mentors and majority minority mentees. She described the saliency of her Whiteness as she tried to connect with her mentee:

> Starting as a mentor was tough to navigate, because my mentee didn't want anything to do with me, right? Like, who are you? Which totally makes sense. I'm this White woman from the university, I came from a fairly privileged background. And I think that sometimes, mentoring programs, if people don't go into it with the right intention, you know, there can be this belief that's like, oh, you're such an angel, you're doing God's work, you know? And that was not why I was doing it. But you can't really communicate that to the eighth-grade girl, right? The only thing that you can do is just keep showing up and keep trying, and kind of prove her wrong: I actually just want to get close to you. And I care about you. (Jacqueline- interview)

Jacqueline understood her mentee's apprehension to connect. She recognized her positionality as an outsider, and that the mentees might have already had negative or neutral

experiences with other types of mentoring programs. She acknowledged that deficit-based mentoring programs can sometimes center the experiences of the mentor, rather than that of the youth involved. Jacqueline drew upon her cultural humility and learned to gain her mentee's trust through consistency. She knew that her mentee's behavior was not personal, and ultimately, she was able to earn her mentee's trust and build a special connection with her.

Jacqueline's ability to connect with her fellow mentors came easily, but this was contrasted with the effort and patience needed to connect with her mentee. For many mentors of color, their experience was the opposite. Where connecting with peers might be a challenge, connecting with mentees, particularly mentees that looked like them, came more easily. For Stephanie, the connection she made with her mentee, Michelle, was incredibly affirming. Stephanie reflected on her mentoring role: "I felt really validated in that work. I knew every day that Michelle loved seeing me, she made it very known that she valued our relationship. So that was validating for me." (Stephanie-interview). Stephanie and Michelle had a shared racial identity, and Stephanie talked about some of the ways that she coached Michelle through challenges with her family and the role that racial identity played in those conversations. Stephanie explained:

> Michelle and I talked about what it means to have family be a part of your identity, and what that looks like. How do you communicate your needs and your worries to your family in a way that is not seen as disrespectful. Because, especially in Black culture, if you were to talk about your feelings, or say, 'I don't think this is right,' it's considered talking back. It silences you and makes you feel like you cannot talk about certain things or you can't communicate. It's rooted in history and slavery, we're not meant to talk and that, unfortunately, is passed down to our family structure. I have done the work with my

> own family, and I encouraged those type of conversations with Michelle. Helping her understand, you actually can talk about these things, and this is how you should maybe phrase it so your family will listen to you. And if you still don't feel like you're being heard, let's brainstorm some other options so you can have an outlet for your feelings. I had to be creative in thinking how we can create a safe space for Michelle that's within our control? (Stephanie- interview)

Stephanie recognized how her racial identity had impacted her own family relationships and wanted to offer support to Michelle in navigating those challenges. As a mentor, Stephanie could offer Michelle the perspective of someone of the same race, but outside of Michelle's family structure. Stephanie was able to pass on some of what she had learned in navigating her own family dynamics to make a space for Michelle to feel heard and safe.

For many mentors, particularly mentors of color, connecting with their mentee via their shared racial identity was meaningful. For Erica, one of the important aspects of making her mentee feel comfortable was being able connect with her on their shared racial identity. Erica felt most represented during time spent with the mentees, who were mostly youth of color, versus with her peers, who were mostly White. Her interactions with the mentees felt validating, and their shared racial identity helped establish rapport when building those initial connections together. Erica reflected on the impact of sharing a racial identity with her mentee:

> When you're talking about mentoring and having relationships with young girls who were predominantly girls of color, that adds something when you are trying to create a relationship and you're trying to meet families and have some kind of cultural understanding, and you're going to sit in their house. You already have a little bit of rapport that you can maybe latch on to. (Erica- interview)

Several mentors of color mentioned that a shared racial identity with youth could provide a basis from which to begin building a relationship. Most of the participants interviewed felt that their women's center engagement brought some level of connection and belonging into their college experience. Overall, students found ways to feel connected to others and most students found spaces where they felt comfortable and validated being their authentic selves.

Belonging & Connection during COVID

For a few participants, the pandemic featured heavily in their women's center engagement experience. Three participants talked about the significance of their engagement during the pandemic, when almost all university classes and activities were virtual. Women's center engagement and events were also completely virtual during the same year, and the mentors and interns had a very different experience as they navigated their shifting roles and responsibilities.

During the pandemic, June felt isolated at home with her parents in a different state, and the mentoring program was a major source of connection for her. June chose to get involved with the women's center because she was interested in a more structured youth-focused program, and she wanted to get out of the "university bubble." June was a mentor for two years, the first year being in person. June described the simple pleasures of connecting with her peers and the mentees during less structured times:

> I think the thing that stuck out to me when we were in person was snack time. We would sit in a circle, and we would hear how everyone was doing, and someone would tell a funny story and we would all laugh. We'd have conversations where I felt like the mentees were able to share things that were on their minds. So, I enjoyed those things,

> talking and being with other people. Those are the things that stick out to me. (June- interview)

In her second year, the pandemic caused the program to shift to virtual meetings. June acknowledged that the group had challenges with getting mentees to attend the virtual meetings. But the meetings also gave her something to look forward to: “it was a time to check in and have community unlike all my other virtual classes where you log on, everyone has a black screen, and then you log off afterwards” (June- interview). June expressed appreciation for the opportunities that the women’s center gave her to connect with her peers and with youth. The virtual mentor meetings provided community and connection for June during a time of intense isolation.

Bailey, who we met earlier, also participated in the mentoring program during the virtual year and like June, appreciated the routine it provided and the opportunity to make connections outside of pandemic pods. She described the experience:

> The mentoring program was one of the better things from that COVID year because it was something that I was doing weekly, and it was meeting with people who were outside of my circle but still in the university community and the city community. So that was honestly a great part. (Bailey- interview)

Having worked with a mentoring program myself during this year, I also observed the connections that were being created in the virtual groups and was surprised by how strong they were, despite the program not being in person. I shared my observations with Bailey and she agreed that something special was happening that year:

> Yes, I definitely think something was happening. The environment we were in set us up for wanting to talk and meet. And even if there were some weeks when the mentees

> didn't show up, and it was sad, because we wanted to talk to them, but we would still stay on the call and talk with each other and catch up. (Bailey- interview)

Mentee attendance was a major challenge during the virtual year, but Bailey acknowledged that their group members still felt a special connection with each other, and appreciated the time they had set aside each week to connect, even if they were not able to connect with the youth.

Hannah also connected deeply with her group members and her mentee during their virtual meetings. Hannah transferred into the university during the pandemic, and she was eager to find some ways to make connections, which motivated her to apply to be a mentor. Despite the virtual nature of the program, Hannah described her experience as a mentor as incredibly meaningful. She enjoyed witnessing her mentee, Susan's, growth over the course of the year and the impact it had on the group. Hannah described how Susan went from relatively quiet and disconnected to engaged and communicative:

> Susan did a total 180. At first, she would be in the group setting and not say a single word. By the end, she contributed a lot more. She was just so sweet. Sometimes at the end of a meeting, she would go through every single mentor and give us each a compliment. Her mom had texted me one time, at the end of the program. Just saying how she had noticed such a huge difference in Susan's demeanor, even at home she was a lot more communicative. (Hannah- interview)

In addition to the pleasure Hannah experienced watching Susan "blossom" over the course of the year, Hannah also talked about how important the mentoring group was for herself. Hannah believed that the program "had more of an impact on me than it did on Susan" (interview). Being able to connect with and learn from Susan, in addition to the "safe space" their mentoring group created was healing for Hannah. She described the group dynamic:

> I feel like we had a couple of really tough conversations. But that was by design, right? I think just the validation of realizing that other women are feeling the same way that I feel about something, I feel like it kind of healed some sort of childhood trauma. I remember just being so vulnerable, and thinking: Thank God, this isn't in person. I would sometimes wrap myself in a blanket. I thought: what would I have wanted to hear when I was their age? And I would say it even if it was difficult to admit.

Hannah recognized that she was able to be vulnerable in her mentoring group in a way that she was not in other settings, even with some close friends. I asked Hannah if it was easier for her to be vulnerable because the group was virtual and she said it was, in a way:

> I strangely do think it was easier. There would be instances where if someone talked about something that got really deep, I could just mute myself really quick, and cry. I don't think that happened very frequently, though. There would be times when people would turn off their cameras, and I think it allowed them to express whatever emotions they were feeling. But, of course, the grass is always greener on the other side and during the year, I wished it was in person. I wished I could hang out with everyone and hug Susan. So, I guess, looking back I'm glad it was virtual, but I wasn't glad at the time. (Hannah- interview)

The virtual setting also seemed to provide comfort to Susan during deep conversations. When Hannah and Susan were talking together, she noticed that Susan would sometimes get up from her chair in the middle of the conversation to get her pet and then bring it back to sit with her while they continued to talk. Hannah recognized it as another benefit to the virtual setting, allowing Susan to be vulnerable while in a familiar setting that felt safe. For Hannah, the virtual nature of the program made it easier for her to share and be vulnerable and may have led to the

group connecting with each other in unique ways. Even virtually, participants developed meaningful connections with each other through their women's center engagement. The pandemic led to extreme isolation for many people, but for the mentors interviewed—the women's center provided a special opportunity to connect with others.

Shifting SES Saliency and its Impact on Belonging

Several students observed that their salient identities shifted when they matriculated. Identity saliency refers to the ways that one may be more conscious of certain identities or observe certain identities playing a larger role in different settings or during different times. For many participants, socioeconomic status played a significant role in their experiences at the university. This aspect of their identities was woven throughout their experiences at the university and the women's center and intersected with their other identities in unique ways.

Intersections with Socioeconomic Status

Albus' limited socioeconomic background played a major role in his experience at the university, one that he could not have predicted. Growing up in a rural, low-income area, Albus' queer identity had been the target of discrimination and harassment. As Albus himself astutely observed, identity saliency "changes with the room you're in" (Albus-interview), and the saliency of his queer identity shifted after matriculating. In college, Albus' identity as a low-income and first-generation college student became the focus of discrimination and the main source of difference from his peers. Albus recalled attending a party one of the first weekends at college and realizing that his life experiences could be exploited for his peers' entertainment. He explained:

> There's always this one question that leads down a rabbit hole, and it's what do your parents do? And I'm a pretty blunt person, and they [the other students] are interested.

> So, I tell them: at the time my stepdad was a custodian, my mom wasn't working, and my dad was in prison. And they're like, oh, wow! How did you get here? And I'm like, well, my parents drove me? And they kept asking me more questions and so I thought they were interested, and I told them. So, eventually they introduced me to someone, and then they asked me the same questions in the same order, and I get the same responses, and it took me two times to realize that I'm being paraded around like a circus spectacle, and it was very alienating. It was a very bad note to start college off with. (Albus- interview)

Albus' socioeconomic status continues to impact his life in a way that he was unprepared for prior to attending college. Reflecting on his time since college, Albus said that he continues to feel like he is stuck in an "in between" space (journal). His education separates him from his family and hometown connections, while his limited income background and family history continues to keep him from feeling fully accepted into other spaces. Albus often changes how he communicates with people to try and better fit into the space he is occupying. He says:

> I realize the more education and experiences I attain, the more I am removed from the lower social class, the less I have in common with family and community from home, but I'm not a member of the other classes either. I'm less liberal in disclosing my background [than I used to be] not because I'm uncomfortable but because it makes others uncomfortable, and their reactions are often hurtful to me. (Albus-journal)

Similar to Albus, Alison found that her limited-income background became more salient for her when she entered college. Of her transition she says:

> It was a bit shocking. I feel like I've met a lot of people [at college] whose families were a bit more well off. And that was weird because my family wasn't well off. But more

than that, none of my friends [back home] came from rich families. Everyone was lower income or middle class. (Alison- interview)

The transition to college was more difficult for Alison than she had anticipated. She had assumed that her experiences would be like most of her peers, but found that to not be the case, even with peers that had grown up in the same region of the state. Although she did eventually find spaces where she felt comfortable on campus, Alison sometimes experienced the same feelings of Otherness as a mentor with the women's center. Her experiences will be explored in subsequent sections.

In college, Victoria saw the nuances of her intersectional identities grow as she learned more about her peers and her positionality at the university. She ruminated on the saliency of her identity as a woman in her decision to get involved with the women's center. She reflected on how the women's center made her feel:

> I believe I felt such a sense of safety and approval in that space because it celebrated womanhood. Upon reflection, I felt most connected to my identity as a woman growing up. In most cases, girls (regardless of race) were kindest to me, and I felt connected to women through that kindness. (Victoria- journal)

While Victoria's identity as a woman attracted her to the women's center, she also observed that her racial identity became more salient for her upon matriculation, as she got more involved in activities and organizations on campus geared towards students of color. Like Alison and Albus, Victoria also encountered a new level of financial affluence among her peers at the university. In particular, Victoria was struck by the affluence among some students of color. Victoria reflected on the intersections of her racial identity and socioeconomic background:

> I just had an assumption that almost all of us [students of color] were in the same boat, and I quickly realized that that was not the case. And then I realized my limited income status is another segment of my identity that I'm now much more aware of. (Victoria- interview)

Victoria's new experiences provided her with further nuance about how her financial background and race intersected. Like Victoria, Sofia also recognized that socioeconomic status played a significant role in university culture. She felt judged by her peers because of her limited income background. Sofia observed that affluence afforded some peers the privilege to act out in ways that she could not. She explained:

> When I came to the university, it was very obvious to me that I didn't have a lot of money to be so carefree, to dress the way that some of those people were dressing. And even behaviors, I feel like people who were upper class just acted a certain way. The first couple of times that I had too much to drink, I feel like it was frowned upon the way that like, I was stumbling or whatever. But I felt like when they got drunk, like their behaviors, it was like, better. That's definitely classism, to just assume that because somebody that clearly isn't higher class is like overdoing it and is disgusting, but when they do it, it's okay. (Sofia- interview)

Sofia observed that affluent peers were immune to a certain degree of judgement. It was clear to her that her lower SES affected how she was treated by peers and what leeway she was or was not given. Neil's socioeconomic status was extremely prescient for him in university, particularly after he lost his parents' financial support and had to work while in college to survive. Neil was shocked by the financial resources that some of his peers possessed. He recalls a particular memory:

> I remember one time I was sitting in class and I could see the laptop screen of another student near me. They logged into their bank account and they had $35,000 just sitting in their checking account. I still don't have that kind of money; I don't know if I ever will. It gave me perspective in terms of what resources some people have access to. (Neil- interview)

Prior to matriculating Neil (and other participants) had not been exposed to peers with access to this level of financial resources. Becoming aware of the socioeconomic discrepancy between themselves and some of their peers was uncomfortable for several participants. It forced them to recognize that they were systemically disadvantaged and Othered in a way they had not dealt with before.

Identity and Belonging with Peers

Painful experiences like the ones detailed above taught Albus that telling people at the university about his background often made them uncomfortable or led to his own mistreatment. As a mentor, however, his low-income background was a connecting point with many of the mentees, including his own. This created some tension for Albus, who felt comfortable talking about those aspects of his experience with mentees, but also knew that sharing those parts of himself usually seemed to make his peers uncomfortable. Albus shares his feelings about being stuck in the middle of these two populations, straddling different identities:

> I felt like an in between, I related to the kids on my social class, but not on race. I related to my peers in terms of race generally, but not always with my social class, so there was some incongruence there. It was easier with my one-on-one time with my mentee but in the group settings, it was at times difficult to disclose aspects of my identity with the students without making my peers uncomfortable. (Albus- journal)

Although Albus' limited income background left him feeling isolated from his peers, he also acknowledged that his experiences with the women's center validated his queer identity. Where he was not necessarily comfortable bringing up his socioeconomic status, he felt that he could comfortably be out and talk about his experiences as a gay man with his peers at the women's center. In high school, exclusively male spaces were a danger for Albus—a space where he feared physical or verbal assault. In the women's center, Albus learned to become more comfortable with exclusively male spaces. This also gave Albus the opportunity to explore more of his own masculinity. He reflects:

> I think my experiences with the women's center actually made me more comfortable in looking at my own masculinity, in a way, because in high school, I was always seen as very feminine. And then I got to college […] I realized that there was this difference in how people perceived me and my gender. And then as my time went on, I could go into spaces that are more traditionally masculine and be okay. (Albus- interview)

Albus' experiences in the women's center were complex. Some parts of his identity felt safe and validated in that space, while other parts felt alienated. Like Albus, Alison connected with her group's mentees based on a shared identity. While Alison valued the connections she made with the mentees, she also felt like there was some level of expectation placed on her by other mentors to make connections with mentees when others could not. This role led, in part, to her feeling disconnected from some of her peers, whom she perceived as assuming that her race was exclusively enough to connect with mentees, but simultaneously seemed to assume that Alison's shared peer identity as a university student trumped any other identities. Alison noted that for some of the other mentors in her group, their identification with the university seemed to impact how well they were able to relate to mentees. Some peers assumed mentees knew about

university landmarks, or other places in the area that certain pockets of students frequented (some of which Alison herself was not familiar with). Alison felt that some of her peers saw the university "as the same for everyone" (Alison- interview). Alison's peers seemed to assume that all university students had similar experiences, and that the university was as prescient for community members as it was for them.

Although Alison had no way to confirm this, her experiences and assumptions lead her to believe that most of her peers in the mentoring group were from more affluent socioeconomic backgrounds. She acknowledged the judgements she made about some of her peers: "I had certain judgments about some of the other mentors. Because, to me, they represented a typical university type that I didn't fit into" (Alison- interview). Alison observed the ways that some of her peers' assumed backgrounds seemed to impact their ability to relate to, and empathize with, their mentees' lives and experiences. One instance that stood out to Alison was hearing a mentoring pair discussing something that a mentee wanted, and her mentor suggesting she ask her parents to buy it for her. Alison reflected on the situation thusly:

> Some of these comments would make me wonder if some mentors would only keep socioeconomic status in mind if they felt like this identity was visible, as in if they were able to perceive someone's financial situation. As someone who comes from a family with financial instability, this concerned me, as a lot of people hold certain perceptions as to what poverty, or just lower income situations, look like without realizing that it can be much more complicated (Alison- journal).

For Alison, it felt like her and certain mentees' lower socioeconomic backgrounds were invisible to some of her peers. Because they did not have visible markers of poverty, these peers seemed to assume that Alison, and the rest of the group members, had similar financial

backgrounds to their own. The same mentors also seemed to struggle to understand the experiences of certain mentees. Alison recalled another situation with a mentee who was regularly absent. Some mentors assumed that the mentee's absences were due to a lack of interest in the program. But Alison found out that the mentee was responsible for helping her parents care for younger siblings at home, which made her attendance to group sporadic. Alison recalled the reactions of some of her peers when she explained the situation:

> I remember feeling as if her [the mentee] caring for her baby siblings came as a bit of a surprise to some of the other mentors, even though it is common for older siblings to take on a role as a caretaker when their parents are unable to do so. As much as I also missed this mentee and wanted her to join us, this was one of those situations where too much pushing could make the mentee feel isolated and even left out for not being able to join sometimes. (Alison- journal)

Alison understood that this mentee's family responsibilities had to take priority for her. She wanted her to feel comfortable attending the group when she was able, and make sure her sporadic attendance did not leave her feeling isolated. Alison's own lived experiences helped her better understand the nuance of some of the mentees' situations, and it fell to her to translate some of that nuance to certain peers, but not all.

Alison also emphasized that there was a lot that she enjoyed about her experiences with the women's center. Several of her peers were very dedicated to the program and put in the time and effort necessary to build meaningful connections with their own mentees and with each other. She reflected on some of the positive aspects of her experience:

> There were mentors in the group that I felt really made our group what it was, and that made me really enjoy the program, especially that year of it. There was a lot that year that

> I enjoyed. There were some people that I was really very, very lucky to have in our group. (Alison- interview)

As with so many of the participants, her experiences with the women's center were a spectrum. Some of which were positive and meaningful, and some of which felt isolating or unpleasant.

Like Alison, who felt that some of her peers limited themselves in their ability to connect with their mentees, Victoria observed some White mentors in her group who connected with each other to the detriment of their mentoring relationships. Victoria acknowledged that it is common human behavior to "stick with what you know" but was sad that these mentors "missed opportunities to connect with not only their own mentee but the other mentees in the group" (Victoria- interview). She described the clique these women created as causing a "rift" between them and the mentors of color, in addition to the mentees. There were, however, several meaningful connections with new or existing friends that Victoria made or grew during her time with the women's center. In addition, during her time as an intern, Victoria recalled feeling deeply cared for by the women's center staff she worked with: "I just felt so wholly cared for and loved and understood by women's center staff in a way that transcended race and income status" (interview).

For Sofia, college was very isolating. She tried to connect with peers through various organizations and events, but "everything I tried to be a part of, I always felt really excluded, or I didn't feel like the inclusion was authentic" (Sofia- interview). Getting involved in the women's center as a mentor was influenced by her desire to connect with peers and youth. Unfortunately, Sofia struggled to make meaningful connections with other program participants.

Like others, Sofia wanted to become a mentor to provide representation for an adolescent girl: "Make her feel like, oh, there's someone that looks like me that went to college- like it's

within my reach" (interview). The majority of Sofia's mentoring group peers were White women. She acknowledged that the mentoring group felt like a "safe space" where the group could share and be open with each other, but only certain parts of her felt safe. Sofia explained:

> So, I think the woman part of me felt safe. But I don't think I ever brought up topics that had to do with being Latin American, or poor. […] I felt like my womanhood was validated, but I don't think my race and economic identity was. (Sofia- interview)

Sofia questioned the efficacy of her own efforts as a mentor, in addition to those of her peers. She did not think the mentoring program's inclusivity efforts were enough. She wondered what might have been if she had been able to connect with a peer that shared more of her identities. She mused: "Could things have been different if my group had been more diverse? Maybe I would have found a bestie" (Sofia-interview). Sofia had to segment herself to fit into her mentoring group, separating her identity as a woman from her ethnicity and limited-income background. Sofia did not feel safe showing up authentically, which prevented her from fostering meaningful connections with her peers.

Neil also struggled to make meaningful connections through his women's center engagement. He dealt with several painful challenges in college, including losing his parents' financial and emotional support after he came out to them. Neil was originally connected to the women's center for counseling and saw the internship as an opportunity to get "involved in a community again" (interview). Neil did not make meaningful connections with his fellow mentors. He did, however, feel inspired and supported by the intern course instructor, Maria. Maria was the first woman of color with a doctorate that Neil had met at the university, and she inspired him to eventually go on to graduate school. As an intern, Neil felt supported by the

course instructor, and safe among his peers, but he did not feel that he was able to make any meaningful connections with fellow interns. He recalls observing those around him:

> I could see the communities forming in the classroom. And I felt more included in that classroom than any other classroom I sat in at the university, but I still wasn't part of it. (Neil- interview)

Neil was one of the few students of color in his intern cohort. Most of the cohort was White women, and he remembers when students were split up into groups for a project, and he looked around and realized each group had one person of color in it. He described the experience as somewhat tokenizing, where his White peers had the opportunity to "be exposed" to someone of a diverse background, a role he did not want. Neil also recalled the experience of being in the class during the 2016 presidential election and realizing that some of his fellow interns supported Donald Trump. Instances like this made it clear to Neil that he and his peers operated in different worlds. Neil felt that many of his women's center peers had a level of privilege he had never experienced, and he recalled observing their growing awareness of the social injustices he had dealt with his entire life:

> I felt like a lot of students in the women's center were discovering privilege and oppression for the first time. I was watching my peers have these reactions to learning about the economic injustices in our community for the first time, but they weren't new to me. It almost went the other way where I kind of realized, oh, wow, some people can be this comfortable, this unaware of injustice. (Neil-interview)

Despite not finding significant connections with his peers, Neil appreciated his experience as an intern and was proud of the work he was able to accomplish, more details of which will be explored in a later section. Neil and other participants who saw the expanded

saliency of their socioeconomic status in college were confronted with feelings of isolation or alienation with some of their peers. This deeper understanding of their intersectional identities was brought on by an awareness of their difference from others at the university. For a number of participants who were mentors, alienation from (some) peers happened in conjunction with finding connection to youth they worked with in the mentoring program.

Identity and Belonging with Youth

While Albus' low-income background was uncomfortable and painful to navigate with his peers, it aided in his ability to connect with mentees. He described one example:

> Almost all the kids we worked with were low income. I was very comfortable with that because that's how I grew up, like going to pick up my mentee, he lived in a trailer. I lived in a trailer. His mom was very insecure about us seeing where she lived. However, I can navigate that space very easily. But I'm sure for some of my peers in the cohort that that probably was very uncomfortable. (Albus- interview)

Albus often felt disconnected from his peers, particularly in terms of socioeconomic background, however his background and experience were a boon to the youth with which he worked. He could connect with the mentees in a way that some other mentors could not. Alison had a similar position in her mentoring group as well.

Her first year as a mentor, Alison's initial connection with her mentee was bolstered by their shared identity as second-generation Americans whose families had immigrated from countries that were geographically close to each other. Alison was excited about that shared connection and found that common ground useful in building relationships with her mentee and her mentee's family. Building connections with mentees based on their shared identities continued into Alison's second year, although with different relationship dynamics.

The racial makeup of Alison's mentoring group was relatively diverse her first year in the program. Her second year, however, Alison was the only Black mentor in her group with exclusively Black mentees. Alison became somewhat responsible for making connections with the mentees that did not immediately connect with other non-Black mentors. Alison was proud of being able to offer that support and connection to the mentees. Alison recalls a conversation she had with one mentee when her regular mentor was absent. The mentee ended up confiding in Alison that she had recently lost a parent, something that Alison had experienced as well. Alison felt grateful that, for whatever reason, the mentee had felt comfortable enough to share that with her, and she wondered if their shared racial identity had anything to do with the mentee's decision to do so. Alison saw her shared racial identity as a strength for fostering relationships with the mentees. Of the mentee who shared her loss with Alison, she said: "whether that [their shared racial identity] was the reason or wasn't, I was very grateful to have that as a strength" (Alison-interview).

Alison's shared identities with the mentees impacted how she experienced the group. She recalled one quiet mentee that she had worked very hard to connect with and make comfortable, but who ended up quitting the group anyway. Alison reflected: "I felt like the shared racial identity, it made me feel like I carried it a bit differently than some of the other mentors" (interview). Alison felt like the mentee's decision to leave the group hit her harder than some of her peers. It frustrated her that she sometimes felt like she was putting in more effort and emotional investment than others.

Like Alison, Victoria's mentoring group was majority White peers, and majority mentees of color. She recognized that her shared racial identity with many of the mentees "came into play quite a bit" during the mentoring group meetings (Victoria- interview). Victoria believed her

shared racial identity with her mentee helped overcome that "initial barrier" in building a relationship (interview). Victoria recognized that this initial connection was just the start, and "there were still so many differences in our lives that we had to work through" (interview). Victoria's conversations with her mentee did not necessarily focus on race, however, she believed being able to offer her mentee a relationship with a woman of color was important to her mentee and her family. Victoria affirmed it was meaningful that her mentee could talk about things that mattered to her with "someone who looked like her" (interview).

Like Victoria, Sofia had wanted to provide meaningful representation to a young woman. Both Sofia and her mentee identified as Latin American, and Sofia recognized that her mentee's family was part of a conservative, Spanish-speaking Christian group similar to one in which Sofia had been raised. However, Sofia and her mentee never spoke about this, and her mentee never offered the information during the mentoring group meetings. Sofia believed that her mentee also might not have felt fully safe sharing certain aspects of herself in the mentoring group. In retrospect, Sofia questioned if she was in the "right headspace" to be a mentor at that time:

> I feel like I went into it trying to mentor myself in another body. But what ended up happening, I just feel like was more performative. I don't feel like any of us were really making a difference. (Sofia- interview)

Like other participants, Sofia had more in common with her mentee than her peers in the program, but unfortunately Sofia's own challenges in college left her feeling disempowered, and that shared identity did not feel like a strength for her. For several participants who served as mentors, finding common identities with mentees was a source of validation and a basis from

which to begin to form a deeper relationship. For others, however, the disparity between feelings of belonging with peers and with mentees was too great.

For several participants, the women's center was a space where they felt accepted and cared for. For some, finding acceptance was complicated, or was only felt in certain spaces and with certain individuals. The women's center offered students new spaces in which to find connection, and several participants appreciated the unique population of peers they met during their engagement. But those peer populations were still majority White and privileged spaces, which students with systemically marginalized identities had to navigate with varying levels of satisfaction. Identity and belonging drove participants' stories and shaped much of their experience at the university and in their women's center engagement.

Experiential Learning & Development

A final theme that emerged focused on the out-of-classroom learning that participants gained during their engagement, which included personal and professional development. Almost all participants reported learning more about themselves and the world around them during their women's center engagement. Participants discussed gaining confidence, learning new skills, and homing in on career interests. They also noted increased knowledge and an expanded interest in community engagement. A significant number of participants also discussed the expanded perspective that their engagement afforded them, the opportunity to think outside of themselves.

Self-Confidence

Several participants noted the increased self-confidence they gained from their experiences. Stephanie recounted how her women's center engagement was an antidote to the negative and hurtful academic experiences in her major. Stephanie had a particularly alienating

experience in a White male dominated major. She experienced discrimination from peers and received little to no support from professors. She credits her women's center engagement with helping her regain the confidence she had lost from her negative academic experiences:

> The women's center gave me a sense of my confidence back. I went from high school, a place where I was wildly accepted to be in a place where I wasn't so accepted and it really did a number on my identity. Working with the women's center reminded me that I was human. It helped me get my confidence back, get my voice back, take initiative. I learned that I didn't have to sit there and do nothing. I could find happiness and joy. (Stephanie- interview)

Like Stephanie, Parker attributed her engagement with the women's center to helping them feel more confident. In addition to solidifying her career trajectory Parker also felt that she was doing something worthwhile and community focused. They reflected on their experience:

> Being a mentor made me a lot more confident. It made me feel like I was doing good for the community. And I really appreciated that I felt like I was dedicating my time to something worthwhile. It made me feel like I was contributing to society, and I always really appreciated that. (Parker- interview)

Mentoring forces students to go outside of their comfort zones and take risks. Alison's engagement helped her grow her confidence in her own abilities. During Alison's second year as a mentor, she took on a leadership role that she was initially unsure about. She reflected on what she learned from that role: "I remember, I was really nervous and unsure about taking on the leadership role. And I think that was the best decision I ever made, because I ended up enjoying it so much" (interview). Alison went on to explain that she was particularly nervous at the beginning of the year prior to meeting with the mentees. She did not feel as confident or

comfortable in the group that was exclusively her peers. However, starting to meet with the mentees helped grow Alison's confidence. She described that shift:

> With the mentees, I felt much more comfortable initiating things and talking to them and being the first one to go into the next conversation or anything like that. And I think it helped a lot in terms of being able to discuss things with people. And I know, one part of that was sometimes you have to open up first so someone else can feel comfortable doing so, especially with the mentees. That was something I had always struggled with, it was always very hard for me to open up or speak personally. It helped me get more comfortable doing that. (Alison- interview)

Like several others, Alison's role helped her improve her communication skills and identify her strengths as a leader. People often think of leaders as individuals who are outgoing and outspoken. However, in my work I have recognized that quiet leaders can often provide the space for others to shine in a unique way. When working with Alison during her time as a mentor, I talked to her about the special impact that I believe one can have as a quiet leader. When I brought up the concept again during the interview she replied:

> I remember being in the class, and you describing it that way. And I think I had always viewed leadership as a conventional model where you're supposed to be a certain way. It opened my eyes that I could fill the role in a way that played to my strengths as well. (Alison- interview)

Alison's women's center engagement helped her prove to herself that she had what it takes to be a leader, and that leadership does not have to look one specific way. Both mentors and interns noted that their engagement increased their self-confidence. Neil credited his internship with

helping him build his confidence and communication skills. His experience helped him learn how to network and communicate with professionals:

> Prior to being an intern, I'd never really been in a professional space before. The internship gave me the confidence to just reach out and shake someone's hand and say: Hi, I'm Neil, and this is who I am. That skill was something that I wouldn't have known how to do without that space being facilitated for me. (Neil- interview)

Neil appreciated that the internship facilitated a space where he could learn how to engage with professionals and become more comfortable talking about himself. Participants also reported that their engagement gave them the opportunity to learn new skills, many of which translated into vocational trajectories that participants pursued after graduation.

Skills and Vocational Interests

Participants reported learning several new skills, the most common being interpersonal and communication skills, listening, problem-solving, and flexibility. Many of these skills directly translated into career paths for participants, and for others they were transferable to new career paths they discovered later.

Stephanie described how her mentoring experience helped her cultivate creative problem-solving and communication skills. Stephanie had challenges getting in touch with her mentee, Michelle, because Michelle did not have her own phone and Stephanie had to relay messages through her parents. In addition, Michelle needing to care for her younger sister was sometimes a barrier to them spending time together. Stephanie recalls the lessons she learned about communication and persistence in her efforts to connect with Michelle's parents:

> There were times I wanted to give up, but I remembered talking about grit in the mentoring class and pushing through challenges. To this day it pushes me to have hard

> conversations, even if someone's avoiding the conversation. I remember having a conversation with Michelle's mom about communication and how Michelle really loved the program and that led into a conversation about her younger sister. And then I was able to offer more solutions. I suggested that some days I can have the younger sister and my mentee. I don't mind if all of us go to the pool or something. It was a really eye opening experience, trying to find creative ways to problem solve and meet people's needs. (Stephanie- interview)

Stephanie's engagement with the women's center helped her develop the confidence to have difficult conversations. She grew her communication and problem-solving skills and had opportunities to think creatively and find compromises. She credited her experiences with the women's center for acquiring skills she continues to use today.

In addition to increased self-confidence, Parker credits their experience as a mentor with helping them become a more compassionate and patient person and a better listener. Through her women's center engagement, Parker learned that she wanted to explore a teaching career, which she is actively pursuing now:

> Being able to interact with the mentees helped convince me to try teaching, and I'm so glad that I did. I learned I wanted to work with youth, and I owe that to the women's center. (Paker- interview)

Parker had not considered teaching as a career prior to her mentoring experience. Having the opportunity to engage with young people in that environment helped her realize it was a passion for her.

Like Parker, Erica credited her mentoring experience with helping her develop her listening skills. Erica explained the value of what she learned as a mentor and how it has

continued to impact her today. She described the humbling experience of recognizing her positionality as a university student entering the community and the importance of understanding parents' perspectives in youth work.

> There were lot of lessons to be learned in mentoring. When we go to families' houses and talk to them, I think there's a lot to be learned in that small instance. You are a university student coming to a community resident's house. You may not look like that family or have any cultural touchpoint with them. They don't need your help. Why do you need to do anything for their child? There's so much that you need to think about and come prepared for before you step into this person's house. Those are skills that are still useful now. Also, the importance of going in and trying to listen first. I will never forget the day the mentoring course instructor said: Tell me more. Tell me more. How often do I use that now? Learning to listen first, not always having the solution. (Erica- interview)

"Tell me more" is an oft-repeated phrase in the program, meant to remind mentors that the best response is often to keep listening, and to make sure one understands a situation before offering solutions. Like Parker, Erica continued in the education field after graduating and the skills she cultivated through her women's center work have continued to serve her well. She summarizes what she gained in the program thusly:

> I think the women's center taught me how to listen. How to go into a new, unfamiliar space and not want to change things right away, but how to show up, listen, and learn. It taught me humility and took the pressure off myself to do anything "impressive" right away. The women's center also began to teach me how to talk to and think about adolescents, a field I dove deeper into as a teacher after graduation. (Erica- journal)

Erica, Parker, and others discussed how their engagement prepared them for future careers. Several participants went into education or youth-focused fields after graduation, including Bailey. Bailey talked about the listening skills she refined as a mentor, in addition to the clarity it gave on the type of career she wanted. While Bailey had already been interested in a career working with youth, being a mentor helped Bailey realize that she was interested in working with youth in small groups and one on one settings more than a classroom setting. Bailey is currently in graduate school for counseling. She described the influence of her experiences as a mentor:

> Working with students throughout the year in a school setting was very helpful. I realized that I liked doing the curriculum and the group work, and just being there and listening. A lot of the skills that we used in mentoring we use in counseling. It made me realize that I wanted to pursue more of a one-on-one small group profession rather than teaching. (Bailey- interview)

Bailey's experiences with the women's center helped her clarify what type of youth-focused career she was interested in pursuing. Similarly, Jacqueline's mentoring experience helped her define her career path, in addition to developing fundamental interpersonal skills and a sense of cultural humility. Being in the mentoring program introduced Jacqueline to the area of study that would eventually become her major and set her on the path to pursuing a career in youth work. Jacqueline is currently working as a teacher. She described the skills she gained as a mentor that she uses in her career: "The mentoring program was so instrumental in learning how to build a relationship with a young person. Being a mentor was the foundation for me becoming a good teacher" (Jacqueline- interview). In addition, Jacqueline recognized that her experiences as a White mentor working with a mentee of color taught her a lot about her own cultural

humility and about working with people that were different from her. These experiences also made her more comfortable talking about identities and engaging in difficult conversations. Jacqueline shared how those skills continue to serve her in her current position:

> Getting involved with the women's center helped me become more comfortable engaging in conversation with others about their identities and backgrounds. This has equipped me with the skills and mindset necessary to build relationships with my students and coworkers, all of whom are from diverse backgrounds, in my current occupation as a teacher. (Jacqueline- journal).

For some students, like Parker and Jacqueline, their women's center engagement helped them recognize vocational interests they had not previously explored. For other students like Bailey, their experiences solidified and refined already existing interests. Victoria also came into mentoring with an interest in youth work and appreciated that the experience gave her the opportunity to confirm that this was something she wanted to pursue beyond college. When asked how her experiences in the women's center contributed to her development, Victoria expanded:

> My work with the women's center contributed to my development in two major ways. One academically, understanding who I wanted to be as a professional, in this mentoring and advising space. Learning about adolescent development was huge for me, and it ended up directly impacting my desire to become a school counselor. And then professionally as well, it gave me experience doing the work that I thought I might be interested in, and then allowed me to validate that, yes, not only am I interested in it, but it feels like my gift to give. (Victoria- interview)

In addition to the ways that Victoria identified her engagement contributing to her development, she also recognized how her experiences influenced her understanding of what she is allowed to expect from a professional environment. She shared the importance of that experience:

> I was just wholly supported by staff. And for that kind of support to be modeled for me to understand what is possible out there for professional supervision. It was really helpful for me, because I am someone who needs warmth and kindness and softness. And I think too often we equate those things with weakness. And my experience in the women's center was the exact opposite of that. And so, for that to be modeled for me, and for me to get validation that I can be myself has been exceptionally impactful for who I am as a person. (Victoria- interview)

Victoria's engagement validated for her that she did not have to change who she was to be professional. She was able to experience a working environment that affirmed her needs. Riya, similarly, felt that their engagement modeled for them what they were allowed to want in a professional setting. Riya felt supported and seen by their internship supervisor and intern team, and discussed how that experience set their expectations for future working environments:

> I learned a lot about myself in terms of what environment I want to work in professionally, as well as the kind of work I wanted to do. I jokingly said it's going to be a lifelong search to find a job that replicates the experience that I had in the women's center. (Riya- interview)

In addition to the working environment, Riya appreciated that the internship gave them experience working in a field they are pursuing professionally. As an intern Riya was able to explore a wide range of topics and issues that were important to them. The influence of their

engagement also contributed to their decision to apply to some interdisciplinary graduate programs that would allow them to continue to explore the myriad interests they were able to write about with the women's center.

For Neil, his women's center engagement was able to provide him with the sense of purpose he needed to persist to graduation. Neil began his internship with the women's center after a particularly challenging time in his life when he was looking for new ways to get back involved in the university community. He applied for an internship team which aligned with a career he wanted to pursue at the time. Neil ultimately chose a different career path for himself, but the internship gave Neil hope for the future and a sense of pride in the work he was doing. He described the impact:

> It helped me construct this vision for myself that gave me hope, that helped me get through my last two years of college. The career didn't pan out, and that's fine, I'm happy where I landed. But it was really important to me at the time, I felt really proud of myself. Because I felt like, despite everything that I had gone through, that I was back on track to make something of myself. (Neil- interview)

Although Neil did not make many significant connections with his peers as an intern, the experience motivated him to persist to graduation. As an intern, Neil also got to work on a project in collaboration with the campus LGBTQIA Center, another office which Neil frequented. Neil described the collaboration as the most meaningful thing he accomplished as an intern. That collaboration helped Neil connect his passion for LGBTQIA rights with the women's center's mission. He reflected: "it was a chance for me to pursue the things that I cared about within the bounds of the women's center's mission for gender equity" (Neil- interview).

Neil's experience as an intern and his connection with Maria, the internship course instructor, both influenced his future vocational interests and exposed him to topics that he continued to pursue in graduate school. Although Neil chose a different career path than the one he pursued as an intern, he gained skills and knowledge that he continues to use today.

June's engagement with the women's center also provided her with valuable skills. Her mentoring experience helped her embrace flexibility and change. Flexibility is a vital skill for youth work and June learned that it is important to have a plan, but it is also necessary to know when to change the plan based on the group's needs for that day. She talked about the challenges of running a virtual mentoring group and youth choosing to keep their cameras off during the group meeting. She described her evolving understanding of the situation:

> The mentors would always have our cameras on, and we'd try to encourage the mentees to have their cameras on. But then we started to realize, we're in their personal space, and some of the mentees are also taking care of their younger siblings. So, we started to be more flexible. If you can turn your camera on, it'd be great, and also, if you don't it's totally understandable. (June-interview)

June and her peers started the year with more rigidity regarding mentee engagement, and believed they should consistently encourage the youth to turn on their cameras for the virtual meetings. As time went on, June realized that this goal was not reasonable or helpful, and that mentees might have any number of reasons for wanting to keep their cameras off. June learned to be more flexible and empathetic to the mentees' perspectives and to adjust her expectations. June also credited her engagement with the women's center with helping her develop better interpersonal skills, including listening.

> Mentoring taught me a lot about relationships and things that were not necessarily taught in school. Things like listening and communicating with people, those things continue to be important to me, and I try to remain aware of them and implement them in my life. (June- interview)

June is not completely sure what kind of future career she might have, but she continues to be interested in youth work and is currently doing youth work with an international service organization. She is grateful for the experiences and growth she gained as part of her women's center engagement.

Like others, Alison's experiences also helped solidify her vocational interest in youth work. Her engagement gave her practical experience working with young people and clarified how much she enjoyed that work. She reflected thusly:

> Vocationally I always thought I wanted to work with younger people, especially in terms of mental health. And I think it made me more assured that it was something I could do, because I enjoyed it a lot. I could feel how much I cared about it. And that's something I wouldn't have realized to that extent had I not been a mentor. (Alison- interview)

Alison is currently applying to mental health-related graduate programs and is interested in focusing on children and adolescents in her career. Her women's center engagement helped her establish her passion for youth work and aided in her personal growth and increased self-confidence. In addition to skills and career interests, participants reported that their engagements gave them increased knowledge and self-awareness as well as establishing a continued interest in community engagement.

Experiential Learning and Community Engagement

Even when women's center engagement did not necessarily directly influence participants' career aspirations, it still contributed to their growth and development. Although college was challenging for Albus in many ways, he talked about how important that time was for him in terms of the breadth of knowledge and critical thinking skills he gained. For Albus, the women's center offered an opportunity to see classroom theory put into practice. He explained:

> In my classrooms it was so theory heavy in such complicated language and it didn't give me time to either reflect or apply that knowledge. The women's center gave me experiences that tied the theory to the practice. (Albus- interview)

Albus' women's center engagement helped him make connections between the things he was learning in his classes and his own personal experiences. College was the first time that Albus was able to really consider his intersecting identities and learn about his positionality in the world. The women's center helped him make connections in his newfound knowledge:

> As I mentioned earlier, I believe college really allowed me to explore the theories related to my identities, including my race, gender, sexual orientation, and low-income status. It was kind of like zooming out of my individual experience and seeing that there were entire fields devoted to these identities, which is empowering. The women's center helped me develop as an identifying man but also in combating gender stereotypes and learning about the nuance and fluidity of gender and sexuality. (Albus- journal)

Experiential learning manifested for participants in different ways. For Albus, he was able to identify connections between his classroom and out-of-classroom experiences. For Hannah, mentoring forced her to confront some of her unconscious biases and learn not to judge people too quickly. As discussed previously, Hannah developed a meaningful relationship with

her mentee, Susan. However, at first, Hannah had found herself feeling intimidated by Susan. Susan had an alternative style and seemed uncomfortable and quiet when they first started meeting. As Hannah and Susan's relationship developed, Hannah came to realize that her initial judgements about her mentee had been unfair. Hannah discussed the impact of this learning experience:

> It was insane. I think if anyone would ever ask me if they should do this program, like, I had a couple of friends that were kind of like curious. And I think at first I was like, I don't know, dude, do it if you want. But by the end, every single person that asked me about it, I was like, do it like, it's gonna change how you think. I had to recognize my unconscious bias. I didn't realize going into it that I had already made this judgment about Susan. But by the end of it, I was so much more aware of how I acted. (Hannah-interview)

Hannah's experience gave her a heightened awareness of her own unconscious judgements, upon which she was able to reflect and grow. It also instilled in Hannah an ongoing interest in community outreach. When choosing internships, Hannah mentioned that one of the draws of her current company was their generous volunteer leave that they offered. Hannah's engagement taught her more about herself and helped her recognize a passion for community outreach.

Stephanie's engagement inspired her to stay involved in community outreach efforts. Stephanie is still involved with mentoring and has a future goal of starting her own mentoring program. She talks about the women's center's impact on her current interests and passions:

> My time as a mentor contributes to how I'm still able to connect with younger girls today. I make volunteering a vital and necessary part of my life so that I can maintain

> connection with my community. I got involved with a mentoring program in my local area this past year. (Stephanie- journal)

Stephanie continues to be involved in community engagement and mentoring. Her work with the women's center gave skills she uses in all aspects of her life and helped solidify her interest in volunteer outreach. A shift in perspective was a benefit mentioned by several participants, enough so that it became its own sub-theme. The next section will examine what participants said specifically about their understanding of perspective in relation to their women's center engagement.

Perspective

An expanded perspective was a common theme among several participants, particularly in terms of understanding the relationship between the university and the city community in which it resides. Parker, like several others mentioned that their women's center engagement allowed them to get out of the "university bubble" and learn more about the community beyond the campus. They described the benefits:

> It communicated to me the importance of leaving the university bubble on a regular basis. I think that was really beneficial, it pushed me to keep challenging myself. The work helped me grow. I think stepping outside of the university community through the women's center was good. (Parker- interview)

Getting away from campus gave participants the opportunity to think beyond their own perspective and consider the experiences of people who were not connected to the university. For Stephanie, she appreciated the opportunity to understand other's experiences better:

> Being a mentor encouraged me to keep being involved with the city. I recognized that there's life outside of the university. I think that was the biggest takeaway, because I

> really got to spend a lot of time with Michelle's family. It was nice to see what it was like to live in the city and not be a college student. (Stephanie- interview)

College is often a very insular experience, and participants found that having experiences with community members and learning more about the city gave them a better understanding of the university's positionality. As with almost any college town, there are tensions between the city and the university, and Hannah reflected on the experience of learning more about those:

> The women's center created a bridge to the community that I didn't have prior. I had never thought about what the university's impact was on city housing. And I remember in our mentoring class, we learned about how rent was going up and how it was displacing people who have been living in certain neighborhoods their whole lives. (Hannah- interview)

The critical thinking skills Hannah refined in college and as a mentor continue to impact how she views and engages with those around her. Hannah's expanded perspective has also influenced how she thinks about the city in which she currently resides. She explained the connection:

> I work in a corporate office, and I interact with these professionals, you know, 40 hours a week. But I'm not really part of this community. I live downtown in a brand-new apartment. And the apartments right across the street are probably at least $600 or $700 cheaper than mine. So, I'm just very aware that in moving here, I am taking a space from someone that was here before me, it's something that I wouldn't have thought about had I not been a mentor. (Hannah- interview)

College students can have an understandably myopic view of their own lives. Engaging with the community gave participants the benefit of considering life beyond college. Jerri

pointed out that engaging with youth pushed them to put their own college issues aside. They recognized that engaging with the mentees required a different tactic:

> Being a mentor encouraged me to be more reflective of college. Because you're interacting with middle schoolers, and they don't care what classes you're taking. That means nothing to them. I think it probably gave me more perspective. (Jerri- interview)

Seeing beyond the moment-in-time that is college was a benefit for several participants. Jacqueline reflected on the perspective her women's center engagement afforded her:

> Being a part of the women's center gave me so much perspective and I think it's why I took a step back from other organizations I was involved in. Because those organizations were suffocating, and I realized that those things didn't matter. When you're in college it feels like those things matter and that you need to be doing the most and know all these people and go to all these parties. But, at the end of the day, what filled my cup was doing things like the mentoring program. And so I think that gave me a lot of perspective and kind of helped me realize the kind of people that I wanted to surround myself with. And I would say that since leaving college my core group of best friends have the same values that I saw in the people I was surrounded by in the women's center. (Jacqueline-interview)

Getting out of the university bubble gave Jacqueline a new perspective that helped her see beyond the insular college experience. It helped her prioritize her commitments and values and focus her energy on the things she cared about most. Victoria also talked about the importance of getting away from the university and learning more about the community beyond campus. She affirmed the experience is something more students should have:

> My participation in the mentoring program helped me understand where I was positioned at the university, and it made me think that more students should engage with the city community, not in any kind of capacity to be a savior, but just to, again, understand your positionality in relation to it all. (Victoria- interview)

So many participants talked about the value of being able to better understand the relationship between the university and the community. Since graduating Erica has returned to work at her alma mater and has been reflecting on living in the city as a community member now, rather than a college student. Erica observed that her experiences as a mentor and her experiences in her specific field of study both contributed to her expanded awareness of the community beyond the university. She said:

> I feel like my university experience, greatly due to the mentoring program and my major, I had a lot of interaction with the non-university community. And so, while I loved the university, I also really loved the city. And I felt like I understood the city and the city's history and what was going on in the public schools. And I just had a broader conceptual understanding of the small piece the university plays in this great city. I am pretty sure that does not happen when you are in the business school doing whatever they do over there [laughs]. (Erica- interview)

Both Erica and Bailey made observations about the differences between what they learned in their education-focused majors versus what other students appeared to be learning in fields of study that were not as human focused. Because women's center engagement attracts students from many different schools in the university, it was in the mentoring class that Bailey realized that other students were not necessarily learning about the same things that she was learning about in her major. She explained her observations:

> I realized, by talking to people who are from different majors, that what we talked about in the mentor class isn't discussed in other areas. And I think that just is fascinating because I was in my own little education school bubble, where we talk about intersectionality, we talk about salient identity, we talk about racism, these are all common discussions. And so it was interesting seeing people have these conversations for the first time, having already had them. And I was like, huh, what do they teach you in the business school? It was very interesting. (Bailey- interview)

Both Bailey and Erica held similar perspectives that important conversations about society, positionality, and identity might not be happening in other parts of the university. Their women's center engagement provided them, and others, an opportunity to engage in important conversations and maybe fill in gaps for some students who were not taking many other social justice-oriented courses. Neil similarly talked about the value of women's center engagement in exposing students to new perspectives. Like others, he also expressed appreciation for the opportunity to think about his own positionality as a university student within the larger community:

> I think the experience of organizing for gender equity at the women's center was positive, not only because of my personal identity development but because of the chance to practice reflexivity, do the privilege work associated with unpacking our identity as university students, and understand how my positionality allowed us to do work in ways that really reached people. That's why I'm proud of the work I was able to do as an intern, particularly in collaboration with the LGBTQIA center on campus. It made me feel like my identity was not merely symbolic, but a form of active representation. I hope the women's center continues to incorporate what women/people of color and/or gender-

> diverse students in the margins know about gender-based issues and bring them into their programs. It's positive for us and likely spills over to impact the majority members of the internship program. (Neil- journal)

Neil hoped that the women's center would continue to prioritize the voices of students on the margins, both to empower those students and to expand the worldview of other students with more privilege. Expanded perspective was mentioned by most participants as an important benefit in their women's center engagement. The unique opportunity to engagement with the community on a regular basis gave participants a more holistic understanding of their place in the community and more sensitivity to the relationship between the city and the university.

Lacking the Resources to Thrive

Unfortunately, not all participants described their experiences as significantly beneficial. Sofia struggled to find meaningful connections in college and some of the social connections she developed revolved around alcohol. Sofia acknowledged that her alcohol use impacted her ability to benefit from her women's center experience, and from college in general. Sofia was able to persist to graduation, however she admits that she does not remember a lot of her college experience. While Sofia did not feel like she connected in a significant way with her peers in the women's center, she did acknowledge that she had some happy memories and hopes that she benefitted from the program in some way:

> I mean I do have good memories. And I have pictures of us like in the cafeteria making arts and crafts. So I mean, I did benefit from those relationships and my mentee wasn't the only one that bonded with me. There were other girls that I remember their names who bonded with me. But obviously, I wasn't their mentor, so it wasn't like a super connected relationship. But I think it was nice. I like to think with everything I was going

> through that the mentoring program was something I looked forward to every week. But was it something tangible that I benefited from? I think it did benefit me in some way. I just don't, like I've mentioned, I just feel like I could have benefited more, but maybe I just didn't take advantage.

Sofia wished she could have taken more advantage of the opportunities available while she was in college. She also mentioned that she might have benefited from more supervision in the mentoring program. Sofia's alcohol dependency impacted her ability to flourish in college and continued to harm her after graduation. She is doing much better now, but she wished that the university had offered more addiction resources while she was a student:

> I didn't feel supported. I didn't have anyone to talk to about my addiction. And if that resource had been there at the time, maybe I would have felt more comfortable. Because instead I just held it inside. I just feel like, you know, addiction hits every socioeconomic class. But it really harms poor people, because we don't always have the resources to go to rehab or have people that can continue to help us, you know, because they have to go to work, they have to provide for themselves and their family. (Sofia- interview)

For Sofia, her college experience did not provide the resources and support she needed to thrive. When students' basic needs are not met, it is nearly impossible to benefit from other opportunities college has to offer.

Conclusion

Humans crave belonging, and that theme was present in every participant's story. Participants shared the ways they navigated their intersectional identities while searching for places on campus where they felt accepted and valued. Most participants identified some level of meaningful connection as part of their engagement, but not all. For participants who did not find

significant connections it often correlated with feeling that their systemically marginalized identities were not validated or understood. Participants also reported numerous benefits from their women's center engagement. These included listening and interpersonal skills, increased self-confidence, a sense of purpose, clarified career interests, and an expanded perspective of their positionality as college students within the university and the city beyond campus. The next chapter will explore how these findings answer my research questions, discuss how this data fits within the existing body of knowledge, and provide recommendations for policy and practice as well as future research.

Chapter V

Discussion

This study attempted to answer three questions: (1) How do students from marginalized identities and backgrounds decide to commit to high engagement with the women's center? (2) How do students from marginalized identities and backgrounds who are highly engaged with the women's center describe their experiences? (3) How do these students see their engagement with the women's center contributing to their development? Findings indicated that seeking community, connection, and a sense of belonging were significant themes in the answers to the first and second question. Question one reviews the components of student engagement and covers the main reasons that participants chose to commit to high engagement. Question two is organized by experiences with the women's center, experiences with peers, experiences with youth, and a discussion section on how marginalized identities impacted participant experiences. Question three is organized by competency domains (Kuh, 1995) with subsequent discussion about the importance of persisting to graduation and a summary of development benefits. Following the research question discussions, I give recommendations for policy and practice based on my findings and implications for future research.

Research Questions

How do students from marginalized identities and backgrounds decide to commit to high engagement with the women's center?

Astin (1984) defined student engagement as including both behavioral and psychological components. He emphasized that the behavioral aspects of student engagement are critical. Astin (1984) stated, "It is not so much what the individual thinks or feels, but what the individual does that defines and identifies involvement" (p. 519). While behavior is certainly a necessary

component of engagement, it is clear from participants' stories that their psychological investment was just as important. In deciding to commit to high engagement with the women's center, participants heavily invested physical and psychological energy into their intern and mentor roles.

When deciding where to invest their energy, students have myriad choices to consider. Participants who committed to the women's center often did so because their values aligned with the mission of the center or the program with which they got involved. Altruism, or an interest in contributing to something seen as worthwhile, was a factor that motivated several participants to commit. Participants were also interested in gaining experience and skills that aligned with potential future career areas. For some participants, their engagement helped clarify vocational interests. Several participants who served as mentors also noted the program structure and oversight as contributing to their decision.

Finding community and sense of belonging was a major component of participants' decisions to commit. Several participants who transferred into the university hoped that their engagement would help them find meaningful social connections in a new environment. The research is clear that out of classroom engagement is key to students finding community and fostering a sense of belonging on campus (Astin, 1993; Harper & Quaye, 2015; Kuh, 1993; 1995; 2009; Tinto, 2000). Participants sought an increased sense of belonging through their engagement, and most were able to build at least some meaningful connections. Participants' experiences regarding their sense of belonging will be explored in depth in the following questions.

How do students from marginalized identities and backgrounds who are highly engaged with the women's center describe their experiences?

Overall, most participants described experiences in the women's center that fostered an increased sense of belonging through connections with others, where it be faculty/staff, peers, and/or youth. Murray and Vlasnik (2015) cited women's center student interns expressing feelings of "accomplishment and pride" and "a stronger sense of belonging" on campus as well as an interest in remaining engaged in social justice work after graduation (p. 124). Participants in this study revealed many of the same outcomes. However, most participants had complex experiences that included both feelings of belonging and exclusion. Experiences are organized into those with the women's center, those with peers, and those with youth. A final section analyzes how systemically marginalized identities impact participants' experiences.

Experiences with the Women's Center

For several participants, the women's center was a unique place on campus. Neil and Jerri both noted a special role that the center held in terms of making space for and collaborating with students. Although neither Neil nor Jerri felt they made meaningful connections with peers, they both still had overall positive impressions of the women's center and the work being done there. In addition, Neil felt connected with and inspired by his intern course instructor, Maria. These experiences imply that even if students do not make meaningful connections with others, they may still feel a sense of connection to the women's center as an entity. Other participants like Jacqueline, Hannah, and Victoria talked about personally feeling welcomed and supported in the women's center. Jacqueline and Hannah both mentioned that they saw the women's center as a place that attracted good people. For these participants their feelings of connection and belonging went beyond feeling connected to specific individuals to encompass the women's center as a whole. Dela Peña (2009) researched students' experiences with a women's center as a third space (existing outside of the public and private sphere). Similar to her findings, some

participants identified the women's center as a safe space which interconnected both the public sphere work of interning and mentoring, and the private sphere care they received as individuals.

Riya attested that their women's center engagement increased their sense of belonging in college. However, they also observed a discrepancy between the welcoming and supportive atmosphere of their intern team versus their attempts to connect with other women's center staff and leadership. Unlike Jacqueline and Victoria, Riya's personal connections on their internship team did not translate to feelings of connection to the women's center overall. On the contrary, Riya recognized that their meaningful connections with individuals did not inherently foster feelings of belonging with the center as a whole. PWI women's centers and college campuses have historically expected underrepresented student populations to adapt to the "values and norms" of these environments (Berger & Milem, 1999; Salsbury & MillerMacPhee, 2019). In Riya's case, the values and norms established in the women's center did not serve them. This will be discussed further in a later section.

Experiences with Peers

Identity was at the heart of many participants' interactions with peers, playing out in unique ways with overarching themes. Participants who held more privileged identities were more likely to report positive experiences and describe connecting with peers as coming more easily. Participants with intersecting systemically marginalized identities were more likely to experience feelings of exclusion. Systemic oppression complicated or hindered some participants' abilities to connect with peers. Areas of identity where this was most often observed include socioeconomic status (SES), race and ethnicity, and sexuality and gender identity. Overcoming these barriers was often aided through connections with specific individuals or small groups.

Five participants described their SES becoming more salient after matriculation. These participants were confronted with a level of affluence among some of their peers that they had not previously experienced. For Victoria, her SES became more complicated, as she realized that not all people of color at the university were from similar lower-income backgrounds, and that her low-income background was an added layer of identity complexity for her, on top of her racial identity. For participants like Albus, Alison, Sofia, and Neil, their limited income backgrounds directly impacted their experiences with peers. These participants shared feelings of being excluded and judged based on their SES and its intersections with other systemically marginalized identities. Albus quickly learned that being open about his background with peers left him vulnerable to ridicule and judgement. Alison felt that some of her women's center peers seemed oblivious to the experiences of low-income individuals, including herself, if they did not see visual markers that labeled them as being low-income. Sofia recognized that her more affluent peers could avoid judgement for their poor behavior in a way that she could not. And Neil was shocked to realize the level of financial comfort and resources that some of his peers experienced, while he struggled to make ends meet.

Aries and Seider (2005) found that lower income students at elite colleges were more aware of their SES and more likely to experience feelings of exclusion than students at less selective institutions. Experiences like those described above "reminded lower income students that they were outsides from a culture and set of experiences shared by other students" (p. 428). Elite institutions have a greater percentage of affluent students and have been making efforts to provide more equitable opportunities for students from lower-income families. However Aries and Seider (2005) attest that prestigious colleges must pay attention "to the challenges as well as the benefits for low income students who enter elite colleges" (p. 420). It is clear from

participants' accounts that SES has a major impact on a students' experiences and that more support and resources are needed. The impact of oppression and marginalization on students' engagement in higher education is under-researched (Stuber, 2009). Although the existing research makes it clear that lower-income students may struggle to find a sense of belonging at college, and particularly at elite colleges.

Most participants of color also reported feelings of exclusion or disconnection from peers, which is consistent with current research on PWIs (Keels & Velez, 2020). Erica sometimes felt that the majority White mentor course left her feeling disconnected, but her seniority in her mentoring group and collaborating with her best friend empowered her make that space her own and one that was comfortable for her and the mentees of color. Stephanie, Victoria, and Alison all shared experiences of feeling that some of their White peers were not interested in getting to know them or others. Sofia felt that her mentoring group was a safe space to be a woman but did not feel comfortable sharing the other systemically marginalized parts of herself. And Neil felt tokenized in his internship course, where he was one of a few people of color, and where his peers often seemed to be learning about oppression and systemic injustices for the first thing, while Neil had been dealing with such realities his whole life. Silver (2020) attested that students' of color sense of belonging in out of classroom engagement was "frequently limited or contingent" (p. 1291). This unfortunately held true for participants' experiences.

For participants like Victoria, Alison, Erica, and Stephanie, despite reporting feelings of exclusion or disconnection from some peers, they were still able to build meaningful relationships with at least some of their peers in their women's center engagement. And while Riya reported feelings of exclusion from women's center leadership staff, their intern team

experience fostered a deep sense of belonging for them. For other participants like Albus, Sofia, and Neil, finding meaningful connections was more complicated. Albus felt that his women's center engagement validated his queer identity for the first time for him, but his limited income background left him feeling excluded. And neither Sofia nor Neil felt that they were able to make meaningful connections with peers in their engagement. For Jerri and Parker, not feeling comfortable coming out to their mentoring groups made it difficult for them to connect with peers. It was only in Parker's second year when they were comfortable being open about their identity and that identity was also helpful to the group that they reported feeling validated in their mentoring role.

However, not all participants with marginalized identities reported feelings of exclusion. Bailey felt comfortable and safe coming out to her group and described her experiences as exclusively positive. And her bisexual identity motivated her to proactively advocate for LGBTQIA youth in her group. For some participants, their marginalized identities were less salient to their experiences with the women's center, at least as they remembered them. Hannah and June were two participants of color who did not recall any specific experiences which they associated with their identities. Jacqueline was the sole participant who's only marginalized identity was being a cisgender woman, she described her experiences as exclusively positive and connecting with peers as coming easily. While cisgender women certainly experience discrimination and feelings of exclusion in college (Vlasnk, 2011), Jacqueline's choice of a woman-dominated major and out of classroom engagement might have contributed to her positive experiences, in addition to the privilege she holds as a straight, White, woman.

When participants felt that their identities were seen and valued, they were more likely to feel meaningfully connected to their peers. Prior research has established that students'

perceptions of discrimination or prejudice impact decision-making and can ultimately impact persistence to graduation (Cabrera et al., 1999). Although, thankfully, all participants graduated, their perceptions and sense of belonging still had major impacts on their college experience.

Experiences with Youth

For most participants who served as mentors, their connections also included the mentees with which they worked. Connecting with mentees based on shared identities was important, and for some participants it provided support or validation that was lacking from their connections with some of their peers. Several participants reported that the parts of their identities that felt like areas of difference and isolation from peers were things that felt like strengths when connecting with mentees. Parker did not feel comfortable coming out to their peers in their mentoring group their first year. But in their second year of mentoring, Parker's identity became a useful resource for the group to navigate how to support the several LGBTQIA identified mentees in the program. Similarly, Bailey's identity as a lesbian made her more sensitive and responsive to their group's LGBTQIA identified mentees.

Several mentors of color including Stephanie, Erica, Victoria, and Alison found strength and validation in the connections they formed with mentees of color. Sofia also shared that her motivation to continue as a mentor for a second year was to stay connected with her mentee. Although Sofia did not feel meaningfully connected to any of her peers, her care for her mentee motivated her to stay engaged. Building mentoring relationships based on their shared identities with mentees was a meaningful part of participants' engagement experiences. These mentors saw their shared identity as a helpful basis upon which to form a relationship and felt pride in being able to serve as a role model for youth of color. Alison and Albus also both shared how their

salient identities felt like areas of strength with their mentees, while also sometimes leaving them feeling isolated from some peers.

For students of color at predominantly white institutions it can be challenging to find representation among faculty and staff in addition to connections with peers who share your identity (Berger & Milem, 1999; Harper & Quaye, 2015). For the participants mentioned above, finding connection and validation in their mentoring relationships provided an alternative form of representation. Where these participants did not always feel connected with some of their engagement peers, their connections with mentees provided another source of belonging. I see these connections as an act of resistance. Finding and building ties with a third population (not faculty/staff or peers) outside of the university which had (for many participants) a positive impact on their university experience.

How Marginalization Impacts Experience

Chang et al. (2006) remind us that cross-racial interactions, and I would expand to say cross-identity interactions, require more than simply putting people of different backgrounds together. An anti-racist campus culture must already be established to ensure those interactions are positive for the marginalized students. Without that establishment, it is based only on the knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity of the individuals involved in the interaction. Without more structural support and education in place, Neil's experience as one of the few students of color in his internship course was tokenizing. Riya identified that their positive engagement experiences were due to them finding the right connections on their team. However, Riya astutely observed that even though their experiences were positive, they did not think the women's center's structure was one that innately supported students from systemically marginalized backgrounds.

For low-income students, it is often particularly challenging to make connections and find belonging in college because their SES is an invisible identity (Aries & Seider, 2005). While many campuses have identity centers for students based on other aspects such as race and ethnicity or sexuality and gender identity, centers or spaces for low-income students are less common. While Albus was in college, he organized a national conference for low-income and first-generation college students on his campus. Getting involved in that organization was very meaningful to Albus and gave him space where he felt normalized in an otherwise alienating college experience. But Albus had to go beyond the university to bring this national conference to his campus. A program of that type was not available on campus for him at that time. More resources for low-income and first-generation students are needed, in addition to more education and open conversation about these student experiences on campus, and in the women's center.

It is clear from participants' accounts that while many of them were able to find connection and support, the structure of their engagement experiences were not necessarily designed to support all of them. This seems particularly true for participants of color and participants from limited socioeconomic backgrounds, and for several students those identities intersected. To be clear, most participants had positive experiences in their engagements. However, students navigating discrimination and exclusion had to put in more effort to make those experiences a reality. Prior research has established that student time and effort is finite (Astin, 1984), and Keels and Velez (2020) affirms that students of color navigate "racialized stressors, which tax their cognitive, emotional, and physiological energies and undermine their ability to focus on academics" (p. 25). So while most of the study participants made meaningful connections in their engagements, those experiences generally took more of a toll on the capacity of participants from intersecting systemically marginalized identities.

In addition to the challenges outlined above, Sofia brought attention to the lack of substance abuse resources available to her in college. Sofia struggled to find meaningful connections, and ultimately connected with a group of friends whose time together revolved around heavy alcohol use. College culture often emphasizes drinking, and students trying to avoid it can feel isolated and disconnected from their peers (Shadley, 2020). Students struggling with substance abuse or those in recovery can face stigma and judgement from peers and administrators. Shadley (2020) affirms that colleges need to do more to educate the college population about these students' experiences and "support and normalize substance-free living at all events" (p. 77). Had the campus culture been different for Sofia, she might have had a more beneficial college experience. Her experience highlights the problematic nature of normalizing substance use on college campuses and the challenges students face when they cannot find support for substance abuse or recovery.

Museus, Griffin, and Quaye (2020) affirm that engagement opportunities can lead to positive outcomes for students of color, and other systemically marginalized students, but "evidence that the engagement opportunities *equalize* the quality of college experiences and outcomes is limited at best." (p. 17). Essentially acknowledging that while marginalized students have positive outcomes, it does not mean that those positive outcomes cancel out their experiences of exclusion or discrimination. Traditionally, HEIs have offered engagement opportunities that require marginalized students to fit into or assimilate with the dominant culture (Berger & Milem, 1999). As discussed previously, Tinto's (2000) traditional model of college student retention does not fit with the experiences of minority students (Tierney, 1999). It assumes that they will break from their families and cultures upon entering college, which Tierney (1999) refers to as cultural suicide. Participants' experiences reaffirm much of the

literature that shows that systemically marginalized students have a harder time finding a sense of belonging in HEIs and that a lot of engagement opportunities are not designed to be culturally responsive to a diverse student population.

How do these students see their engagement with the women's center contributing to their development?

Research has shown that out of classroom experiences are just as important to student development as those that take place inside the classroom, and participants' experiences align with those findings. Participants described a range of developmental benefits gained in their engagements. For some participants, their engagement directly influenced career trajectories, and for others they noted life skills gained that serve them in other career paths. Developmental benefits outlined by participants aligned with previously documented in research (Astin, 1993; Berger & Milem, 1999; Cress et al., 2001; Kuh, 1993; Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 2000).

Competency Domains

Kuh (1995) documented five competency areas in which students identified positive development from out of classroom engagement: interpersonal competence, practical competence, cognitive complexity, knowledge and academic skills, and humanitarianism. Study participants identified benefits across all five competency domains, and they provide a useful way of organizing findings.

Interpersonal Competence. Interpersonal competency refers to students' increased self-awareness, autonomy, self-confidence, social competency, and sense of purpose (Kuh, 1995). Stephanie, Parker, Neil, and Alison all identified increased confidence as a benefit of their engagement. Their engagement with the women's center gave them the opportunity to try new things that were out of their comfort zones and prove to themselves they could handle those

situations. Bonebright et al. (2012) also noted increased self-confidence as a positive outcome cited by several participants in their own study on students' experiences with their women's center. Stephanie and Alison both mentioned challenging situations that required their persistence, and ultimately lead to them feeling more capable. Erica, June, Alison, Parker, and Stephanie also identified an increased level of self-awareness. Participants cited situations where they were able to reflect on how their perspectives and the perspectives of others might differ and learning how to compromise and empathize with the other person.

Practical Competence. Many participants discussed increased practical and vocational competency through their women's center engagement. Parker, Bailey, Jacqueline, Victoria, Alison, and Riya all traced direct connections between their engagement and their career trajectories post-graduation. The women's center provided them with concrete experiences which helped them identify and clarify vocational interests. Riya and Victoria also mentioned the uniquely positive working environments they experienced at the women's center, and how those environments empowered them to set expectations for future jobs. For Victoria, her working environment affirmed for her that she did not have to change or conceal who she was in a professional setting.

Other participants, like Neil, who chose a different career trajectory after graduation, still cited skills that they learned in their engagement that they continue to rely on presently. Out of classroom engagement can give low-income students "the opportunity to cultivate the social and cultural resources" that make it easier to succeed after graduation (Stuber, 2009, p. 881). Neil explained that his internship was his first opportunity to work in a career setting and learn how to engage with professionals. That experience increased his confidence and gave him access to resources that helped him succeed in his chosen career path.

Cognitive Complexity. Cognitive complexity refers to a student's increased reflective judgement and the application of knowledge. Many participants described how their engagement helped expand their perspective beyond the student experience to encompass the relationship between their university and the community in which it is located. Participants expressed how their experiences forced them to think beyond themselves and consider their own perspectives and priorities in relation to others. Understanding of unconscious bias and cultural humility also increased. Cress et al. (2001) found that students who participate in leadership activities, such as being a mentor or intern, rate higher levels of increased self-reflexivity than nonparticipants. Engagement activities like the ones offered at the women's center give participants opportunities to increase their understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Knowledge and Academic Skills. Kuh (1995) explained that out-of-classroom experiences often "offer opportunities to apply knowledge obtained from coursework" (p. 136). Albus shared that his women's center engagement gave him the opportunity to see theories he was learning in his classes put to practice. Several participants who served as mentors discussed connections made between concepts learned in their mentor class and experiences they had in their mentoring role. The experiential learning solidified concepts taught in the classroom that stayed with students for years after graduation.

Humanitarianism. Many participants noted that their engagement experiences felt worthwhile, like they were doing something important with their time that had an impact outside of themselves. Stephanie and Hannah both mentioned an ongoing interest in community outreach beyond college. And many participants' vocational interests tended towards altruistic fields such as education and mental health.

Persisting to Graduation

While participants described a wide range of experiences, they all had the commonality of persisting to graduation. In addition to the benefits outlined above in the five competency domains, out of classroom engagement helps students stay connected and motivated in college life. Even in cases like Sofia's, where she was unsure about if and how she benefitted from her engagement, one can argue that her decision to remain a mentor for two years proves that she felt at least some level of connection with her mentee. And her multi-year engagement may still have aided in her ability to persist.

However, it is obvious that Sofia would have benefitted from more structural support, which could have led to her finding a sense of belonging in a safe and substance-free peer group. Struber (2009) observed that almost 70% of high school graduates go on to some form of higher education, and "the relevant question" is no longer "whether they complete their degree. It is increasingly important that scholars focus on the stratifying processes that take place on college campuses" (p. 877-87). So, while persisting to graduation is still an important measure for engagement outcomes, participants stories make it clear that it should not be the main positive outcome of engagement.

Developmental Benefits of Engagement

As Kezar (2007) asserted, student engagement goes beyond class participation to encompass the wide array of activities and experiences available at an institution. Engagement in cocurricular activities give students the opportunity to learn leadership and interpersonal skills skills that will be necessary when transitioning to a career; and such activities are a better predictor of workplace success than grades (Kuh, 1995). Researchers are clear that the learning that takes place outside of the classroom is just as important to student development and should

be considered an equally necessary part of the college student experience (Kuh, 1993; 1995, Harper & Quaye, 2015; Tinto, 2000; Harper & Antonio, 2008).

The women's center mentor and intern engagement roles are what Kuh (2009) referred to as high-impact activities. These activities "make a claim on student time and energy in ways that channel student effort toward productive activities and deepen learning" (Kuh, 2009, p. 688). High impact student engagement experiences benefit all students but can be particularly beneficial for students from systemically marginalized backgrounds (Kuh, 2009). However, these are also the students that face the most barriers to accessing and integrating into high-impact activities. Pendakur et al. (2020) attest that "countless cultural and contextual obstacles exist on the path of students being able to fully engage with all the campus offerings" (p. 4). The developmental benefits of the engagement opportunities studied here are clear, but those benefits came along with many feelings of exclusion and other negative emotions for students. It is obvious that engagement outcomes cannot focus on development benefits alone, without also considering the holistic experiences of students. There is still so much for HEIs to do to make engagement equitable.

Implications & Recommendations for Policy and Practice

It was clear from participants' experiences that, while the majority had positive experiences in their women's center engagement, the structure of their engagement was not inherently supportive of the diverse student population. Participants' engagement experiences with the women's center are a microcosm of the university as a whole. While these recommendations are for the women's center, they are also applicable to many other offices on campus. I also recognize that some aspects of these recommendations may already be underway

in the women's center. I offer them in their entirety but understand that only parts of them may be needed based on what is already in place.

Capacity Building

Participants recounted a range of positive and negative experiences with women's center staff and leadership, making it clear that staff's values, knowledge, and understanding around working with diverse student populations was inconsistent. Within HEIs it has become standard practice to hire one person in an office or unit whose role is focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The same is true of the women's center in this study, and this practice places the onus of responsibility on one person who has the impossible job of single-handedly creating an inclusive environment for diverse students. While DEI focused staff positions are valuable, they are only one part of the solution. A more holistic and effective solution is for the women's center to adopt a capacity building model for diversity and inclusion.

In a capacity building model, "staff and faculty competence around diversity and inclusion is considered a core institutional value" (Mauro and Mazaris, 2016, p. 4). Within this model, "staff diversity and inclusion competencies are regularly assessed, implemented or improved, and reassessed" (Mauro and Mazaris, 2016, p. 4). Making the women's center inclusive, welcoming, and culturally responsive first requires that all the women's center staff be in agreement about their values and practices regarding DEI. This would entail creating and implementing DEI-related continuing education for all women's center staff.

Pendakur et al. (2020) affirmed that engaging diverse student populations must be a shared responsibility across all faculty and staff within the university. They explained the importance of educating staff and faculty on the many factors that influence students' lived experiences. The authors stated: "Without a strong historical and political lens, it is easy for

educators to lose sight of how their campuses have evolved and, yet, continue to fail students" (Pendakur et al., 2020, p. 7). Continuing education for women's center staff would need to be ongoing, including regular discussions about current events on campus and around the world that impact students.

Capacity building would require regular evaluation of educational materials, ongoing implementation, and staff assessment. Capacity building efforts should be measured as part of the performance goals for individual staff and for the women's center as a unit. Ensuring that all women's center staff are gaining the same learning and development around DEI is the first step to creating an atmosphere that is culturally responsive to the myriad and fluctuating needs of a diverse student population.

Establish Student Learning Goals and Foster Positive Interactional Diversity

Participants reported varied experiences with peers with many having felt both senses of belonging and exclusion at different times. Based on these experiences it is clear women's center should be doing more to foster interactional diversity amongst students. Interactional diversity, socializing across identity, has been linked to myriad positive outcomes for students including enhanced critical thinking skills, higher self-esteem, and increased cultural awareness and appreciation, among many others (Harper & Antonio, 2008). However, the positive outcomes of interactional diversity are only consistently reported for White students, while students of color report inconsistent, and sometimes negative, outcomes (Harper & Antonio, 2008). In order for the women's center to foster interactional diversity that benefits all students, student learning goals must first be established.

Student-facing staff and administrators are often left out of conversations about student learning. However, staff are responsible for students' cocurricular education, and should

approach it with the same intentionality of faculty creating courses (Harper & Antonio, 2008). Learning goals would help the supervisors of interns and mentors structure the engagement experience and would guide course curriculum for the courses that interns and mentors take during their engagement. Creating learning goals should be done in collaboration with students (Harper & Quaye, 2015). Harper and Antonio (2008) encourage educators to become "learners and use their discoveries to craft deliberate programmatic and policy interventions" (p. 11). Effective learning goals would require identifying strategic "outcomes, activities and experiences to actualize those goals, and assessment plans" (Harper & Antonio, 2008, p. 12). Implementation of learning goals would also require personal and unit-wide accountability. Learning goals should be communicated to students at the beginning of their engagement and should be assessed throughout.

Student learning goals would be a necessary first step towards fostering interactional diversity that is beneficial for all students. Educators often believe, incorrectly, that putting diverse students together in a room is enough to foster cross-cultural learning (Chang et al., 2005; Harper & Antonio, 2008; Pendakur et al., 2020). Rather, educators "must facilitate structured opportunities for these dialogues to transpire" (Pendakur et al., 2020, p. 8). Facilitated interactional diversity requires that educators "are conscious of every action they undertake and are able to consider the long-range implications of decisions" (Pendakur et al., 2020, p. 8). Creating space for these dialogues also requires women's center educators to understand their students' "prior knowledge and experiences" that they bring with them to their engagement (Pendakur et al., 2020, p. 8). This knowledge informs the educator's decisions and preparation. Establishing and implementing student learning goals would be the first step towards fostering

beneficial cross-cultural learning and interactional diversity amongst students engaged in the women's center.

Feminist Evaluation and Assessment

As mentioned previously, effective interactional diversity requires an understanding of the students engaged. The Council for Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education asserted that women's centers must "identify [and assess] relevant and desirable student learning and development outcomes" and "provide evidence of impact on outcomes" (Goettsch et al., 2015, p. 918). Clear learning goals and assessment and evaluation are part of best practices for higher education programs and services, including women's centers. Regular evaluation and assessment is necessary to understand students, assess learning outcomes, and proactively respond to students' needs. Evaluation and assessment should also be developed in collaboration with students. Beardsley and Miller (2002) stated that feminist evaluations should be collaborative between stakeholders and evaluators to "circumvent the hierarchical organizational context" (p. 57). Feminist evaluation and assessment recognize that student input is necessary to ensure their needs are being served.

Assessment should garner qualitative and quantitative data that can be used to support students' engagement experiences from start to finish (Carter et al., 2019). Assessment can be used to measure students' prior understanding of the learning goals upon entering their engagement and their learning outcomes at its conclusion. With students' permission, information about their prior knowledge and experiences can be shared with the intern/mentor supervisor and course instructor. Student experiences during their engagement should also be assessed at the end of each semester. Assessment should include specific questions to better understand students' sense of belonging with policies in place to support students who seem to

be struggling. Carter et al. (2019) affirmed the importance of feminist evaluation and assessment in women's center work. They encouraged women's centers to:

> Employ evaluation as a feminist strategy to gauge how well we are doing what we say we do. Do we really develop students as leaders? Do we increase students' critical thinking? Do we support students in ways we hope to support them? To think about evaluation in this way calls for a centering of evaluation in our work. Rather than thinking about evaluation as an add-on, something to be done at the completion of a project, reframing evaluation as process-oriented can be transformative and feminist by design. (Carter et al., 2019, p. 111).

Evaluation and assessment needs to be centered in the work of the women's center. This is the only way to be sure that the women's center is meeting its mission and providing the type of engagement experiences that students want and need.

A Diverse Student Advisory Board

As stated above, student learning goals and evaluation and assessment should be crafted in collaboration with the students the women's center serves. To this end, a diverse student advisory board should be established for the women's center. To best serve students, women's center staff must listen to students to understand what they need from their educational experiences. Pendakur et al. (2020) explained:

> When educators speak with students from diverse backgrounds, they will begin to see patterns in their stories emerge and gain a more nuanced understanding of their needs. In addition, educators can observe the particularities in students' experiences and begin to develop customized services to improve student outcomes. (p. 10)

Too often student-facing administrators make assumptions about how to best serve students based on their own beliefs, rather than gathering data from students themselves. A student advisory board would support the women's center's mission of serving students by ensuring that the services and opportunities being offered are aligned with students' needs.

Intentional Engagement with other Cultural and Identity Centers on Campus

Student services and engagement opportunities are often siloed across college campuses, making it challenging for students to find resources and community (Mauro & Mazaris, 2016). Participants' experiences illustrated the challenges many of them faced in trying to find support and connection. Collaborating with other cultural and identity centers on campus is one of the ways that the women's center can stay abreast of all the resources available to students. In addition, these collaborations can help women's center staff stay engaged with the needs and experiences of diverse student groups, and how they can better serve them. CAS best practices also stated that women's centers "must collaborate with colleagues and departments across the institution to promote an inclusive campus climate free of discrimination, harassment, and other barriers to success" (Goettsch et al., 2015, p. 920). While the women's center does some collaboration already, there is more that can be done to intentionally engage diverse student populations in collaboration with other centers and units. Intentional engagement should also include learning outcomes for programs and assessment of programs upon completion.

Implications for Future Research

This study has only scratched the surface of diverse students' experiences with one women's center. Further research at the same institution could use a mixed methods approach with a larger sample size to understand the trends among students' experiences and to garner more input from students on how the women's center can best serve students. Future research

could also include current students and students who engage with the women's center to varying degrees. Three participants mentioned negative experiences while receiving counseling services in the women's center, and further research should be done to assess the mental health care being provided by women's center clinicians.

There is a major knowledge gap in understanding students' experiences with women's centers, and plenty of opportunity for women's centers across the country to fill in that knowledge with research of their own. I would encourage all women's centers to consider ways to better study the experiences of their students. And to gather that data with the intention of making potentially major changes to their center's structure based on students' feedback.

Conclusion

This study utilized feminist research theory, Black feminist thought, and intersectionality as framework to help begin to fill in the gap in women's center engagement research. This study aimed to better understand diverse students' experiences with one campus women's center. The findings illustrated some of the ways that participants' systemically marginalized identities impacted their experiences at college and their attempts to find belonging and connection through engagement with the women's center. The study also documented a range of developmental benefits that participants received from their women's center engagement. Participants' experiences with the women's center were complex, with most having both positive and negative encounters, and almost all reporting at least some type of developmental benefit. Based on participant accounts it is clear the structure of the women's center is not inherently supportive of all students. It is my hope that the recommendations provided can create a more inclusive and structurally supportive women's center that can truly serve the needs of the diverse

student population. I hope this research inspires other women's center administrators to consider new ways that they, too, can provide more culturally responsive student engagement.

Appendix A: Recruitment Email and Follow Up Email

Recruitment Email
Greetings,

My name is Sarah Jenkins, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Virginia. You may also know me through my role in the Women's Center. As part of my doctoral work, I am conducting a research study about the experiences of students who identify as belonging to a systemically marginalized background or identity and who are or have been highly engaged in the women's center (UVA IRB-SBS 5701). You may qualify for the study if you are at least 18 years of age, and have now, or in the past, served as an intern or mentor through the women's center for at least one semester and identify as belonging to a systemically marginalized background or identity. Identities to consider include (but are not limited to) race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, citizenship status, socio-economic status, physical and/or cognitive ability, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your identification and responses will remain confidential.

If you choose to participate in this study, there will be one 60-90 minute virtual interview followed by a short (30 minutes or less) journaling exercise. During the interview, I will ask you questions about yourself and your experiences with the Women's Center. Within three days following the interview, you will complete a journaling exercise, where you will be asked to reflect further on your experiences with the Women's Center and the interview process.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please read and sign the informed consent and fill out this short questionnaire: https://virginia.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4TJyxUHA8m3QLEa

If you have any questions or concerns, please email me at stj7e@virginia.edu.

Sincerely,
Sarah Jenkins

Follow Up Email

Dear XX,
Thank you so much for being willing to participate in my study! You'll be receiving an email from Doodle to choose a time for your interview over the next month or so. If none of those times work for you, just reach out and we'll find a time that does. I am also attaching a copy of your signed consent form. Thank you again for sharing your time with me.
Please feel free to reach out with any questions.
Sincerely,
Sarah

Appendix B: Recruitment Qualtrics Survey

Participant Interest Survey- Students Experiences with the UVA Women's Center

My name is Sarah Jenkins, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Virginia. You may also know me through my role in the Women's Center. As part of my doctoral work I am conducting a research study about the experiences of students who identify as belonging to a systemically marginalized background or identity and who are or have been highly engaged in the women's center (UVA IRB-SBS 5701). You may qualify for the study if you are at least 18 years of age, and have now, or in the past, served as an intern or mentor through the women's center for at least one semester and identify as belonging to a systemically marginalized background or identity. Identities to consider include (but are not limited to) race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, citizenship status, socio-economic status, physical and/or cognitive ability, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your identification and responses will remain confidential.
If you choose to participate in this study, there will be one 60-90 minute virtual interview followed by a short (30 minutes or less) journaling exercise. During the interview, I will ask you questions about yourself and your experiences with the Women's Center. Within three days following the interview, you will complete a journaling exercise, where you will be asked to reflect further on your experiences with the Women's Center and the interview process. Participants who successfully complete their interview and journaling exercise will receive a $25 electronic gift card.
Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. Please carefully review the informed consent below and electronically sign the consent prior to completing the rest of the questionnaire. Completing the following questionnaire will help the researcher better understand your identities, backgrounds and experiences. This questionnaire will be used to aid the researcher in recruiting as diverse a participant sample as possible.
Any questions can be emailed to Sarah Jenkins stj7e@virginia.edu.

1. Are you a current or former UVA student?
   - I am a current student
   - I am a former student
2. First Name
3. Last Name
4. Email Address
5. Current Age
6. Graduation year (projected or actual)
7. When were you engaged with the women's center as an intern or mentor (what years were you engaged and for how long)?
8. What was your role with the women's center?
9. What do you consider your most salient identities?
10. Why are you interested in participating in this study?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

(Guidelines and some prompts adapted from Vlasnik, 2016)

Pseudonym: Start Time:

Date: End Time:

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. My name is Sarah Jenkins, and I am a doctoral candidate in Higher Education Administration. You may also know me from my role in the women's center. I am working on a research project that looks at how students who belong to systemically marginalized backgrounds and identities experience the women's center. I chose this topic because I recognize that historically, women's centers have not always been inclusive or welcoming to individuals from systemically marginalized communities. I want to better understand what those experiences are like for our students so the center can improve our services and programs. I really appreciate you agreeing to be interviewed. The information you share with me will be incredibly valuable for my project and I hope that the results of this project will help improve women's center work across the country.

This interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes of your time. I will be recording our conversation. I will also use the closed captioning feature to help with transcription. Your name will not be used in any reports or publications that result from this study. I will make sure to de-identify any quotes or other characteristics. Although my women's center role obviously informs my doctoral research, I want to make it clear that everything you tell me in this interview will be confidential and will in no way impact any professional or personal relationship we [might] have through my women's center role.

Your participation is voluntary, and you can decide to stop participating at any time. You can also decline to answer any question. Do you have any questions before we get started?

With your permission, I'll start recording and turn on closed captioning and then ask you to give your verbal permission again to be recorded.

Pronouns:

What would you like your pseudonym to be for this study? I can choose one for you if you don't have a preference.

Background information:

- Please tell me a bit about your background and how you ended up at this institution?
- What was your time at this institution been like for you?
- On your survey you listed your most salient identities as [insert] could you tell me a bit more about those identities?
- In addition to the women's center what other activities are/were you engaged in during college?

Women's Center Questions:

Introduction

- How did you learn about the women's center?
- What made you decide to get involved in the women's center?
- What was your time in the women's center like for you?

Experiences

- Can you tell me about any meaningful relationships you made through the women's center?
- Thinking about your role at the women's center, how, if at all, did your identities come into play?

- In what ways do you feel like your identities are represented in and/or validated by the work you are doing at the women's center?
- Was there ever a time you felt like your identities weren't respected/represented/ and/or validated in your work with women's center?

Impact

- In what ways, if any, did your work with the women's center have any impact on how you viewed/engaged with the university at large?
- What is your current career or area of work?
- Do you feel like your experiences with the women's center contributed to your development? Your vocation, career choices?
- If you could change the women's center, what would you change?
- Are there any other ways that you feel you benefitted through your women's center work?
- Are there any ways that you feel you were harmed by your work with the women's center?

Concluding Questions:

- Is there anything else you'd like to say about anything we talked about?
- Is there anything else that you think I should be taking into consideration about this topic?

Conclusion: Thank you so much for your time and willingness to share your experiences with me. The next step in your participation is to complete a short journaling exercise. I will email you a word document with instructions and prompts, please review the instructions carefully. Save a copy of the document and write your journaling responses within it. Make sure to save the document with your responses and email it back to me once you've completed your journaling exercise. In order for your memories of this interview to be as fresh as possible, I'm asking participants to complete their journaling exercise within three days following their interview. So I'd ask that you return your journaling responses to me by [**DAY, MONTH XX**]. Does that work for you?

After I have transcribed your interview I will provide you with a summary for you to review. I want to make sure that you feel like your experiences are being authentically represented. You have the power to make any changes to the summary or remove any information that you deem private or identifying. Later on, I will also provide you with a draft of my analysis for you to review and provide any final changes that you wish to make.

Do you have any questions?

Appendix D: Journaling Exercise Protocol

(Guidelines Adapted from Vlasnik, 2016)

Participant pseudonym:

Thank you for speaking with me in your interview; your participation means so much to me. I know that conversations like these can bring up a lot of different emotions. I'm including a link to the Women's Center's resource navigator here (https://womenscenter.virginia.edu/resource-navigator). This site has an interactive map and lists of local resources organized by different needs.

The next step in your participation is to complete this journal exercise. Included below are journaling prompts and guidelines. Your responses provide an opportunity to deepen the conversation we have started about your experiences with the women's center.

Journals are confidential and will only be seen by me, the researcher. Please express yourself in whatever writing form or style you would like when exploring the prompts. I invite you to place brackets [ ] around any writing or stories that you deem identifying or private. As a researcher, I will use bracketed sections to help me understand your overall experiences and perspectives, but I will not quote or paraphrase bracketed stories or sections in any way in the final project. This technique is utilized to create a safe space for you to explore your experiences without concern for how the data will be presented in the final report.

Save a copy of this document and write your responses within it. Make sure to save your responses and email the document back to me once you've completed your journaling exercise. For your memories of the interview to be as fresh as possible, I'm asking participants to complete their journaling exercise within three days following their interview.

Please return your journaling responses to me by [**DAY, MONTH XX**].

Please use the prompts below as a guide but feel free to answer only the ones that are most salient to you, or to not use them at all. You can plan to spend approximately 30 minutes writing your responses.

Thank you again for your time, commitment, and sharing!

- What was the interview experience like for you? Any unexpected outcomes?
- Did you experience any positive, negative, or mixed triggers during the interview process? Please tell me about them.
- How did you feel after the interview?
- Are there any aspects of your identity that we didn't get to discuss during the interview that you'd like to reflect on now?
- How did/do you frame your identities in your women's center work? In school? In future or current careers?
- Reflecting on your college experience, how did college contribute to or shape your development? Of those areas of development, did your role in the women's center play a part in any of them? (Feel free to reiterate or expand upon any points we discussed in the interview)
- Is there anything you wish I had asked in relation to the study's topic? What might you like to share that you have not been asked?
- Were any of the interview questions or journaling prompts unclear? Do you have any suggestions for changes?

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