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ABSTRACT

LEARNING AND LEADING: TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES
AMONG COLLEGE STUDENT PEER LEADERS

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Department of Counseling, Adult, and Higher Education
Northern Illinois University, 2016
Carrie Kortegast, Director

The purpose of this interpretive study was to identify the transformational learning

experiences and leadership development process of college students who participate in peer

leadership positions. This study explored the relationship between peer leadership roles and

transformational learning. The study was shaped by four research questions: 1) How do college

students who engage in peer leadership roles describe their experiences? 2) How do these student

leaders make meaning of their experience? 3) What processes help student leaders make

meaning of their peer leadership role? 4) What knowledge, skills, and abilities do participants

report having gained as a result of their peer leadership role? Participants included 16 college

students who were engaged in peer leadership activities. Learning from exposure to diverse peer

interactions; identity exploration and reconciliation; enhanced personal, professional, and

academic development; community responsibility as leaders; and lack of institutional support

emerged as the central themes of this study.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

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LEARNING AND LEADING: TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

EXPERIENCES AMONG COLLEGE STUDENT PEER LEADERS

BY

ALEXANDER R. MILLER

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING, ADULT, AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Carrie Kortegast

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Pursuing this degree has been a transformational learning experience for me. I would first like to give reverence and thanks to God for allowing me to achieve this milestone in my life. I would also like to acknowledge all of the people who supported me during my journey. To my chair, Dr. Carrie Kortegast, many thanks for your guidance and support through this process. I appreciate all of the time and feedback you generously provided throughout this process.

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the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end" (Jeremiah 29:11 KJV).

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, especially my parents and grandparents,

Alexander and Jackie, Roosevelt and Pearl Liddell, and John and Lucille Miller; my uncle

Bernard Liddell; my Sunday School teacher Talmadge Betts; my good friend Jeffrey Dailey; my

best friend since high school, Robert Clay; and my extended family, The Souls of Salvation.

Without your patience, love, support, and sacrifice over the years I would not be where I am

today, and I am eternally grateful to each of you. I also dedicate this work to all the young black

men who dare to dream. May this work stand as reminder that you can achieve great things if

you remain committed to your goals.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the key goals of higher education is to produce graduates who can be leaders and make a positive impact on the world (Clark, 1985; Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001). This goal is evident in the growing number of leadership programs that have emerged on college campuses in recent decades (Astin & Astin, 2000; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999). Leadership development programs created for college students have been shown to improve both interpersonal (Bialek & Lloyd, 1998) and problem-solving skills (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005). Research has shown that students who participate in co-curricular activities (i.e., student organizations, student government, community service, etc.) gain skills and abilities that enhance their overall personal and professional development (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1997).

Peer leaders are college students who serve as paraprofessionals who are integrated into the staffing patterns of many institutions of higher education. Paraprofessionals on college campuses are typically students who are trained to assist and support those in professional positions. Peer leadership roles include, but are not limited to, residence halls advisors, tutors, research assistants, orientation leaders, and student organization officers. The primary responsibility of individuals in these roles is to provide leadership and mentoring for other students (Ender & Newton, 2000).

A number of studies have examined the impact of peer leaders on the students they lead (Cuseo, 2010; Donahue, 2004; Ender & Newton, 2000; Swenson et al., 2008). However, little is known about the impact on peer leaders themselves: whether and how peer leadership roles contribute to college student development (Smith, 2009), and if so, which specific experiences enhance student growth. This study will benefit student affairs professionals by eliciting peer leaders' descriptions of their experiences and identifying the knowledge, skills, and abilities students gain as result of serving in a peer leader capacity.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This qualitative study will seek to identify the transformational learning experiences and leadership development process of college students who participate in peer leadership positions. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1) How do college students who engage in peer leadership roles describe their experiences?

2) How do these student leaders make meaning of their experience?

3) What processes help student leaders make meaning of their peer leadership role?

4) What knowledge, skills, and abilities do participants report having gained as a result of their peer leadership role?

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate these questions. Specifically, a basic interpretive approach was used to explore how participants viewed their experience of serving as peer leaders (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The interpretations were gathered through semi-structured individual interviews with 16 participants

from Park University (a pseudonym), a private, urban, highly selective institution in the Midwestern region of the United States.

College Student Development

At its core, higher education aims to develop college graduates who possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to compete in today's global market and make a positive impact on the world around them (Komives, Dugan, Owen, Slack, & Wagner, 2006). Creating programs that support and advance college student learning and development to achieve this aim requires a knowledge and practical application of student development theory (Renn, 2007). Because the profiles of college students are dynamic and change over time (Abes & Jones, 2013), understandings of student development are also continually evolving.

The history of student development theory dates back to nineteenth century Europe with the philosophy of *in loco parentis*, in which higher education personnel served as surrogate parents for college students (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). These professionals were expected to provide emotional and academic support for students as well as to serve as disciplinarians. This philosophy began to shift in the 1960's as colleges and universities experienced rapid growth due to greater support from the government for higher education. The growth prompted a movement to a *student services approach*, which focused primarily on providing services that would assist students in their academic work, such as tutoring, rather than on supporting student development (Evans et al., 2010). The 1960s marked the emergence of the *student development research* that contributed to many of the theories that continue to guide the work of student affairs professionals today (Evans et al., 2010). These theories provided a

foundation for understanding how college students are best able to learn and develop both in and out of the classroom, and how universities can most effectively support these processes.

The changing college student demographics, particularly in terms of increasing ethnic and racial diversity, of the 1980s and 1990s prompted a reexamination and expansion of student development theory, building upon earlier theoretical perspectives (Abes & Jones, 2013). It was during this time that student affairs theorists and practitioners began to develop a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary college student (Evans et al., 2010). Today, student development theory is crucial in guiding the practice of student affairs professionals and other educators who seek to enhance student learning (Evans et al., 2010). It provides a context for understanding college student development and behavior (Renn, 2007) and informs the advising and guidance of students with both academic and personal concerns.

Howe and Strauss (2000) have labeled today's college student population the "millennial generation." These are students who were born during the years 1983-1992 (Howe & Strauss, 200). Howe and Strauss (2000) identified seven characteristics that describe the millennial generation.

1. Special: Many of these students are from smaller families and have few siblings.

2. Sheltered: More than earlier generations, these students were kept at home because of safety concerns.

3. Confident: A lot of parental involvement and support gave them a lot of self-assurance.

4. Team-oriented: These students grew up in one of the most diverse American populations ever documented. This allowed them to have a sense of collaboration and less sense of selfishness.

5. Conventional: This generation is concerned with the environment, very practical.

6. Pressured: This generation is overbooked and has a high drive to succeed.

7. High-achieving: This generation is concerned with the future.

According to Howe and Strauss (2000), these students represent the MTV generation. Meaning they are the first generation that grew up with the Music Television cable channel. They were introduced to computers at an early age (Duderstadt, 2000). They have seen many tragedies, such as the Columbine massacre and 9/11. Their parents, most of whom represent the Baby Boomer generation that grew up in the 1970s (Howe & Strauss, 2000), are often labeled "helicopter parents" due to their tendency to hover and be overly involved in their children's lives.

Given the characteristics of today's millennial college student, it is important to create developmental opportunities for these students while in college. At the same time, it is vital to set parameters for their parents, often as early as orientation, to help them understand what their role should be in their child's college experience (Howe & Strauss, 2000). For both purposes, a student development approach is necessary to meet the needs of today's college student.

College students' values and beliefs are shaped, to varying degrees, by their experiences during their college years (Evans et al., 2010). These experiences may include interactions with faculty, staff, and peers; participation in co-curricular activities; and involvement in leadership roles, among others. Research suggests that college students who are involved in activities and

relationships outside the classroom are also likely to engage in reflective practices that guide

their actions (Astin & Astin, 2000; Boatman, 1999). Making meaning of lived experiences—such

as serving as a peer leader—enables students to develop a system of values and beliefs that

reflects and incorporates those experiences (Cranton, 2006). According to Mezirow's (1991)

Transformational Learning Theory, critically reflecting on one's experiences and their

implications can lead individuals to question their assumptions and beliefs. As a result, a shift in

understanding takes place, and transformational learning has occurred (Cranton, 2006).

College Student Learning and Leadership Development

Mezirow (1991) defined *transformational learning* as a process through which learners

reflect critically on past assumptions and views and reconcile these previous understandings with

new knowledge gained through different life experiences. Within this style of learning, the

learner is able to relinquish a past understanding in favor of gaining a new one. Transformational

learning is distinct from other types of learning in that it allows experiences (often critical or

traumatic) to shape our views and beliefs. Specific types of learning experiences—including class

discussions, social interactions, peer learning and group work, and perspective sharing—have

been shown to encourage transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991, p. 35). The research

literature has also identified three categories of life events associated with transformational

learning: activities with peers, teachers, and advisors; coursework; and critical life events such as

the death of a loved one, moving, a career change, or the birth of a child (Mezirow, 1991).

The phrases *peer mentoring* and *peer leadership*, which were borrowed from the field of

organizational behavior (Jacobi, 1991), are used interchangeably in higher education to refer to

relationships between individuals of equal status that seek to promote intellectual and personal

development (Lipton, 2004). Such relationships may incorporate teaching, counseling, directing,

referring, or guiding (Daloz, 1999), and can have a significant and lasting impact on the

development of the mentee (Zey, 1997). Research also suggests that peer mentoring relationships

can support career development and advancement (Kram, 1988). Some researchers have

suggested that peer mentorship is an effective practice in enhancing college student learning and

development for both parties in the relationship (Daloz, 1999; Ender & Newton, 2000).

The research offers some understanding of transformational learning among college

students, but not from the perspective of peer leaders. This study provides further insight into the

peer leader role and the transformative experiences of these students. The study supports the

work of the student affairs professionals responsible for training the students who serve in peer

leader roles.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this interpretive study was to identify the transformational learning

experiences and leadership development process of college students who participate in peer

leadership positions. This study explored the relationship between peer leadership roles and

transformational learning. The study examined how participation in peer leadership roles

contributed to transformational learning among college students at Park University, a private,

urban, highly selective institution.

The study was guided by four research questions:

1) How do college students who engage in peer leadership roles describe their

experiences?

2) How do these student leaders make meaning of their experience?

3) What processes help student leaders make meaning of their peer leadership role?

4) What knowledge, skills, and abilities do participants report having gained as a result of their peer leadership role?

Five central themes emerged from this study: Learning from exposure to diverse peer interactions; identity exploration; enhanced personal, professional, and academic development; community responsibility as leaders; and a lack of institutional support.

Significance of the Study

Investigating peer leadership in the context of transformational learning provided critical insight into the relationship between leadership development and college student learning. Early research suggested that various forms of peer relationships yield such positive outcomes as loyalty to the institution and academic persistence (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1987, 1997). Some studies have investigated the role of college student involvement in co-curricular activities (Astin & Astin, 2000), but few have sought to examine the peer leader role specifically. Understanding the influence of peer leadership on student learning has significant implications for higher education practitioners, who seek to provide learning experiences that support transformational learning.

This study is also significant in that it provides an argument for the importance of out-of-classroom learning. There is at times a misconception among higher education professionals that learning happens only in the traditional classroom context. This study provided evidence that

significant learning can occur outside this context (Hill, 2000). The study also supported the notion that the faculty role is not the only position that supports learning in a collegiate setting, but peer leadership roles also supports student learning.

Peer leaders provide a source of support and assistance for newer students in navigating their college experience (Hill, 2000; Kim, 2009). To further develop peer leadership programs, more students with peer leader experiences need to be recruited for these positions. Sharing the findings of this study might inform the work of student affairs practitioners who support these positions at other institutions. The findings of the study can also reaffirm higher education's commitment to student development and learning. Finally, these findings will provide an understanding of how adult learning theories may be applied in understanding the learning and development of traditional-aged (18- to 25-year-old) college students.

Summary

This study examines the experiences of college student peer leaders. It is imperative that student affairs professionals understand the role of student learning through peer leadership. This study contributes to the field of higher education by sharing interpretive data regarding the transformational learning experiences of college students serving in a peer leader capacity. It also informs professionals who work with peer mentor roles in departments such as Residence Life, Student Activities, and Orientation. This study also contributes to the broader literature on the role of paraprofessional positions in higher education.

Chapter 2 will provide an overview of the scholarly literature on college student co-curricular involvement, identity development, and leadership development, as well as previous research on transformational learning (TL), which provides the conceptual framework for this

study. The chapter will also present the rationale for this study and identify the gaps in the existing research that this investigation seeks to fill. Chapter 3 will describe the research design and methodology utilized in this study, including the approaches to collecting and analyzing data. Chapter 4 will outline the findings of the study. Five themes emerged from the data analysis: learning from interactions with diverse peers; identity exploration and reconciliation; enhanced personal, professional, and academic development; community responsibility as leaders; and lack of institutional support. Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the findings and the implications of this study. This study has implications for the practice of student affairs as well as the understanding of student learning. Finally, the study will offer recommendations for student affairs practitioners and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will present an overview of the available literature on five topical areas: (1)

peer leadership, (2) college student involvement, (3) college student identity development, (4)

college student leadership development, and (5) transformational learning theory, which also

provides the conceptual framework for this study. While a great deal of literature exists on

transformational learning theory, little research has explored this theory in relation to college

student learning. This study will investigate the experiences of college students serving as peer

leaders in the context of transformational learning theory.

Peer Leadership

Peer groups have a significant impact on college student learning and development (Astin

& Astin, 2000; Cuseo, 1991). Pascarella and Terenzini (1997) define college students' peer

group based on the close relationships they form with peers on campus. Peer relationships are

also one of the external forces that promote college student persistence (Astin & Astin, 2000).

Astin's (1993) national longitudinal study of college students found that "the student's peer

group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the

undergraduate years" (p. 389).

Peer relationships also have a significant influence on academic achievement (Donahue,

2004), and peer leadership occurs not only in a co-curricular context, but also in the classroom

(Swenson et al., 2008). Swenson et al.'s (2008) study of peer relationship quality among first-year undergraduates found that students who identified with their peer leaders were able to gain assistance with their transition to college life. The study also found that students who were disconnected from their peer leaders had some challenges in their transition to college life in comparison to those students who were connected to their peer leader. These results suggest that relationships with peer leaders can positively impact first-year college students' adjustment to college life (Donahue, 2004).

<div align="center">Definition of Peer Leaders</div>

Peer leaders refer to students who hold positions that serve as resources for other students (Swenson et al., 2008). Peer leader roles may be paid or unpaid. These positions include, but are not limited to, resident advisors (RAs), orientation leaders, first-year seminar peer mentors, and student organization presidents. Peer leadership roles have proven to be a valuable resource for institutions of higher education, particularly in the areas of retention and budget assistance. College campuses offer many peer leadership opportunities, and it is often hard to classify these positions because of the large number and variety of positions and the complexity and diversity of the responsibilities associated with them (Harmon, 2006).

D'Abate (2009) conducted a case study of faculty and peer leaders in a first-year seminar program. The peer leaders were asked to identify and rank the responsibilities of their role on a Likert scale. The peer leaders indicated that their role required them to serve as a guide, an advisor, and an encourager for first-year students. The faculty members who participated in the study reported that the peer leaders were also expected to be a friend to the first-year students.

Ender and Newton (2000) also found that peer leaders/mentors provide support for fellow students and are required to take on responsibility for guiding their peers.

D'Abate's (2009) study was conducted at a highly selective liberal arts college in the Midwest. Although the study did not gather data from the first-year students the peer leaders served, it did gather data from faculty members who witnessed the peer leaders' work. It is critical to note that data gathered from the faculty and the mentors themselves provided a definition of the peer leader role that differed from other studies in that the definitions were derived from faculty members in an academic context (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Despite the widespread integration of peer leadership positions within higher education, there is no single, agreed-upon designation for these roles. Ender and Newton (2000) introduced the term *peer educator* (p. 2), yet they also use the phrase *peer mentor*, as do Amaral and Vala (2009), Harmon (2006), Metz (2009), and Rodger and Tremblay (2003). In contrast, Hamid (2001) and Cuseo (2010) refer to these students as *peer leaders*.

Although a variety of terms are used to refer to these roles, there is somewhat greater agreement on their definition. Ender's (1983) definition, which has been most frequently cited (Ender & Newton, 2000; Hamid, 2001; Metz, 2009), defines a peer leader as "a student selected and trained to offer educational services to his or her peers" (Ender, 1983, p. 342). Ender went on to catalog the various programs and services that utilize peer leader roles.

Recent titles for peer leader roles have sought to be more comprehensive and accurate in describing the work of the peer leader (Keup, 2012). Such titles include student ambassador, orientation leader, resident advisor, peer mentor, and peer advisor. Cuseo (2010) described peer

leaders as typically older or more experienced students who provide support for younger or newer students. All of these positions and titles share a common expectation of serving as a guide or coach, even when the peer leader is not performing specific job functions (Cuseo, 2010). For the purposes of this study, the terms *peer leader* and *peer mentor* are used interchangeably.

<u>Peer Leadership and Personal Growth</u>

The research literature contains a number of studies that examine how the peer mentor role impacts mentors themselves. Good, Halpin, and Halpin (2000) examined journal entries of 19 peer leaders in an engineering program at an institution in the Southeast. The peer leaders' responsibilities included tutoring, holding weekly group meetings with mentees, and planning programs for students. The researchers sought to determine the impact of the peer mentor role on the students who served in that role. The study found that as result of their peer mentor role, participants achieved academic growth; enhanced their critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills; and advanced in both identity and leadership development. Thus peer leaders, as well as the students they serve, reap benefits in their interpersonal growth and development (Keup, 2012; Kim, 2009; Russel & Skinkle, 1990).

Harmon (2006) studied the learning outcomes of students who served as peer leaders for first-year undergraduates at an institution in the Southeast. Harmon found that participants' personal and intellectual maturity increased as result of the self-reflection prompted by their role (Harmon, 2006). The peer leaders reported improved organizational and interpersonal communication skills, greater awareness of diverse perspectives, an increase in their

understanding of group dynamics, and enhanced intercultural awareness. The peer leaders also gained a robust understanding of the role of personal relationships as a result of their self-reflection. The reflection process allowed the peer leaders to understand what was involved in being a leader for one's peers. Harmon recommended conducting further research with diverse student populations to understand the intersections of various elements of identity among peer leaders.

Amaral and Vala (2009) conducted a quantitative study of peer leaders who mentored students in a chemistry course. They found that students who received mentorship earned higher grades than those who did not. They also found that mentors themselves achieved higher grades in their chemistry courses due to their work as a peer mentor. This study supported the value, for both mentors and mentees, of incorporating peer leadership positions into undergraduate science programs (Amaral & Vala, 2009).

Locke and Zimmerman (1987) studied peer leaders who mentored Black students at an institution in the Southeast. They administered pre- and post-tests to the peer mentors and found significant advances in their "ego development" (Locke & Zimmerman, 1987). These studies demonstrate the impact on academic and social growth for students who serve as peer leaders. However, these studies did not identify leadership development as an outcome of peer mentorship.

Peer Leadership as a High-Impact Practice (HIP)

High-impact practices are well tested teaching and learning strategies that have been shown to benefit college student development. These practices have taken on various forms to fit

the needs of today's college student, as well as the specific needs of many higher education institutions (Kuh, 2012). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) published a reports in 2007 and 2008 that provided a greater understanding of high-impact practices within institutions of higher education (Kuh, 2012; Brownell & Swaner, 2009). The practices outlined in these documents included first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning/ community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects (Kuh, 2012).

Brownell and Swaner (2009) also conducted a review of high-impact practices within higher education. Their findings suggested that, true to their name, high-impact practices do influence the college student experience (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). Brownell and Swaner found positive effects on student persistence and success, as students who participate in high-impact practices are more likely to succeed academically than those who do not. Peer leadership roles also are considered high-impact practices in that they are collaborative and create learning communities among college students that support student learning and development (Kuh, 2012).

College Student Involvement Theory

Student involvement theory (SIT) supports and guides the role of the student affairs professional in higher education. SIT focuses on how the college experience relates to a particular student's development, and is directly linked to student retention and persistence. Alexander Astin's (1975) theory of involvement focuses on the college student experience and its implications for individual development. Astin's (1999) theory and research efforts have

made key contributions to the body of knowledge about student involvement on the college

campus. SIT suggests that the variables of *input* and *environment* influence student outcomes

(Astin, 1999), and that students' out-of-classroom involvement contributes significantly to their

academic persistence and their success in transitioning to college life (Tieu et al., 2009).

<div align="center">Curricular Involvement</div>

Curricular involvement refers to a student's level of involvement in the classroom and is

critical to understanding student involvement theory. Sidelinger and Booth-Butterfield (2010)

studied classroom connectedness and engagement in the college environment, and in particular

the effects of peer-to-peer interaction on classroom performance and connectedness. They found

that classroom connectedness and involvement are not dependent on classroom size, but rather

on each student's level of engagement in and commitment to the classroom environment.

Quality classroom experiences arguably contribute to student success within the

classroom (Rust et al., 2003). Additionally, Baker (2008) has argued that out-of-classroom

experiences can impact the curricular involvement of college students. Baker examined the

academic success of students who were involved in student organizations versus those who were

not. Baker found that students who were involved in student organizations were

more likely to succeed in their coursework than those without extracurricular involvement.

<div align="center">Co-Curricular Involvement</div>

Brazeau et al. (2009) investigated the correlation between college students' involvement

in graduate programs and undergraduate co-curricular involvement. *Co-curricular involvement*

encompasses all of the non-academic contexts of a student's experience (Astin, 1999, p. 7), such as participation in student organizations and governance, social fraternities and sororities, and residence halls activities. Byer (1998) studied fraternity men's perceptions of involvement in a student government organization, seeking to understand how participation in two student organizations impacted the college experience. The study found that involvement in two organizations positively impacted the students' social and leadership skills (Byer, 1998). Although the sample size (four males ages 20-22, three of whom were White and one of whom was African-American) was small, the findings highlight the need for greater collaboration among student affairs areas to further enhance the outcomes of student involvement.

<div align="center">Involvement among Various Student Populations</div>

College students who identify as members of underrepresented groups are more likely to experience feelings of isolation within the college environment (Baker, 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand special student populations within the framework of SIT. Extensive research has examined student engagement among members of various underrepresented groups. Baker (2008) used the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF) to obtain a sample comprised of equal numbers of Asian, Black, Latino, and White students. This study yielded some critical data related to persistence, but did not provide sufficient data regarding student involvement. SIT research supports persistence as an outcome, but rarely investigates the diverse student populations within the higher education context (Evans et al., 2010). Some research (Caffey & Donahoo, 2010; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001), however, has examined the student

involvement of various ethnic groups, first-generation students, adult or other non-traditional students, and community college students. These studies are rare exceptions.

The student involvement research that focuses on ethnicity and racial groups has produced some conflicting findings in areas such as satisfaction of participants and reasons for involvement in co-curricular activities. However, this research varies in context, methodology, and thematic approach. Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) investigated involvement among Black college students who were affiliated with fraternities and sororities as well as among those who were not. Their study found that Black students were more likely to succeed on campus when they were involved in both "traditional" and multicultural student organizations (Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001, p. 32).

Researchers have also explored the relationship between campus engagement and spiritual development among African-American/Black students (Caffey & Donahoo, 2010). Examining the role of spiritual involvement in the lives of African-American college students, Caffey and Donahoo (2010) concluded that it is vital for student affairs practitioners to address the spiritual involvement needs of all students. The study found that the participants recognized the importance of spiritual involvement in their adjustment to college. This study added a spiritual dimension to our understanding of SIT, although it focused primarily on spirituality and not as much on student involvement.

First-Generation Students

Choy (2001) asserts that first-generation college students represent a growing population within today's college student demographic. Pike and Kuh (2005) found that first-generation

students were less likely to engage in co-curricular experiences and more likely to report that their college environment was unsupportive of their academic development. Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, and Miller's (2007) quantitative study yielded data helpful in understanding the involvement of first-generation college students of various ethnicities. Their work highlights the importance of studying within-group differences among the first-generation student population.

Rood (2009) explored the involvement of first-generation students at a private, Christian college and investigated the students' reasons for attending that institution. Rood's study was grounded in a college student persistence theoretical framework and identified persistence as an outcome of involvement. This qualitative study found that students' spiritual involvement influenced their adjustment to the institution. The data also implied some connection between spirituality and classroom involvement.

These studies employ varying approaches to understanding the involvement of first-generation students, providing insight into the needs of this population. The research confirms the impact of student involvement on persistence, and reinforces the need to provide student support programs for first-generation students. More research is needed, however, to examine the kinds of student organizations and academic opportunities this population identifies as important to their learning, as well as the types of involvement opportunities that impact the persistence of specific racial and ethnic populations within the first-generation demographic.

Adult/Non-Traditional Students

As college population continues to evolve, it is imperative to better understand the adult student population, including the impact of involvement on this population (Graham & Long Gisi, 2000). Graham and Long Gisi (2000) investigated the effects of student involvement on the development of adult students in comparison to traditional-aged students. The study found higher levels of curricular than co-curricular involvement among adult students. Correlations were found between students' ages and both forms of involvement, with older students displaying higher levels of curricular involvement than younger students.

<div align="center">College Student Identity Development</div>

Marcia (1980) defined *identity* as an internal process that is designed to inform the personal desires, abilities, beliefs, and history of an individual. While definitions like Marcia's reference the individual nature of identity development, some aspects of identity are socially constructed (Eliason, 1996). Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) noted that the student affairs literature describes identity as personal yet also impacted by social groups. Hoffman (2004) described identity development as encompassing all facets of diversity, including gender, ethnicity/race, age, sexual orientation, class, and religion. Josselson (1996) described identity as the "ultimate act of creativity" through which individuals are able to express themselves (p. 27). Whether we emphasize the personal or social aspects of identity development, both represent the individual nature of identity formation, particularly among college students.

<div align="center">Racial and Ethnic Identity Development</div>

The definitions of *race* and *ethnicity* vary widely across the literature, and numerous models and theories exist to explain the process of racial and ethnic identity development. College students are constantly defining and redefining their personal identities; thus it is fair to assume that identity development among college students is always evolving (King, 2008; Nishimura, 1998). Institutions of higher education are well situated to provide learning environments in which college students can engage in the process of discerning their personal identities (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Models of racial and ethnic identity development are constructed largely based on Erickson's (1959, 1963, 1968) psychosocial development model. This model provided an understanding of how identity intersects with individual biological and psychological changes and is often cited in the college student development literature (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Erickson's model has four childhood stages, one adolescent stage, and three adult stages. In each stage of the model the individual encounters a "crisis" or traumatic event that confronts the individual with two opposite choices (Allen, 1997). Resolving the crisis presented at each stage represents a critical moment in individuals' lives through which their identity is formed and reconciled (Allen, 1997).

Jean Phinney (1990) proposed a model of racial/ethnic identity development grounded in Erikson's model. Phinney believed that individuals must feel connected to a particular racial/ethnic group in order to develop an affinity for and self-identification with that identity. This model suggests that racial/ethnic identity is closely connected to one's social identity and sense of belonging to a particular racial/ethnic group (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Phinney (1990) argued that identity moves through three stages: unexamined ethnicity, ethnic identity search/moratorium, and achieved ethnic identity. In the first stage, *unexamined ethnicity*, individuals do not engage or seek opportunities to explore their ethnic identity, often identifying instead with the dominant culture (Phinney, 1990). In the second stage, *ethnic identity search/moratorium*, refers to engaging in an exploration without making a commitment. For college students this may be evident in their participation in activities (such involvement in student organizations, or attending campus programs) in which they can explore their racial/ethnic identities. Phinney (1990) notes that during this stage, immersion in one's own racial/ethnic identity often leads individuals to reject the dominant culture.

In Phinney's (1990) third and final stage, *achieved ethnic identity*, individuals have developed a greater understanding of and commitment to their racial/ethnic identity. At this stage they also begin to develop a greater appreciation for different identities. These individuals are aware of the societal landscape and understand the impact of power and privilege in navigating differences among racial/ethnic groups. Current identity models and theories suggest that there is a process of forming one's own racial/ethnic identity that is similar for all racial/ethnic groups (Adams, 2001; Ferdman & Gallegose, 2001).

Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI)

The Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) acknowledges the multidimensional nature of identity while recognizing that each dimension influences one's "core sense of self" (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Although the model was introduced in 2000, the

research that grounds the model was conducted in 1997 (Jones, 1997). The study, which examined 10 diverse women attending an East Coast university, identified critical themes that helped create a framework for understanding multiple layers of identity (Abes & Jones, 2013). The model is fluid and supports the notion of ongoing identity development. The MMDI captures identity at a particular moment in an individual's developmental trajectory, and acknowledges that identity may shift depending on which factors are most salient at a given time (Jones & McEwen, 2000). The model's key components, based on Jones' (1997) findings, include the core, multiple social identities, relationship of social identities to the core contextual influences, and identity salience (Jones, 1997).

The *core* lies at the center of the model and depicts how individuals view themselves on the inside, or what an individual views as their underlying sense of self (Abes & Jones, 2013). The core typically encompasses the attributes one would use to describe oneself in ways beyond what could be seen. The core is critical in understanding personal identity, as it is generated by the individual and cannot be determined by anyone else.

The multiple social identity component of the model supports a notion that our identities are socially constructed. Social Identities are depicted in the model as overlapping circles around the core. This component acknowledges identities such as race, gender, religion, and social class. This begins to introduce the notion of a layered identity and its intersectionality. For example, the role as a mother might be influenced by cultural values. In this example the role of a mother is not independent of your cultural values, but interdependent of other facets of your identity (Abes & Jones, 2013).

Within MMDI lies a relationship between one's core sense of self and one's social identities, and this relationship encourages the individual to reconcile what has salience. *Identity salience* refers to which identities are most important to the individual among the many identities an individual may possess. These salient identities often remain close to the core and to how individuals view themselves. For example, a white lesbian may identify more closely with her lesbian identity than her white identity. For this woman, her lesbian identity is most salient.

Abes and Jones (2013) suggest that identity salience is a byproduct of systems plagued with privilege and inequality. Salience is often a result of individuals experiencing a sense of "otherness" and feeling that their identities are invisible. Constructing a core sense of self is complicated, given the role of power and privilege in our society. Thus contextual influences and privilege must be taken into account when seeking to understand multiple identities (Abes & Jones, 2013).

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Student Identity Development

The latter part of the 20th century saw the development of LGBTQ identity development models and theories. Initially these models and theories examined the experiences of white males, and did not consider the implications of racial/ethnic identity (Cass, 1979, 1984; D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995). The study of LGBTQ students has presented higher education with theories and models that provide a better understanding of this student demographic (D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995). In addition, it has provided greater insight into the coming out process for LGBTQ students, which can be complex and varied (Rhoads, 1994; Stevens, 2004). LGBTQ identity development is individual and multifaceted, and this complexity is reflected in

the multiple development theories that seek to describe the experience of LGBTQ students (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

Student affairs professionals first began to understand the identity development of LGBTQ students through Vivienne Cass' Homosexual Identity Model (Cass, 1979). Cass' model incorporated six stages: identity confusion; identity comparison; identity tolerance; identity acceptance; identity pride; and identity synthesis. Troiden (1988) used the Cass model to develop a greater understanding of LGBTQ student development. Troiden's (1989) model identified the four stages of sensitization, identity confusion, identity assumption, and commitment. Troiden conceptualized these stages as fluid rather than linear, suggesting that the various stages can be revisited throughout an individual's life.

Some researchers have conceptualized LGBTQ identity as grounded in the coming out process, in which an individual shares this identity with others. Renn (2007) views coming out as a particular occasion or event, defined as an individual's first instance of disclosure to self and others of an individual's sexual identity. Historically, researchers sought to understand *why* some individuals develop an LGBTQ identity, but more recent research has shifted to exploring *how* individuals develop their identity, offering a healthier outlook in understanding homosexuality. Although LGBTQ identity development theories have helped advance understandings of the LGBTQ population, higher education has been slow to follow this understanding. this focus has not emerged significantly in higher education research (Renn, 2007).

Identity and Learning: Baxter Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship

Self-authorship can be defined as the development of values and beliefs that are authentic to one's identity and allow one to engage in a genuine way the world around them (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Self-authorship serves as an internal processor for individuals as they develop relationships with others and achieve an understanding of how personal decisions are made. Developing self-authorship creates a sense of assurance and frees individuals from the need for approval from others, enabling them to listen to others' perspectives while standing firm on their personal beliefs. Self-authorship implies a progression to personal autonomy, even while welcoming the possibility of productive relationships with others who hold diverse perspectives.

The theory of self-authorship is considered an integrated theory that not only contributes to student development knowledge, but also has implications for the classroom (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Baxter Magolda (2001) found that research participants were looking for particular answers during their college experience. These students were interested in knowing, *How do I know what I know? Who am I? And how do I want to create relationships with others?* These three questions represent the three dimensions of self-authorship: epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal.

Baxter Magolda identified four phases of self-authorship: following formulas, crossroads, becoming the author of one's life, and internal foundation (Baxter Magolda, 2001). These phases are nonlinear and are activated by the individual's own life journey or identity. *Following formulas* occurs when one allows other people and influences to define one's decisions. Many students enter college in this phase in relation to their parents or other sources of support. For example, college students may start their first year with a major that was decided by their

parents. Often these students trust the advice of their parents, and may struggle with telling their parents that they have different academic interests.

Crossroads is defined as the moment when the individual begins to question the ideas and influence of others (Baxter Magolda, 2001), yet is not quite ready to act on their own. This phase can occur when an individual receives advice from a trusted source that does not yield a favorable result. For example, a student might encounter a crossroads after receiving a poor grade in a class for the major their parents chose for them. They experience dissonance in recognizing that what they want to do is different from what their parents think they should do. They consequently begin to question their parents' advice and to seek another solution.

In *becoming the author of one's life* (Baxter Magolda, 2001), individuals are comfortable enough to try out some ideas and beliefs on their own. This phase introduces a sense of independence and a necessary disconnection from the influence of others. Becoming the author of one's life may also present some challenges, particularly in the area of managing relationships, due to this new independence.

In the final phase, the establishment of an *internal foundation*, individuals are assured in who they are and what they believe. They have grown confident in their relationships and constantly seek to develop them. In this phase individuals have developed a strong belief system that will guide them through the rest of their lives. The phases of self-authorship suggest there's an opportunity for college students to critically engage in learning experiences while in college that can contribute to their identity and learning (Evans et al., 2010). Peer leadership is one of the many opportunities for learning.

The theory of self-authorship is an integrated theory which means this theory draws from previous theories and has implications for understanding student identity development and learning. Baxter Magolda & Patricia King (2004) later published the Learning Partnerships Model (LPM), which illustrates the connection between learning and the three dimensions of self-authorship. Achieving self-authorship requires developing an appreciation of diverse perspectives (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004), and Baxter Magolda argued that the ability to appreciate multiple perspectives represents an element of "cognitive maturity" that is crucial to the 21st century educational system. Understanding self-authorship is critical to constructing appropriate learning goals for our students (Baxter Magolda, Creamer, & Meszaros, 2010).

College Student Leadership Development

American higher education seeks to prepare college students to become leaders in our society (Astin, 1993; Komives et al., 2006). Higher education institutions expect college students not only to contribute to their communities, but also to train others for leadership, with the goal of making the world a better place (Boyer, 1990). Just as there are many definitions of leadership, there are also many perspectives on leadership, particularly within higher education (Chambers, 1992; Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994; Cox & Miranda, 2003; Cress et al., 2001; Gardner & Upcraft, 1990; Graham & Cockriel, 1997; Romero-Aldaz, 2001). These various views have helped shape understandings of leadership within a higher education context today. However, it is the early leadership theories of Greenleaf (1977) and Berlew (1974) that have had perhaps the greatest impact on understandings of leadership in contemporary American higher

education.

Leadership Development Theories

One of the early advances in theorizing leadership development emerged from the work of Robert Greenleaf (1977), who helped shape the concept of *servant leadership*. Greenleaf founded a nonprofit center in 1964, but then changed its name to the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership in 1985. Among the center's programmatic offerings were special workshops intended to provide higher education professionals with the tools to train college students in the principles of servant leadership. Berlew (1974) also supported the notion of servant leadership through his scholarship. Berlew identified the need for leaders to have compassion for their followers, arguing that leadership should not be undertaken for personal gain, but instead for the purpose of serving those in one's community.

Astin's (1993) longitudinal study represents another contribution to leadership development theory. Astin examined eight measures of college student involvement, five of which incorporated co-curricular involvement among peers. Astin found that involvement in co-curricular activities enhanced college students' leadership skills (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Some researchers over the past 15 years have advocated *socially responsible leadership*, which is the basis of the Social Change Model for leadership development, first discussed in 1996 as the preferred approach to leadership development among college students (Astin & Astin, 2000: Hoy & Meisel, 2008; NASPA & ACPA, 2004).

The Relational Leadership Model (RLM), created in 1998, characterized leadership as a "relational process" that can be used to effect change (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998, p.

21). The model has five characteristics: it is inclusive, empowering, purposeful, ethical, and process oriented. These elements promote a view of leadership as an opportunity to benefit others, rather than as a means of wielding power. Some researchers have found that peer leadership positions align well with the RLM (Collins-Shapiro, 2006). For example, a student who serves as an orientation leader or gives campus tours to prospective students is performing functions that fall within the "inclusive" element of the RLM (Collins-Shapiro, 2006).

Komives et al. (2006) created the Leadership Identity Development Model as the result of a grounded theory study with 13 college students. This model highlighted the stages college students go through in the process of developing as a leader (Komives et al., 2006). The model identified five areas that influence leadership identity development: a) broadening views of leadership, b) developing self, c) group influences, d) development influences, and e) the changing view of self with others. A number of other researchers have found that students in peer leadership roles are subject to one or more of these influences (Amaral & Vala, 2009; Collins-Shapiro, 2006; Harmon, 2006: Kram & Isabella, 1985; Schwitzer & Thomas, 1998).

Alexander and Helen Astin created a think tank for higher education professionals to create a model for understanding college student leadership, producing a leadership development theory known as the Social Change Model (SCM) (Wagner, 2006). The SCM encourages individuals to commit to creating positive change in the world around them. This model views leadership development as a process that enables the leader to help others, not to attain a position of power (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006).

These theories promote leadership development through serving others and making meaning of that service (Collins-Shapiro, 2006; Komives et al., 2006). However, such theories

do not address the need for leaders/learners to reflect on or analyze the process of leadership development, practices that provide space for a new understanding of their leadership skills to emerge. In contrast, transformational learning supports the leadership development of college students by promoting growth through reflection (Mezirow, 2000). Transformational learning thus offers individuals the freedom to receive and reconcile new experiences for the purpose of advancing growth and development (Mezirow, 2000).

<div align="center">Conceptual Framework: Transformational Learning</div>

Mezirow (1991, 2000) describes transformational learning (TL) as individuals' ability to make meaning based on their assumptions and expectations. One of TL's key components is the ability to challenge existing assumptions and knowledge based on new experiences (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). Our views are shaped by meanings that have two frames: "habits of mind" and "points of view" (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). A *habit of mind* may be defined as an assumption one has already formed. Such assumptions may include religious or political views, liberal or conservative ways of thinking, being introverted or extroverted, a preference for certain learning styles, or a tendency to hold particular views of the world around us (Mezirow, 2000). A *point of view* is defined as "the cluster of specific beliefs, feelings, attitudes and value judgments that accompany and shape an interpretation" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7).

According to Mezirow (1991), meaning perspectives which refers to an individual's worldview can be placed into three categories: epistemic, sociolinguistic, and psychological. *Epistemic meaning perspectives* refer to the ways we know and understand facts, and how we make use of that knowledge and understanding. *Sociolinguistic meaning perspectives* are

typically found when understanding cultural norms and expectations (Cranton, 1994).

Psychological meaning perspectives are formed by one's view of self and personal needs

(Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (1991) noted that meaning perspectives may be skewed by the

individual's own self-concept.

Transformational learning can occur in four distinct ways: "by elaborating existing

frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming points of view, or by

transforming habits" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 19). Through this mode of learning our frames of

reference, and thus the substance of our value and belief systems, may be altered (Mezirow,

2000). Transformational learning provides the conduit through which an individual can reconcile

problematic frames of reference to make them more congruent (Mezirow, 2000). When we

encounter contradictions within our belief and value systems, we can reflect on these areas to

gain greater insight and reach a satisfactory resolution. Mezirow (1991, 2000) suggests that the

speed of this transformation may vary from sudden to gradual.

Mezirow (1997) contends that although TL may have a positive impact on the learner, it

can also cause discomfort and have some undesirable outcomes, including disorientation and

confusion, negative assumptions, lack of recognition that others are negotiating similar changes,

and decreasing confidence in the new relationships and roles. As such, reflective practices are

essential to the individual's ongoing growth and development as a learner (Mezirow, 1991).

 In the 1970s, Mezirow (1978) sought to understand why older women were returning to

college and how this non-traditional student population was affected by college enrollment.

Mezirow identified 10 phases of perspective transformation based on the data from this study:

1. A disorienting dilemma

2. A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame

3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions

4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change

5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions

6. Planning a course of action

7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan

8. Provision trying of new roles

9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships

10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective (Mezirow, 1991)

Mezirow originally intended the phases of TL to be linear, like those of other stage theories. However, researchers have suggested that these phases are fluid and dependent on the learner's personal experiences (Taylor, 2000). Nevertheless, Mezirow identifies specific outcomes that are crucial in understanding TL, describing the learning that may occur as a result of a particular experience. These outcomes include perspective transformation, cognitive dissonance, and making assumptions explicit.

Perspective Transformation

One outcome of TL is the ability to transform individuals' views of the world around them. Mezirow (1981) defines *perspective transformation* as the

emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings. (p. 6)

The first phase of transformational learning, the disorienting dilemma, refers to a critical moment that may be quite traumatic, such as an accident, a death, or a failed relationship. Such incidents may trigger new ways of operating for the individual. College students encounter traumatic incidents (such as divorce or the death of a family member) that may provoke a change in their perspective on life. These incidents can thereby have an impact on their overall growth and development (Mezirow, 2000). This study will explore what events, if any, may occur in the context of serving as a peer leader that lead to the transformation of participants' perspectives or worldview. This study will seek to provide further understanding of the disorienting dilemma stage of transformational learning in relation to the experiences of college student peer leaders.

Cognitive Dissonance

Festinger (1957) defined *cognitive dissonance* as the experience of mental discomfort that results from an individual holding contradictory beliefs or opinions, which can nevertheless result in positive effects. "Two cognitions are consonant if one follows from the other, and they are dissonant (opposite) if one cognition does not follow from the other" (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999, p. 3). Mezirow drew on Festinger's (1957) work to identify the role of cognitive dissonance in triggering transformative experiences. Given that cognitive dissonance generates high levels of psychological discomfort (Festinger, 1957), most people are comfortable in a state of cognitive congruency and strive to minimize cognitive dissonance. Similarly, many college

students are unable to see the benefits of cognitive dissonance until they can critically reflect on a specific experience and the learning that resulted from it (Mezirow, 1981). This study will provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on instances in which they have experienced some level of cognitive dissonance and identify the impact of these experiences on their beliefs, opinions, and ideas.

<u>Making Assumptions Explicit</u>

Segal et al., (1999) asserted that "critical incidents and disorientating dilemmas do not lead necessarily to critical reflection" (p. 87). Segal et al. (1999) studied TL and found that disorienting dilemmas or critical moments may cause learners to engage in reflective practices, or alternatively, a learner's lack of reflection can cause them to "shift the blame" (to others) of the cognitive dissonance (Segal et al., 1999). According to Segal et al. (1999), "explicitness (of thoughts and decisions) is not itself a moment of critical reflection but the condition of both reflection and defensiveness" (p. 74). This quote supports the importance of reflection in navigating disorientating dilemmas. This navigation also causes the learner to identify the ideal conditions in which they can reflect on and observe their assumptions (Segal et al., 1999).

Making assumptions explicit allows learners to identify their tacit and previously unexamined assumptions. When learners are faced with an encounter that contradicts what they assume to be true, they become aware of what they previously thought and took for granted. At times learners can become defensive and fail to reflect on their assumptions; at other times, they may recognize the need to reflect and subsequently change their assumptions. Under such conditions these incidents can lead to learning and development (Segal et al., 1999).

Critical Analysis of Transformational Learning Research

Although the theory of transformational learning has generally been well received by scholars, some researchers have provided a critique of TL as a learning theory (Cranton & Roy, 2003; Dirkx & Smith, 2009; Taylor, 2000; Yorks & Kasl, 2002, 2006). Critiques of TL provide a comprehensive view of the theory that is crucial in applying this theory in multiple contexts (Leonard, 2002).

Taylor (1997) suggested that in addition to cognitive factors, non-cognitive factors such as one's environment can also promote perspective transformation. This study will incorporate some non-cognitive factors. Taylor (1997) reviewed 39 empirical studies on transformational learning and identified gaps in the research literature, which discusses TL as a distinctly adult learning theory and explores the practical application of TL primarily in adult learning contexts (Taylor, 1997). Although some studies have used college students to understand TL, none have studied the peer leader role specifically. This study will use a young adult population that differs slightly from the adult population first studied in 1978.

Taylor's (1997) critique also suggested that TL relies too heavily upon critical reflection as a key mode of learning. Taylor argued that there are additional "non-conscious" ways of learning that are not accounted for in transformational learning theory. Taylor defined non-conscious modes of learning as "learning that takes place outside of one's focal awareness" (p. 52). Ten years after completing his initial study, Taylor (2007) examined an additional 41 empirical studies conducted from 1999-2005. In his second analysis he found that critical

reflection and disorienting dilemmas were heavily discussed in the literature (Taylor, 2007), suggesting that non-conscious ways of learning were still largely being overlooked.

Taylor's later second review however outlined ways in which later studies of TL addressed the role of non-conscious ways of learning. Taylor found that subsequent studies discussed in greater detail the long-term and irreversible nature of a new perspective. Later studies also provided greater clarity on how meanings can be challenged and changed, as well as on the specific types of reflection that can lead to perspective change (Taylor, 2007). Wilson and Kiely (2002) studied the progress of theories of adult and transformational learning, arguing that the theory of TL has been "epistemologically and theoretically stuck" (p. 18). Kegan (2000) suggested that transformation should reference a change in our ways of gaining knowledge, in "the very form by which we are making our meanings" (p. 53).

Engberg (2008) found that colleges and universities are finding intentional ways to incorporate support for transformational learning among adult learners. Engberg (2008) also found that adult learners whose college curricula supported transformational learning performed better academically than those in curricula that did not. Few colleges and universities have considered the role of transformational learning in the development of traditional-aged college students (Kilgore, 2001).

<center>Summary</center>

The literature on college student peer leaders is limited. This may be due in part to the variety of titles and definitions associated with the roles of students who serve in a peer mentoring capacity (Harmon, 2006). A few studies have sought to provide a substantive

overview of the learning outcomes, as well as the growth and development, associated with these roles (Good et al., 2000; Harmon, 2006). However, there remain significant gaps in the literature, and few studies have investigated the implications of peer leadership roles for college students' transformational learning.

Transformational learning theory has been studied extensively, primarily using qualitative methods (Engberg, 2008; Mezirow, 1978; Wilson & Kiely, 2002). Most of this research uses non-traditional college students or adult learners as its participants. Only a few studies have collected data from traditional-aged (18- to 25-year-old) college students, typically using community service and activism as variables (Kimoto, 2011). This literature review suggests that further study is needed to understand transformational learning among varying populations of learners, particularly 18- to 25-year-old college students who participate in peer leadership roles. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study investigated how participation in peer leadership roles contributes to transformational learning among students at Park University, a private, urban, highly selective institution. This qualitative study drew upon interpretivism (Merriam, 1998) to understand the lived experiences of college students who serve as peer leaders. Merriam (1998) asserts that qualitative studies in education "seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives of the people involved" (p. 11). This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1) How do college students who engage in peer leadership roles describe their experiences?

2) How do these student leaders make meaning of their experience?

3) What processes help students make meaning of their peer leadership role?

4) What knowledge, skills, and abilities do participants report having gained as a result of their peer leadership role?

Ultimately, this study will inform the work of practitioners who create and lead intentional learning environments for college students. The following section describes the epistemological and methodological approaches that guided this study. Additionally, I will provide a discussion of the methods, data collection and analysis, researcher role, and trustworthiness.

Epistemology

Epistemology is the philosophical study of how knowledge is gained and created (Crotty, 1998). Epistemological approaches in research provide a paradigm that enables scholars to relate their research goals to a larger way of thinking and generating knowledge (Creswell, 2014). This study will use a constructivist approach, which views learning as occurring when the learner (or researcher) is able to make meaning of received knowledge. The constructivist research approach relies on some level of independence of the researcher, who must critically reflect on new knowledge gathered through the research process. This approach also implies that the researcher works collaboratively with participants to gather data and interpret meaning (Crotty, 1998). This epistemological understanding was appropriate for this study in that the meaning of the peer leaders' experiences will be defined by the participants.

Transformational learning is categorized as an adult learning theory and has a direct connection to constructivist epistemology (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Mezirow, 1991). Proponents of the constructivist perspective view meaning as resulting from experience and reality as socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Crotty, 1998). Similarly, TL focuses on the reflective process as an opportunity to identify and challenge assumptions and values, for the purpose of engaging in experiences that will change the learner's perspective (Mezirow, 1998). The constructivist stance best represents how I view learning and generating knowledge through the free exchange of ideas. Peer leaders are able to build relationships with their peers in a similar fashion. This type of relationship, which is unlikely to occur elsewhere in the college context, helps create an environment that fosters learning and development.

Theoretical Perspective

Understanding the importance of theory to the research process allows the researcher to gain an understanding of theoretical approaches associated with research design, and supports the researcher's ability to investigate complex research questions (Mertz & Anfara, 2006). Reference to a theoretical perspective also provides the researcher with a guided approach to research design. This study utilized an interpretive theoretical approach. *Interpretivism* seeks to understand a problem from the perspective of the participant. This paradigm suggests that meaning is "created by the individuals concerned" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 28).

Educational research that uses the interpretive paradigm seeks to identify meaning from the point of view of the individual (Erickson, 1986), rather than pursuing understandings provided by a scientific lens (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998). The use of an interpretive perspective implies that meaning is not absolute, but instead constructed by individuals.

This study aligns with an interpretive theoretical perspective because of its connection to learning and meaning making based on personal experience (Merriam et al., 2007). Transformational learning relies on the power of reflection as a means for learning and development; it also acknowledges that meaning is socially co-constructed. Mezirow (1996) compares transformational learning to the interpretivist approach, asserting that these paradigms are similar in their reliance on assumptions of rationality, as well as in their recognition of the need to validate assumptions.

Mezirow (1991) explained:

Because symbolic models, meaning perspectives, metaphors, and meaning schemes are all or almost all products of unreflective personal or cultural assimilation, the possibility of distortion of assumptions and premises makes reflection and critical discourse essential for validation of expressed ideas. A distorted assumption or premise is one that leads the learner to view reality in a way that arbitrarily limits what is included, impedes

differentiation, lacks permeability or openness to other ways of seeing or does not facilitate an integration of experience. (p. 118)

Mezirow's words convey the importance of reflection in understanding experiences and advancing the learner's development. This study invited participants to share their experiences as peer leaders, yielding insight into the knowledge they gained as a result of their peer leader experience.

Methodology

The methodological approaches utilized in this study were influenced by my epistemological and theoretical perspectives. Researchers who use the interpretivist approach employ specific research methods that support this approach, such as observations, interviews, or case studies. These methods allow the researcher to gain insight into the experiences of the participants (Lichtman, 2006).

In selecting an approach for this study, the interpretivist paradigm seemed the most appropriate methodology. Merriam (1998) provides a succinct and substantive justification for engaging in the interpretative qualitative approach:

> For lack of a better label, the term *basic* or *generic interpretive qualitative* [italics in original] study refers to studies that exemplify the characteristics of qualitative research. Many qualitative studies in education do not focus on culture or build a grounded theory; nor are they intensive case studies of a single unit or bounded system. Rather, researchers who conduct these studies, which are probably the most common form of qualitative research in education, simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved. (p. 11)

Interpretivist studies are common in educational research (Lichtman, 2006). Given the interpretive and exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative methodology was the appropriate choice for attempting to answer the research questions it seeks to address.

The interpretive methodological approach seeks to explain the actions, assumptions, and thoughts of participants in scientific yet substantive ways (Prasad, 2005). This method allows ideas to emerge organically from the perspective of the participant, rather than that of the researcher. Interpretive studies rely heavily on the perceptions and interpretations of the participants, while allowing the researcher the autonomy to form generalizations (Prasad, 2005). This approach was most useful for this study both because of the emphasis placed on understanding individual experiences and due to its connection to the theoretical framework (Merriam et al., 2007).

The research questions also aligned with this approach in that they encouraged participants to reflect on specific ideas and beliefs that emerged from their experiences. Such ideas and beliefs are assumed to influence behavior (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (1991) defines meaning as "an interpretation that is informed by perceptions and cognition" (p. 34). To create a strong connection to a qualitative approach, I aligned my study with an interpretive perspective. This approach enabled participants' experiences to emerge and permitted flexibility in the study and in understanding the data (Creswell, 2014). The following section describes the specific methods of data collection used in the study.

<div align="center">Data Collection and Analysis Methods</div>

Using a qualitative interpretive methodology, I asked participants to engage in reflective practices during the interviews to create meaning in relation to their roles as peer leaders. Creswell (2014) suggests that the researcher should employ strict guidelines in collecting data, while setting clear boundaries for inquiry. These guidelines apply to selecting the site and participants, establishing what specific data the researcher will collect, and making plans to record and analyze the data (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative methodology seeks to understand the actions and behavior of the subject being studied (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Some actions and behaviors may be too complex for basic studies and require further methods of study from the researcher. Consequently, we rely on qualitative data to paint a vivid picture of some complex human problems. Strong results from qualitative studies are predicated on how well the data has been collected and analyzed (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

<u>Participant Selection</u>

The sampling method I used is purposeful sampling. The goal of this study was not to apply the findings to the overall population; thus random sampling is not appropriate. Using purposeful sampling allows the researcher to choose participants who will provide data that is most likely to effectively answer the research questions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Patton, 1990). According to Patton (1990), the beauty of purposeful sampling is the ability to use "information rich" samples that will be important to the "purpose of the research" (p. 169). Purposeful sampling is a common practice in qualitative research studies (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

To best utilize a purposeful sample, I created criteria for inclusion in the study (Merriam, 1998). The criteria ensured that participants will be able to provide data that supports the purpose of the study. The criteria for this study were simple, yet specific. Participants needed to have met the following criteria:

1. College students who are between 19 and 25 years old.

2. Students who have served in a peer leadership role (Resident Advisor, Recognized Student Organization (RSO) leader, or Orientation Leader) for at least one academic year.

3. Students who are able to recall their experiences as a peer leader

In purposeful sampling there is typically no specific number of participants required; the number depends instead on the topic, research questions, and depth and quantity of the data needed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal is to collect as much data as possible until reaching data saturation, meaning until data becomes redundant (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). However, given the nature of the peer leadership positions being studied, I recruited 16 participants to avoid "redundancy" of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202). Redundancy implies that many of the participants may provide similar responses to the interview questions. This number allowed me to obtain enough data from a variety of different perspectives to adequately answer the research questions. Using the purposeful sampling approach allows the researcher to gain rich and descriptive data from participants who meet the criteria for the study.

Two methods were used to identify participants for this study. The first was criterion sampling, in which "all participants must meet one or more criteria as predetermined by the research" (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 191). The second method was snowball sampling, in which

participants are recruited by referral. This method allowed participants to refer others whom they believed met the criteria (Krathwohl, 1998; Patton, 2002). The referred participants (two) met the criteria identified for this study. Given my relationships at Park University, where I am currently employed, using the criterion sampling method was useful in securing participants.

For this study, I chose to select 16 participants (9 women and 7 men) from Park University because I am familiar with this student population and had ready access to students who met the stated criteria. To gain access to the sample population, I used intentional recruitment and selection strategies. A "gatekeeper" is someone within the population who has the ability to grant the researcher access to a given population (Krathwol, 1998). As a staff member at Park University, I have relationships with several gatekeepers (who are student affairs staff) who have ready access to my sample population.

The participants represented diverse peer leadership roles at Park University, including resident advisor, orientation leader, coffee shop manager, fraternity chapter president, and student organization executive board members. Their responsibilities included: facilitating meetings, representing the organization to university administrators, managing the budget, mentoring students who are new to the group, managing student-run businesses, and planning and developing programs. The findings of the study represent the experiences of the participants at Park University. These findings also represent a particular moment in time, and reflect the perspectives of the participants. Table 1 presents demographic information for the selected participants, using pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Peer Leadership Role	Years of Peer Leadership
April	21	Female	African-American	Student Organization	3
Claire	22	Female	Asian-American	Student Organization	2
Dan	21	Male	White	Resident Advisor	3
Derek	20	Male	Multiracial	Student Organization Student Government	1.5
Jessica	21	Female	Asian-American	Orientation Leader Student Organization	3
Lily	20	Female	White	Student Organization, Sorority Member, and Community Service Peer Leader	1.5
Lucy	20	Female	International (Asian)	Orientation Leader Student Organization	1
Mark	21	Male	White	Fraternity President Athlete	2
Mary	22	Female	White	Coffee Shop Manager	3
Monica	21	Female	Biracial	Student Organization	1.5
Pam	20	Female	White (Muslim)	Student Government Student Organization	2
Paul	19	Male	Asian-American	Student Government Fraternity Vice-President	1.5
Rex	22	Male	African-American	Student Organization Orientation Leader	3
Robert	20	Male	African-American	Student Government Student Organization	1
Sam	22	Male	White	Student Government Student Organization	3

Sue	22	Female	White	Orientation Leader Student Government	2

Context and Setting

Founded in 1890, Park University is an elite, private research university with an enrollment of 15,000 students (undergraduate, graduate, and professional), a medical center, and several remote campuses throughout the world. It is a private, urban, highly selective institution that is known for its academic rigor. The university has approximately 400 student-run organizations, as well as intercollegiate athletics. The student population at Park University is 56% male and 44% female.

The university has significant racial/ethnic diversity, with 24% identifying as students of color (domestic), and 10% as international students. It is important to note that all first-year undergraduate students must live in official university housing. With an average of 1600 incoming first-year students each year, the role of the resident advisor is crucial to this residential experience. The participants will offer varied experiences and represent the diversity of the Park University community.

Park University offers many opportunities for students to engage in co-curricular activities, which are reinforced by the requirement that all first-year students must live in the residence halls. Park University is nestled in an urban neighborhood with a vibrant local community. The Park University community boasts a strong arts and entertainment culture, as well as being home to influential political and spiritual leaders. The faculty and research at Park University are nationally known and respected. Intercollegiate athletics are not a huge part of the

culture, but they have a Division I athletic program. The university was founded in the late 1800s and has a deep sense of tradition and pride.

Park University's Division of Student Affairs has a mission of meeting the holistic needs of PU students, a charge it shares with the Student Affairs office within the undergraduate college. Park University has two student affairs units, one unit is dedicated to the undergraduate college, and the other unit is for undergraduate and graduates students. The president of Park University openly admits to having very little understanding of student development theory, and views students as consumers. The Student Affairs unit encompasses such traditional student affairs offices as housing and residence life, student activities and leadership, and even dining services. Its mission is to help "students, staff, and faculty experience university life at its fullest." Within the Division of Student Affairs, the Student Leadership Institute has the sole responsibility for leadership development for all Park University students. The goal of the Institute is to develop leadership capacities such as innovation, humility, resilience, adaptability, and interpersonal skills.

The undergraduate college Student Affairs unit has only two core operations: orientation and academic advising. The mission of this unit is to create a sense of class community and institutional affinity for the undergraduate college. This dual system of student affairs at Park University creates confusion for students and seems not to meet the needs of the student population based on anecdotal evidence. The undergraduate college at Park University is very influential in the curricular (academic) experiences of students, but the college is not actively involved in supporting the co-curricular experiences of students.

Park University has numerous exceptional achievements and accolades to its credit. Five Nobel Laureates are alumni of the institution. Park is noted as one of the first non-historically black universities to tenure an African-American faculty member, and it awarded one of the first Ph.D.s to an African-American woman. It also has other key offices that serve diverse student populations, including the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Student Life office, as well as an International House that serves the needs of the international student population.

Park University is often described by students and faculty as "the place where fun comes to die," alluding to its lack of social activities and intense academic rigor. At Park University the faculty have a high level of influence on the experience of students, particularly in the classroom. Faculty members at Park University are expected to produce research, and they are not expected to be involved in student life programs. This is evidenced by the small number of faculty members who advise student organizations or attend student programs.

Park University students operate independently and rely on student governance to manage their organizations and programs. Students at Park University are highly motivated and take their co-curricular involvements very serious. Although there are over 400 student organizations, the fraternity and sorority community is not recognized by the institution. These organizations operate independently and receive no institutional support.

Interviews

Individual interviews comprised the method of data collection in this study. Interviews are a common method of collecting data in an interpretive study (Merriam, 2002). I used semi-

structured interviews to ask questions centering on the participants' experiences as peer leaders. Semi-structured interviews are composed of predetermined, open-ended questions that allow the interviewer the ability to follow up when necessary (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Yin, 2010). Semi-structured interviews differ from structured or unstructured interviews in that they allow the interviewer the flexibility to probe further based on responses from the participant.

The interviews were face-to-face and lasted 45-60 minutes, and the questions elicited the experiences of college students related to their role as peer leaders. I asked questions that invited students to discuss their experiences as peer leaders and to describe the training they received as part of their role. The interview questions were designed to encourage participants to go beyond surface ideas to focus on the impact of their experience (Van Manen, 1998). The interview protocol that guided the interviews is presented in Appendix A.

In conducting an interpretive study, unlike other types of research studies, data collection and analysis often happen concurrently (Merriam, 2002). Typically in interpretive studies, themes are formed as the researcher interviews participants. This allows the researcher to edit interview questions with future participants and increases the likelihood that data collection efforts will be productive and yield rich data (Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

The interviews occurred during January and February 2016. As part of the research process, all of my criteria and interview protocols were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Northern Illinois University. Participants also signed informed consent forms before the interviews were conducted. I offered to conduct the interviews in my office, but also suggested other locations that might be comfortable for the participant. All participants were fine with the interviews occurring in my office. All interviews were audio

recorded and I also took notes throughout the interviews, as a means of recording my impressions and observations. After each interview, I reviewed the recording to evaluate the interview and become familiar with the data. To insure high quality, accurate transcriptions, I hired a professional to transcribe the interview recordings.

The review of literature and conceptual framework selected for the study guided the creation of the interview protocol. The literature on peer leadership (Ender & Newton, 2000) and transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2000) informed the development of questions pertaining to peer leadership experiences. Creswell (2014) explains that qualitative research explores the meaning participants make and the beliefs they hold (p. 4). Conducting semi-structured interviews enabled me to obtain a better sense of the participants' views and perspectives. Based on the content of the first round of interviews, I determined there was no need to conduct follow-up interviews.

Although other forms of data collection were considered, interviews were the only form of data collection ultimately used in the study. Interviews were chosen to elicit the participants' self-reported perspectives on their learning and leading processes. The interviews were also helpful in allowing participants to reflect on their peer leadership role and share the knowledge, skills, and abilities they gained. All questions were open-ended and intentionally designed to capture the essence of the participants' feelings, behaviors, and values. The questions were also designed to encourage discussion between the researcher and the participant during each individual interview to insure that I was able to gather rich data.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently in this research study. Data analysis is the process that allows the researcher to make sense of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). A key component of qualitative research is that it allows the identification of themes based on the perspectives of the participants. Seidman (2006) provides some explicit recommendations for analyzing, synthesizing, and interpreting qualitative research data. These suggestions, which offer instructions for conducting data analysis in a manner consistent with qualitative research methods, guided my method of gathering data and informed my process of gathering and analyzing the data concurrently (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Merriam (1998) describes data analysis in an interpretive study as an often "complex process that involves moving back and forth between parts of data and abstract concepts, between description and interpretation" (p. 178). After the interviews had been transcribed, I began to divide the data into categories of meaning (Giorgi, 1997; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) derived from transformational learning theory and other supporting literature. This allowed me to obtain an understanding of the interview data from the perspective of the conceptual framework. However, Merriam (1998) suggests using a flexible method for analysis, in which the researcher creates themes and categories to begin analysis. So using this approach as well, I created a blend of units of meaning that were categorized into codes and eventually into themes.

Themes and codes are intended to introduce concepts that are germane to the research questions, but are shaped by the voices of the participants. This process was challenging, as I needed to compare new data to data that had already been collected as interviews were occurring. However, working between existing and new data provided an opportunity to create themes or

codes that were shaped from all data sources. *Codes* are defined as words that have some level of

symbolism for the study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Merriam (1998) asserts that codes

should be comprehensive, exclusive, and congruent with the research questions. Codes enable

the researcher to quickly find related pieces of data throughout the transcripts (Miles, Huberman,

& Saldaña, 2014). This study utilized simultaneous coding to analyze the data. Simultaneous

coding allows the researcher to apply several different codes to a set of data (Miles, Huberman,

& Saldaña, 2014). This method was appropriate for this study because it allowed the experiences

of the participants to be interpreted in different ways and placed in several different codes, if

necessary.

The process of coding incorporates several levels of codes. The first level, open coding,

requires the gathering of large chunks of data and often represents the initial phase of analysis. In

focused coding, the second level, the researcher reviews the data again for clarity and begins to

create categories. In the third level, thematic coding, previous codes and categories have been

refined, and from these concepts, themes are formed to yield assertions (Marshall & Rossman,

2006).

Once the codes were established, the data gathered allowed assertions to emerge.

Assertions are thematic statements that make assumptions about a particular research problem

and represent the evidence that emerges following data collection (Erickson, 1986; Miles,

Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Assertions are helpful in summarizing the findings in meaningful

ways and allow the voices of the participants to influence how the findings are communicated

(Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This process was critical to understanding the experiences

of the participants.

Prior to submitting the interview recordings for transcription, I listened to each recording and reviewed the notes I had taken during the interview. After listening to the entire interview, I selected a participant pseudonym to make it easier to organize the data. After the transcript of the first interview was completed, I reviewed the Interview Protocol (Appendix A) to ensure that I was asking the right questions and using appropriate probes to capture rich data. I chose not to make any changes to the Interview Guide after this review. I also noted any data that was unexpected, as well as emerging common themes.

Merriam (1998) suggests a flexible way of analyzing data that includes identifying data of interest that are easily labeled. Often times these points of data are conceptual and not as specific to research questions, but they allow the researcher the ability to interpret data freely. This method allowed me to review the data and simultaneously identify themes and compare new data to current themes. By constantly reviewing all the transcripts, I was able to interpret the phenomenon and identify the categories, codes, and eventually themes that emerged from the data. To obtain a greater understanding of the data, I also took all of the transcriptions and grouped them in corresponding themes to insure that the voices of the participants supported the themes. As new codes were introduced in the data, I found it important to retain some of the original codes. Through this method, I then began to identify "child" codes with "parent" codes; by re-reading the transcripts I then moved text into and out of codes to best fit the data into the identified themes.

Researcher Positionality

It is necessary to provide insight into my background and its connections to this research to illuminate how my experiences may influence my views on learning and college student development, as well as my selection of a research topic and methodology. I served in a peer leadership role during my own college years, and I chose to become a student affairs professional largely as a result of my involvement in campus activities. I greatly enjoyed serving as a resident advisor (RA), a role in which I was responsible for 35 residents who were my peers. This role prompted my interest in developing leadership skills, and eventually led to my choice of a career in higher education.

During my first year as an RA, one of my residents, Beth (a pseudonym), shared with me that she had been addicted to drugs since high school. She was depressed and wanted to seek help for her addiction and depression. Beth confided in me as the RA, and insisted that I keep this informational confidential. I felt well prepared to serve as a resource and referral agent for this student. Yet in hindsight, I realize that this was a critical moment for me as a student leader, with limited training and with significant responsibility for the well-being of my peers.

Many students who are responsible for supporting their peers as a resident advisor, orientation leader, or officer of a student organization experience similar critical moments. Working to support Beth forced me to reflect on my own views and beliefs about depression and to identify healthy ways of coping with these feelings. Although significant time has passed since I held the RA position, I define this experience as a transformational moment in my life. This incident provided me with an understanding of mental health that I did not have previously, and emphasized for me the importance of living a balanced life. It also helped me understand the

complexity of being responsible for my peers. Serving in this peer leader capacity greatly influenced my interest in conducting this study.

Currently, I serve as a student affairs administrator responsible for creating intentional learning environments in which students can engage in activities to help them build relationships and explore their own identity. In this role, I often engage with students who are experiencing critical moments in their lives that will have a lasting impact on their view of themselves and the world around them. As a student affairs staff member at Tulane University in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, I saw firsthand how college students responded to this storm and its aftermath. I recall student leaders rallying to participate in service projects and to serve as orientation leaders for new students during the aftermath of hurricane, and in the process begin to recognize their own resilience.

My professional life and goals, as well as my experiences and beliefs, have been shaped by my work as a student affairs professional and my interaction with student leaders involved in such co-curricular activities such as student organizations, community service, and student government. Through professional networks as well as informal mentoring relationships, I have been fortunate to connect with other student affairs professionals who support my growth as a student affairs practitioner. Because of my experience as a peer leader, as well as my professional experiences and beliefs, I feel that it is my responsibility to contribute to the literature on peer leadership and student learning and development.

<div align="center">Researcher Assumptions</div>

Several assumptions underlie the research design and analysis of this study. Specifically, I make assumptions about the peer leader role that are evident in the research questions. These assumptions are grounded in the existing literature and shaped by my professional experiences in the field of higher education. These assumptions include:

1. Peer leader roles on college campuses are transformational experiences, given the expectations placed on students who serve in these roles as well the knowledge, skills, and abilities they gain. (Astin, 1984)

2. Adults encounter significant life experiences that may lead them to transform their perspective in relation to their lifestyle, belief system, and self-understanding. (Mezirow, 2000)

The goal of identifying researcher positionality is to acknowledge one's own placement as the researcher. Simply put, researchers must determine whether they are insiders or outsiders in relation to the research (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The dissertation process permits the flexibility for researchers to choose their own research setting, which often places them on both ends of the positionality spectrum. Given my work in student affairs, I acknowledge that I was an insider to this study, as well as to the setting of Park University.

Having served as a student affairs professional at various institutions, I have formed an understanding of peer leadership by observing this role at several institutions with varying missions. Having served at an institution in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, I saw the aftermath of a national disaster on a major city, as well as an influential institution of higher education. In my role, I was called upon to assist senior-level university administrators in creating a new vision for the campus community after this major catastrophe. I worked with a

broad group of colleagues to create a vibrant student experience that supported development and learning, despite a context of significant upheaval and transition. I can only assume that many of the students enrolled during the hurricane would define that experience as transformational.

Trustworthiness

I have carefully considered ways to maintain the integrity of the research participants' perspectives, as well as of Park University. It is important that I am trusted and that I insure this study is authentic and representative of the participants. Patton (2002) speaks of such authenticity as trustworthiness or "the appreciation for the perspective of others" (p. 546). Creating authentic relationships with participants helps make them feel comfortable in providing rich descriptions of their experiences (Creswell, 2014). Although I knew some of the participants, there are some whom I met for the first time during the interview process. I therefore did not have enough time to establish authentic relationships with those I was meeting for the first time.

One way I insured trustworthiness and authenticity was by keeping notes throughout the data collection process. These notes enabled me to share my experiences as the researcher while also documenting any instances in which my integrity as a researcher may have been questioned. The notes allowed me the opportunity to reflect on the process, as well as to identify my own assumptions as the researcher.

I reviewed the audio recordings regularly to ensure that I accurately captured the voices of the participants and that I was knowledgeable about the data, and also as a means of quality

control for future interviews. Additionally, to ensure the trustworthiness of the study I also conducted member checking (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). This involved inviting participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the interview transcripts and the findings chapter. They were asked to provide any necessary changes, thoughts, or corrections using the Track Changes feature of Microsoft Word. This enabled participants to see how their stories would be understood, as well as to allow room for them to clarify their thoughts. Although all participants were able to review their transcript and the findings chapter, there were no changes submitted by participants.

All participants were informed that the interviews were confidential and their real names would not be used. All recordings were stored on my password-protected computer, and will be deleted after I have completed the dissertation process. As an additional measure, I will offer to share the findings of this study with the participants at its conclusion.

Summary

Creswell (2014) suggests that the selection of a research design should complement the research question. The qualitative approach I chose for this study allowed broad interpretations of the participants' responses to the interview questions. This required that decisions be made that were aligned with the study's epistemological underpinnings, theoretical perspective, and conceptual framework. As noted above, my professional experiences have influenced how I engaged in this study and have shaped my positionality as the researcher. Thoughtfully considering these research procedures insured that the data and its interpretations were rich, insightful, and trustworthy.

All individuals are unique in their manner of interpreting their own lived experiences (Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2000). Nevertheless, studying participants who share a similar context may provide some insight into how college students engaged in peer leadership roles perceive their experience and how such roles affect their learning and growth. This study, using a conceptual framework of transformational learning theory, contributes to our understanding of how college students in peer leadership roles may experience critical moments that transform their perspectives and beliefs. Such an investigation of transformational learning among college students has the potential to inform the work of student affairs theorists and practitioners alike.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter provides an analysis of the data and reports the findings of the study. This study sought to identify the transformational learning experiences and leadership development process of college students who participate in peer leadership positions. The study investigated the following research questions:

1. How do college students who engage in peer leadership roles describe their experiences?

2. How do these student leaders make meaning of their experience?

3. What processes help student leaders make meaning of their peer leadership role?

4. What knowledge, skills, and abilities do participants report having gained as a result of their peer leadership role?

This study explored the relationship between peer leadership roles and transformational learning. Mezirow (1991) defined transformational learning as a process through which learners reflect critically on past assumptions and views and reconcile these previous understandings with new knowledge gained through different life experiences. In general, participants reported that they engaged in meaningful learning opportunities while serving as a peer leader, and gained skills and abilities that will assist them in their personal, professional, and academic development.

To understand the findings, it is important to acknowledge the variety of peer leadership roles in which participants engaged. The 16 participants in this study represent diverse peer leadership roles at Park University, including resident advisor, orientation leader, coffee shop

manager, fraternity chapter president, and student organization executive board members. The duties associated with these roles share many similarities, including but not limited to facilitating meetings, representing the organization to university administrators, managing the budget, mentoring students who are new to the group, managing student-run businesses, and planning and developing programs.

However, these leadership roles also differ widely, particularly regarding the number of peers each participant leads. For example, a fraternity president may be responsible for a group of 80 men; a student organization president is typically responsible for leading 30 to 40 students; an orientation leader may be responsible for 10 to 15 students. Yet all such positions have considerable responsibility for supporting student development at Park University. In addition, some participants held more than one peer leadership role. The experiences discussed by participants thus varied greatly.

This study sought to elicit and interpret students' experiences as peer leaders to identify the ways in which they make meaning of these experiences. Simultaneous coding was used to analyze the data. Five themes emerged from this analysis: learning from interactions with diverse peers; identity exploration; enhanced personal, professional, and academic development; community responsibility as leaders; and lack of institutional support. These themes are discussed in detail below.

Learning from Interactions with Diverse Peers

Fourteen participants reported either an increased awareness of or a change in their ideas, beliefs, or values as result of their peer leadership roles. They attributed these changes in

perspective to the learning that resulted from working and engaging in interactions with diverse peers. The changes in perspective and awareness differed in scope and context, but all 14 participants reported that these changes resulted directly from their involvement in peer leadership activities.

For example, Mark reported that he had a greater understanding of LGBTQ issues as result of his role as president of his fraternity. Mark identified conversations with a few fraternity brothers as "the moment when the light bulb turned on" and his view of the LGBT community changed. Mark related an incident involving a member who had shared with him that he was questioning his sexual orientation. Mark recalled his reluctance to have this conversation, as he did not feel he was "trained" to discuss these issues. He also felt that he was still trying to discern his "own views of the gay community." Mark shared:

> It was rough. He was looking for my advice and I felt that I had to just speak from the gut on this one. I basically shared with him that life is too short not to be the real you. After that conversation, I thought to myself, Hmmm. It's really that simple. That is when the light bulb turned on. I really felt that way . . . It was good that I was able to have that talk with him. It helped him, and me.

Mark's story offers insight into how he was able to navigate a difficult conversation with a peer while also reconciling his own views of the LGBT community. His ability to be authentic in this conversation with his fraternity brother enabled him to resolve his own views of the LGBT community.

Similarly, Dan, who served as a resident advisor, discussed his understanding of the experiences of transgender students on campus and how he was able to reconcile his own understanding of gender and gender expression. Dan related a discussion he had with his peers in the residence hall during his first year as a resident assistant:

When I was a first-year, I had never encountered transgender students before . . . at least

not to my knowledge. But I was talking to a friend . . . [and] said, "Hey, I saw this guy

wearing a dress," and I thought it was funny. I was talking to him about it and another

resident of my res hall kind of came into the conversation and was like, "Are you talking

about my friend, [name]?" . . . [then] informed me that this was a person who identified

as a woman. But even after being sort of told that, I was like, "No, this was a guy." [He

had] a masculine voice, masculine this and that, and I didn't even, you know, stop to

think about what [being transgender] meant because it was just very foreign to me. And it

was just kind of jarring.

Dan's comments illustrate how engaging with his residents enabled him to gain an

awareness of the ways in which his peers might decide to express their sexuality. His comments

do not suggest that his perspective had changed, but that he had learned "the hard way that there

are some people that identify differently on this campus." This incident marked Dan's first

encounter with a transgender person.

Pam, who served in multiple peer leadership roles, also discussed how her knowledge

and understanding of LGBT issues shifted. At the time of this study, Pam served as the president

of the Muslim Student Association (MSA), and she stated that LGBTQ issues were not discussed

at all among her peers in MSA, let alone within the larger Muslim community. Pam reflected on

how the perspective on LGBTQ issues she had learned from her family had shifted as a result of

her peer leadership role:

> My parents are naturalized citizens and I am like first-generation American . . . and I
> consider myself to be like more liberal or democratic than like my parents might. . . . I am
> more liberal than they are and I guess things like having friends who are LGBTQ as well
> as the folks that work with me in [my] organization. My parents try to relate but they

don't understand for religious reasons or cultural reasons . . . for me my immediate family is like important to me but less so my extended family. Whereas very much so like in our culture your family is--your family is like everything: forget everything else. But I am glad I am able to talk with all of my friends here about this stuff and it not seem weird.

Pam's comments highlight how engaging with her peers has allowed her to develop "accepting" views of LGBT people, even though these views are in conflict with those of her family.

The participants' reports reflect the four ways in which transformational learning can occur: "By elaborating existing frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming points of view, or by transforming habits" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 19). Lily, who served as the co-editor of the newspaper and a site leader for a community service organization in the area, provided insight into how her perspective changed as a result of leading her peers during a summer community service project. Lily reflected on how her views about education changed as a result of her community service work:

I participated in the community service or justice orientated summer program by the Community Service Center on campus over the summer. I was really interested in teaching and there was sort of a day when we talked a lot about education and went to a charter school. I've always been pretty in favor of [them]; I don't think they are like miracles but just the offered choice. I have always sort of thought that was a good idea, but through talking with the other students in the program and talking to people like in their community who were really opposed to charters coming in, that made me think a lot more about some of the other sides . . . I probably didn't look at it from sort of like a fairly privileged view of someone that didn't have to go to public school. And that definitely sort of challenged my opinion on that issue some; not actually like a total 180, but that was a question I thought on a lot more.

Lily's story illustrates how she was able to achieve a broader understanding of educational policies by engaging and leading her peers through community service work.

Participants conveyed their appreciation for the academic rigor of Park University as a complement to the learning they experience through their peer leadership roles. When asked how her extracurricular activities supported her academic experience, Pam responded, "They're like a support system. There are some other really wonderful support systems. They're a place where you can geek out. Yeah, and also just like extracurricular activities [are] like having a really good support group who understands you." Pam's comments reflect her view of her peer leadership activities as a link to her academic experiences at Park University. She also shared how her involvement on campus has provided a sense of "support" for her overall experience at Park University.

Sue, who served as a student organization president and orientation leader, expressed a fondness for the Park University academic experience and also described how her academic experience serves as a "perfect complement" to her peer leadership roles:

> I think it is definitely empowering because particularly at Park you know that you are constantly surrounded by people who are brilliant and effective and going to be doing amazing things with their lives. And while that can be really exciting to be a part of that community, it can also be kind of competitive, and you start asking yourself, like, Do I belong here? I think knowing that there are opportunities on campus to say that I can lead people and it doesn't mean that I am better than them, and it doesn't mean that I am worse than them, but I can help contribute to something that is part of such a prestigious institution.

Sue's comments speak to the importance of her peer leadership experiences in fostering self-confidence and supporting her learning within the classroom environment.

Participants also reported that learning occurred as a result of traumatic events they experienced while engaged in peer leadership opportunities. The first phase of transformational learning, the disorienting dilemma, refers to a critical moment that may be quite traumatic, such as an accident, a death, or a failed relationship. College students encounter traumatic incidents

(such as divorce or the death of a family member) that may provoke a change in their perspective on life. These incidents can have an impact on their overall growth and development (Mezirow, 2000).

April described a traumatic event she learned of while talking with one of the members of the Organization of Black Students (OBS) where she served as Vice-President. This conversation was a result of April trying to ascertain why the members of OBS were not attending scheduled meetings. April shared:

> We didn't realize that part of the reason why people are not engaging with the Organization of Black Students (OBS) is that we had two board members who had multiple allegations of sexual assault against them. There was a girl who was talking to me about this. This boy was--one of the boys was running for e-board . . . and she said, "He should not be on the e-board; he sexually assaulted me."

April was able to connect the member to the appropriate university resources, and from this conversation April was able to understand why her peers had not been active in the organization. Peer leaders like April are regularly expected to support and lead their peers through such traumatic events.

Similarly, Claire discussed how, as editor of the campus newspaper, she was responsible for managing an article that reported a sexual assault that occurred on campus. Claire shared that this was a learning moment for her, in that she had to make decisions on how to handle such a high profile traumatic event. Claire felt that she was able to act quickly and responsibly. She also felt that she learned how to manage her emotions as well as those of her peers through this incident. Claire recalled:

> The other time that I have been thinking about is when we were dealing with the allegations of rape at another frat last quarter. I think that the discussions and the debates were decisions about what to publish, how to publicize, with whose consent to publish, led to the resignation of two of our editors, one of which was my own Managing Editor. .

. . I wondered at that time if the decision that I made, which was against his wishes, was worth him resigning and leaving the organization and the damage that it did to the organization as a whole. But also the damage that it did, like he was so upset with what I had done that he needed to leave.

And since then, you know, that conversation has been cleared up and like he seems fine. I am fine with it but it's kind of those moments where I feel like the decision I make has too big of a possible effect on the organization or on others, that I start to question if sticking to whatever principle it is, like my position and my principles, is really worth it. And I think those are the most disturbing kind of moments for leadership.

Claire's comment clearly showed how she was expected to navigate a very delicate incident on campus. Claire's thoughts provide insight into her role as editor of the newspaper and how she was required to make important decisions in moments of crisis.

Sam, who served as treasurer of the Crew Team, recalled experiencing a car accident while traveling with the Crew Team:

We were in this car accident and pulled over on the side of the road. The car clearly was not drivable. We were kind of all just sitting on the shoulder; a couple of other cars from Crew drove right by us, recognized us, and kept going. Our first Crew meeting afterwards our coach was basically like, "I'm shocked this could have ever happened. I'm like starting to think that like some of you are just like sociopaths, like, what the heck?" So figuring out how to heal as a team after that, which I think goes back to figuring out, so why did that happen? But figuring out how to go from having that happen to healing as a team, to having that bond to trusting your teammate again, is a really hard step.

Sam emphasizes that he and his teammates had to reestablish trust in one another and in their identity as a team in light of their teammates' lack of assistance following the car accident.

Monica discussed a traumatic event she personally experienced while leading the Model UN group during a program in China. As vice president of the Model United Nations, Monica was responsible not only for organizing the group's large conference, but also for managing the group's trip to China. Monica shared:

So this summer while I was in China I was at one of the events that we were leading, and I got a message from my mom saying that her mother had just, like, passed away. I felt

very, you know, caught off guard, because you know I didn't really--I sort of knew it was coming, but not really. But I was also like leading this delegation of you know Park students, and I was the one in charge of all the logistics of, like, making sure people were, you know, had their lesson plans ready and, you know, we were getting ready to go to Beijing.

This narrative illuminates the learning that occurred as a result of Monica encountering a traumatic event while leading the group in China. Monica's response to this traumatic event provides evidence that she is able to remain focused in the midst of trauma. Monica later recalled that she was surprised how "tough" she had become. Monica also noted how much she appreciated the support she received from the peers accompanying her on the trip. Monica identified this incident as teaching her the importance of being "present" in moments of crisis. She also stated that having her peers on the trip helped her manage her emotions and taught her the value of having a "support system" during times of crisis. Monica's experience illustrates how the disorienting dilemma of her grandmother's unexpected death was critical in triggering new ways of operating for her.

The participants' narratives provided evidence of either changed perspectives or an increased awareness of their ideas, beliefs, or values. The narratives also provided insight into the nature of participants' interactions with peers that prompted change and triggered awareness. They discussed the impact of navigating traumatic events with their peers and how that had contributed to their learning. The participants' examples highlighted the learning that occurred as a result of peer leadership experiences.

Identity Exploration and Reconciliation

The narratives of 13 participants provided evidence that their involvement in peer leadership roles prompted them to discover, test, or reconcile their personal identity. The identities explored by participants varied, but included racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation. Participants reported that they were able to use their peer leadership roles to "safely" explore the elements of their personal identities that were most salient to them.

Derek communicated his appreciation for his experience as a member of the executive board of the Organization of Black Students (OBS), noting how his involvement in the organization enabled him to participate in activities that "give back" to the African-American community. Derek shared that although he identifies as multiracial, he identifies most strongly with his African-American identity:

> I primarily identify as Black now, but in high school I did not participate in a lot of "black things." That's why I enjoy being a part of OBS. It's like I am able to build this tight community with people that have similar identities. I'm also able to give back. OBS gives me an opportunity to be a part of the Black student experience at Park, and I get to lead the group.

Derek's comments emphasize the benefits of being able to explore his African-American identity by through his peer leadership role in OBS. Although Derek identifies as multiracial, he sought opportunities that would allow him to explore or "test" his African-American identity, and he found such an opportunity through his involvement in OBS.

April reported her involvement in planning an event that allowed her to explore her Black feminist identity. She shared an account of a bias incident targeting Black women that had occurred campus. April felt that she needed to do something in response to the incident. April was affiliated with a traditionally African-American sorority, and she shared that she worked with her sorority sisters to plan an event called "Save Our Sisters (SOS)." April relished the fact

that she was able to collaborate with her sorority sisters to host a very "dynamic" discussion. She shared, "That event made me really love being a Black woman. We celebrated each other through an open forum." Planning a program with her sorority sisters in response to a campus bias incident gave April a sense of pride in her identity as a Black woman.

Claire shared how her involvement with peers at the newspaper provided her with support as she began the process of exploring her sexual orientation. When asked how she self-identified, she responded, "I identify as Korean-American. My socioeconomic status is upper-middle class . . . My sexual orientation is questioning queer." Claire appeared to be confident in the response related to her sexual orientation. She shared that during her first year in college she had identified as heterosexual, but she had since begun to question her sexual orientation:

> My first year, I thought I was straight, but the more I got involved with the newspaper kids and began to hang out with different types of people--for some reason I felt free to think about the possibility that I may be queer. I haven't shared this with my family, but all of my editors know. We work long hours together, we share our lives with each other.

Claire's example provided insight on how she has been able to explore her sexual orientation while serving as editor of the newspaper. She also shared how she is able to rely on the close relationships with her peers to support her identity exploration. LGBTQ identity development and the coming out process itself is complex, individual, and varied. This is evident in the multiple identity development theories that seek to describe the experiences of LGBTQ students (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

Paul shared how his involvement in a predominantly Asian fraternity, which hosts events supporting the Asian community on campus, had allowed him to gain a greater appreciation for

his Asian-American identity. Paul also emphasized the importance of being in organization with people with whom he identified:

> I feel like I am involved with quite a few things on campus, but my fraternity allows me to have a brotherly bond with guys that look like me, and can identify with how I was raised. Being Asian was not that important to me in high school, but now it is. I'm not sure why that is, but I realized it after I was initiated. Now I am able to come to terms with a big part of who I am.

Paul's involvement with his fraternity helped him to reconcile his Asian-American identity. His comments also suggest that by providing opportunities to engage with peers who shared his racial/ethnic identity, Paul's involvement in the chapter enabled him to claim this as a highly salient identity.

Paul related how he felt comfortable coming out to his fraternity brothers, but not his family. Paul described the strong relationships he has established with his fraternity brothers through his involvement in the chapter, and shared that his family did not "receive the news well" that he was gay:

> I can compare telling my parents I was gay, with telling my fraternity brothers. What a difference! My family was not happy, and quite frankly very emotional to hear me tell them I was gay. I know that they love me, but do not understand that this is a part of who I am, just as much as being Asian is. But my fraternity was very accepting of me, and they love my boyfriend. But I told my brothers when I first took on the vice president role, and they were super supportive and used this as an opportunity to boast about the accepting nature of our fraternity. This was difficult for me at first, but it's good to know that my fraternity was excited for me, when family was not so much.

Paul describes the nature of his relationship with his fraternity brothers and the importance of their support when he chose to share his sexual orientation with them. Paul also highlights how difficult it was to come out to his family. Paul implied that he hoped for greater acceptance from his family, and he seemed relieved to know he could count on support from his

fraternity brothers. Paul's account supported the identity exploration and reconciliation theme in that his peer leadership role enabled him to find a space to explore his LGBTQ identity.

Pam, who identifies as a Muslim feminist, shared how all of her identities are represented in her peer leadership roles she holds. Pam is not only involved in the Muslim Student Association (MSA) but also serves as vice president of the Women in Business (WIB) student organization. Pam shared that she decided to join WIB because she wanted to be around peers who were interested in business, but particularly women:

> You know men dominate the business world. WIB works to help women on campus break that barrier. WIB is different than MSA in that I am able to celebrate the fact that I am a woman, and in MSA I celebrate being Muslim.

Pam highlights the ways she is able to explore her personal identity by engaging with and leading her peers in two student organizations that represented her two salient identities. The MMDI suggests that there is a relationship between one's core sense of self and one's social identities that encourages individuals to reconcile what has salience. Salience refers to which identities, among the many identities an individual may possess, are most important. These salient identities often remain closest to the core self and to how individuals view themselves.

Dan credited his peer leadership experience with providing an opportunity to reconcile his identity as a White male. Dan's role as a resident advisor (RA) required him to plan programs focused on diversity and inclusion. Dan shared that although he does not identify as a person of color, he has become "mindful" of how his identity may be perceived by his peers:

> I know that I am not a minority, so I know oftentimes my peers who identify as a person of color might think I don't get it . . . We can thank years of injustice for that. But I am mindful of how the residents on my floor who identify as a person of color might perceive me and the programs I plan. I know it's a work in progress, and I know I am always learning in this area.

Dan's comments convey how he was able to reconcile his personal identity and understand the impact this identity had on his ability to serve as an RA. Dan also communicated his interest in continuing to learn about his identity and understand how it impacts his interactions with his peers.

The experiences related by the participants suggest that their peer leadership roles provided them with numerous opportunities to explore their personal identities. Participants identified relationships with peers and planning or participating in programs as the primary means through which they were able to explore their personal identities. Participants also reported a greater sense of pride in their identity as a result of participating in specific student organizations that provided an opportunity for identity exploration.

Torres et al. (2009) note that the student affairs literature describes identity as both personal and as influenced by social groups. Phinney (1990) suggested that individuals must feel connected to a particular group or identity before they will self-identify with a particular racial/ethnic identity. The accounts shared by the participants suggest that their involvement in peer leadership roles allowed them to feel more connected to their personal identities. This was evident in their sense of pride and their affinity for their peer leadership roles.

Enhanced Personal, Professional, and Academic Development

Fourteen participants reported developing in one or more of three specific areas-- academic, personal, or professional--as result of their peer leader roles. The skills developed within these areas varied, but can be placed in the following categories: leadership development, life skills, and skills necessary for life after graduation.

Leadership Development

All fourteen of the participants who reported skill development discussed particular leadership skills they gained as a result of their peer leadership roles. Specifically, participants identified decision making, communication, and conflict management as areas in which their skills advanced as a result of their peer leadership experience. Moreover, by reflecting on and making meaning of their experiences, the students engaged in transformational learning that yielded personal and professional growth (Mezirow, 2000).

When asked to identify the leadership development skills he gained as result of his peer leadership roles, Robert, who served as an orientation leader and an executive board member of two organizations, replied:

> Yeah, you know, there is always the cliché ones--communication, being articulate, public speaking--but there are also the ones that I don't think you pick up unless you have the experience; like, no one tells you that these are really important. I think that patience is really important. I think that teamwork is really, really important. It is one thing to have this charismatic leader and they are the president or they are the top of this student organization. It is another thing to have that person who is able to delegate, who is able to work with the other officers and officials in that organization. To be most effective as a peer leader I think that you got to--you got to find a balance between everything that you are doing and making sure that you are putting in energy and putting your time and your abilities into these different things.

Robert's reflections provide an understanding of the skills he feels he gained as a result of his peer leadership roles.

Rex emphasized how leading the Caribbean Student Association helped him develop greater self-confidence in response to criticism from others:

> I mean, largely you have to be okay with dealing with a lot of criticism and negativity, right, and especially when it is anonymous . . . because to deal with that and to also deal with crazy-craze that is not anonymous . . . every organization has internal disagreements, but even the best functioning organizations . . . can be perceived . . . that

your organization is not the greatest. . . . You have to be prepared to deal with criticism whether it is to your face or if it is not. You know, very often people are going . . . to criticize to your face for a variety of reasons, right?

Rex's comments highlights how developing greater self-confidence as a result of his peer leadership roles has made him more resilient and better able to handle criticism.

Similarly, Sue also reflected on the qualities needed for her peer leadership role:

I think you have to be able to make decisions quickly and effectively. You are often being kind of faced with a lot of different questions that, you know, maybe you don't have a lot of expertise with, or maybe there are conflicting opinions about. I think you have to be able to balance kind of, what are the needs of my organization or the needs of this job, and what are the kind of cost and benefits of each of my options? And who can I consult if I don't understand enough to make this decision effectively?

Sue identified decision making as a necessary skill for her peer leadership role.

Alternatively, Lily shared what she felt was needed for her peer leadership role:

I think that my job at the paper requires really just the ability to juggle a lot of things at once, as well as having the really strong sort of written communication skills because the sort of journalism piece in it is still really strong. But I think more than anything it's just the ability to take on a lot of things at once, because in my job I deal with making sure everyone's working at, like, a reasonable pace, so like a lot of checking up on people, sort of keeping in mind what every person in the room is doing. Reading through content and making sure it all looks fine and there aren't any errors.

Lily's comments emphasize delegation as one of the skills necessary for her role in managing the student newspaper.

Involvement in peer leadership roles has been shown to improve students' organizational and interpersonal communication skills, expand their awareness of diverse perspectives, increase their understanding of group dynamics, and enhance their intercultural awareness (Harmon,

2006). Participants identified a variety of skills and abilities they gained as a result of their peer

leadership roles. When asked to identify the skills gained as a result of her role, Pam responded:

> [A] skill that I really learned is how to make sure that people are comfortable doing the work . . . they are given to do, but they also want to do that work that you give them to do. Because I think that is what makes, like, the best result . . . I also might have like communicated with people a lot better, even like through like Skype or Google Hangouts or email. I think it is like really hard sometimes to like be an effective communicator on email. It definitely comes across sometimes when I work with my teams . . . there is always this point where it is like, Okay, that was not what we meant to say.

Pam's comments highlight the strengthening of her communication skills as a result of her peer

leadership role.

Dan identified the skills he gained as result of his RA position as crisis management,

communication, and conflict management:

> I am much better, sort of, I guess responding to crises and to sort of putting on my sort of serious face and sort of getting, you know, things solved where there is a problem and it kind of helps me sort of separate my outward personality and my inward personality a little bit. I kind of can make myself come across as a little bit more put together and a little bit more responsible appearing than I really am . . . I think I've improved in just how I read people and how I interact with people. . . . if someone says something that I disagree with I don't have to jump in and you know, start a conflict about it. I can, you know, I am better biting my tongue maybe. . . . I think that it has mostly helped me to sort of be more, you know, self-aware and more in control of my image almost, and just how I am putting myself out into the world and sort of being adaptable and flexible and stuff like that.

Dan's comments emphasize his ability to be a better communicator and a more skilled manager

of conflicts and crises as a result of his RA role.

Paul, who served as vice president of his fraternity as well as a student government

representative, reflected on the skills he has gained as a result of his peer leadership roles:

> I think I have become a more efficient person. That is a good, very kind of like utilitarian skill though. I just think that like that first year being the social chair was like me running around going, like, How do I do this and how do I this and what is this and what is that? I

know I am very good. But I feel like a lot more efficient. I think that as a result [I am] better with my time. So I remember first year I would be just like, me as a new person was kind of just like dropping the hammer on things when everything didn't work out. . . . But I think this year I am a lot more efficient about things.

Paul's comments illustrate the leadership skills he developed as a result of his peer leadership activities. He described his ability to be efficient and to be mindful of timelines as a byproduct of his involvement in peer leadership activities.

Participants identified a variety of examples of leadership skills they developed as result of their peer leadership roles, providing insight into the ways they were able to learn these skills. They highlighted how the particular experiences they encountered contributed to their learning. It is evident that the leadership skills participants developed contributed not only to their own learning, but also to the learning of their peers.

Life Skills

Seven participants reported gaining general life skills as result of their peer leader positions. Participants identified life skills as the general competencies needed for managing one's own personal life. These skills can range from managing personal finances to negotiating personal relationships. Participants reported that learning how to manage their daily routines while also fulfilling their peer leader responsibilities contributed to the advancement of their life skills.

Participants illustrated how their peer leadership roles were influential in helping them learn how to plan and manage their schedules. When asked to describe her daily routine, Mary, who managed one of the student-run coffee shops on campus, responded:

Typical day is usually another class and then after that I will go home or go grocery

shopping. I either like do my homework and make dinner and then like hang out with my roommates, or like I'll make dinner and then like make plans with a friend and then go to sleep pretty early. Being the manager, I have had to learn ways to manage my time. There is so much asked of you as manager, and it can overtake your schedule if you allow it . . . I have learned to make time for fun in my life, and try to live a balanced life, whatever that means.

Mary's thoughts exemplify the learning that was necessary to be able to manage all of her responsibilities. Mary also emphasized the importance of making time for "fun" activities in her schedule. The participants reported having very busy schedules, but they acknowledged that their busy schedules are to be expected due to their commitment to their peer leadership roles.

April also described the importance of planning in maintaining her daily routine. April described her daily routine as including classes, time spent in the library, and meetings. April reported that although her schedule is often hectic, she found her responsibilities to be manageable. She observed, "I have learned over time that it is important to grab hold of your schedule, or your life can end up in shambles." This quote captured the learning that resulted from the need to balance her peer leadership roles with her other responsibilities.

Derek reported improvement in his ability to plan ahead, rather than putting off responsibilities, as a result of his role in leading the Keynote Speaker Committee for the campus-wide Black History Month celebration. Derek describes this as a seminal event for the Black community at Park University, and planning this event represented a major undertaking. Derek reported that his daily routine had to change while planning was taking place because it required "massive amounts of time." Derek described himself as a procrastinator prior to planning the program, but reported that taking responsibility for this event caused him to be "proactive and to anticipate the unimaginable."

Some participants reported gaining financial management expertise as result of their peer leadership experience, as responsibilities such as planning campus events, booking speakers, and ordering food for programs taught them to be more fiscally responsible. Sam described how as treasurer for the Crew Team, which was $7000 in debt at the beginning of his term, he was charged with finding innovative ways of fundraising and generating revenue for the organization:

> I quickly had to become very strict with spending, and also had to strategize how we were going to raise $7000. Luckily, a few of our members' families donated the money. But I totally used this as a moment to appreciate, because I quickly realized that we are shielded as college students, but the day will quickly come where we will need to learn how to manage our own [money]; mom and dad will not be around.

Sam's role with the Crew Team helped him to develop financial management skills as well as a new appreciation of the challenging nature of money management.

Lucy, who served as an orientation leader and as secretary of a women's finance organization, recalled how she used the knowledge of contracts gained through her peer leadership role to help navigate her search for an apartment. She shared her experiences working with her peers in a Recognized Student Organization (RSO), which gave her the opportunity to interact with various speakers who came to give talks on campus. Through this experience Lucy learned the importance of performance agreements, and she recognized that leasing an apartment was "close to planning a speaker" in terms of the skills required for success. This past fall, she was looking for an apartment and "was running into unethical landlords" who wanted to rent to college students but didn't have their lease agreement in writing. She noted, "I guess I put my program planning hat on, and realized that if it is not in writing it means nothing!" While not directly the outcome of peer leadership, Lucy's story highlights how the responsibilities

associated with peer leader roles provide experience for students to draw upon, enabling them to navigate life situations with greater skill and confidence.

Participants communicated that through their peer leadership roles, they obtained skills that enhanced their ability to manage their personal lives. Participants cited examples of how they applied the learning they gained through their peer leadership roles to develop effective strategies for managing their personal lives. The life skills they gained included, but were not limited to, time management, financial planning skills, and negotiating contracts.

<u>Skills Necessary for Life after Graduation</u>

Nine participants reported acquiring skills that would prepare them for post-graduate pursuits, whether they planned to apply to graduate school or enter the workforce. Participants identified how serving in peer leadership roles fostered skills that they anticipate will support their career paths. Research has shown that peer leaders, as well as the students they serve, reap benefits in their interpersonal growth and development (Keup, 2012; Kim, 2009; Russel & Skinkle, 1990), and that peer mentoring relationships themselves can support career development and advancement (Kram, 1988).

Mary shared how she believes serving as a coffee shop manager has prepared her as she approaches graduation:

> Going back to the skills that I've gained, I think all of those are really essential to do well in any environment in the world in a professional setting. And I don't think I would have been forced to learn them quite as well if I would have just been--just been an employee. I also think that it helps me to prepare for what my life might look like after I leave here. I know that if I decide to go to grad school or work professionally, I know that I am prepared for either choice, because I know that I can survive in almost any team environment and be successful.

Mary's thoughts convey how she gained confidence in navigating professional relationships due to her peer leader role.

Sam reported that he plans to work after graduation, and he believes his involvement in peer leadership has helped prepare him for life after Park University:

> So I will probably leave here and get a finance job. I know that I will have to lean on some of things I learned through my RSO involvement to help me figure [out] some problem in my job. I also think I am confident as a candidate entering an interview room. I feel that I have some solid experiences that have allowed me to be a stellar candidate for any position. Although I felt that I have received a world-class education here at Park, my extra-curriculars have set me apart from others.

Sam's words clearly convey his confidence in the knowledge, skills, and abilities he possesses as a result of his peer leadership roles.

April described how her plans after graduation have been shaped by her peer leadership experience. She discussed how the collaborative nature of peer leadership has caused her to pursue careers that are "individualistic":

> To be honest with you I think being a peer leader has kind of made me really want to pursue a career like being a bit more individualistic. So if you like--you got to sacrifice something. You sacrifice a part of yourself when you join an e-board or several e-boards because your vision, the way you want things to go, will now always, rarely be what happens. Because people have different opinions and you have to--you have to compromise and get to common ground, that so doesn't really look like a lot of what you wanted it to be. I am a writer and for me the one thing that I can't compromise is my writing. One thing that I can't compromise is what I put on paper. Leading a group of my peers for the last three years taught me that.

April's peer leadership roles have helped her focus her plans after graduation on pursuing a career path that will allow her to work autonomously.

Paul also reported feeling prepared for life after graduation, although he is only a second-year student. Paul believed being involved in peer leadership has given him the confidence to go

out into the job market and secure a position. Paul expressed that peer leadership has allowed

him to approach internship interviews "very cockily." Paul was certain that the knowledge and

skills gained from his peer leadership roles will allow him to be successful in his search for a

summer internship.

Robert, who is also a second-year student, shared:

I definitely think it is giving me some good practice so when I have to, you know, oversee a budget or when I have to plan meetings or organize meetings or bring students together. When I have to talk to administrators I think that is all good practice for the field of law and politics. And being a peer leader is really important because I get to talk to people who are just like me and I get to amplify their opinions and their perspectives and make sure that they are represented, and that sounds to me like an elected official. I am still learning so there may also be more to report, but this is what I know now.

Robert expresses confidence in his ability to apply the skills he has gained as a peer leader to his

professional interest of being an entrepreneur and a politician.

Nine participants reported that their peer leadership roles contributed to their plans for

after graduation. There were two participants were unable to articulate the knowledge, skills, and

abilities they gained as a result of their peer leadership roles. This could be due to the length of

time they had served in a peer leadership role. These two participants were younger peer leaders,

and may need more time to reflect on their experiences.

The fourteen participants reflected on practical ways in which their peer leadership roles

were able to contribute to their skill development. Participants reported learning how to work

effectively with others in a team environment and developing other skills they believe will make

them more competitive in the job market. The examples provided by participants suggest that

their peer leadership roles allowed them to "practice" working in teams and utilizing other skills

necessary for post-graduate success.

Community Responsibility as Leaders

As a result of their peer leadership experiences, participants reported developing a sense of responsibility for holding their peers accountable, improving the experience of their peers, enhancing the campus community, and leaving a legacy of leadership. Participants articulated a sense of accountability to their fellow students, discussing how their peers' expectations of them creates a high level of responsibility to their community. Participants also conveyed a commitment to improving the campus community at Park University.

Holding Peers Accountable

Ten participants reported that they were confidently able to hold their peers accountable when they failed to meet established expectations. Participants shared that being responsible for the actions of their peers was an important part of their peer leadership roles, and that there were times where they had to hold their peers accountable. This was especially true when their peers acted in ways that were not in line with the policies and rules established by the student organization or the university itself.

Mary explained the importance of holding her peers accountable while managing the coffee shop:

> One big rule that people don't really like is that . . . employees used to be able to just like go behind the counter to like--because they get like free drinks, so they used to just be able to like go behind the counter whenever to like make themselves tea or something. And now we ask them to like wait in line and ask their co-workers to like make those drinks for them if they want coffee or anything. Because it looks more professional and the people that are actually standing in line get a little like frustrated when they see them just like pop behind the counter and then leave. . . . So I have to be like, Hey guys, you know like I see you. Don't do that.

When asked to elaborate on her peers' responses to these interactions, Mary continued:

Usually they take it with a sense of humor. I try to be funny and say, you think you are getting away with that, but you are not. . . . Luckily all the people who I work with like their job and also generally want to do a good job and are motivated. But I have to pause and think about how I should handle those moments when people are out of line. I also have to process what's the best way to communicate the reprimand.

Mary explains how she is able to hold her peers accountable in ways that are respectful and productive. This example supports student learning in that Mary had to reflect on the most effective way to hold her peers accountable to the policies of the organization. Transformational learning relies on the power of reflection as a means for learning and development; it also acknowledges that meaning is socially co-constructed.

Mark shared his experiences holding his fraternity brothers accountable:
One thing that I did was we instituted like a Judicial Board type thing. Because in the past it was kind of like a dictatorship where the president, whatever he said went. But I didn't like that system so we put in a Judicial Board and I chose three kids from every class and kind of, if kids, say, you know, one kid broke a table, one kid broke the railing . . . they would rule on it and they would hold kids accountable, whether it just be, you know, you have to pay a fine or you are suspended for the next social event or you are suspended for the quarter depending on how serious it was. It held kids accountable and it's happened this year too and so it's kind of it's changed the mindset of kids because no one wants to get fined, no one wants to, you know, have to sit out for parties. So I think everyone's behaviors improved because of it.

Mark's comments convey his ability to utilize measures internal to his fraternity to hold members accountable. Mark was confidently able to hold his peers accountable because the chapter had adopted a system that relied on a group approach, as opposed to Mark serving as the only person responsible for the accountability process.

As a leader among orientation leaders at Park, Jessica shared how difficult it was initially to hold her peers accountable:

It's very hard not to be like pointing the finger morally at someone but also let them know, be like, Hey, like you dropped this ball this time. . . . I had to approach these friends of mine later and be like, Hey, like I know it's not a big deal to you but like you not being there for those 30 minutes like made my life so much more stressful and like when you give your word on one thing I would like you to give me an advance notice if you can't make it. That way I can, like I, I understand if you're busy.

Mark's and Jessica's narratives reflect the importance of both holding their peers accountable and being accountable to their peers. Peer leaders are expected to manage the work and be responsible for the actions of their peers. The participants communicated that this can be a difficult part of their role, and attributed their success in this area to their ability to build strong relationships with their peers. Participants conveyed confidence in their ability to hold their peers accountable when necessary.

<div align="center">Improving the Experience of Their Peers</div>

Nine participants described a desire to actively contribute to the experiences of their peers by working to improve campus life. Participants expressed the goal of serving their peers as a motivation for engaging in peer leadership activities. Many of the participants observed that although these peer leadership roles are often overlooked faculty, staff, and even peers, they make a valuable contribution to the Park University community. Participants therefore view their peer leadership roles as "a service to their peers." April articulates this view:

[W]hen I was on the e-board on OBS I was kind of frustrated at a lot of the Black students on campus who wouldn't come to OBS events. I was like, Come on, what are you guys doing? Like this campus is not here for you. Like we are trying to like create a better campus for you! I had asked some of my friends, I was like, Well why don't you all go to OBS? They said, because I don't want to. I got really frustrated.

April provided a vivid example of her commitment to improving the campus community by leading the students in OBS. She also shared her disappointment at the apathy of some of her peers. April's feelings provided insight into her commitment to improving the experiences of Black students at Park University, a commitment she views as her contribution to the experiences of her peers.

When asked about their motivation to apply for a peer leadership role, many participants responded that it was their responsibility to make the campus better for the students who came after them. Sue shared that she had attended a very small high school and was not able to participate in organizations in high school, but was able to get involved during her first year at Park. Sue shared that she enjoyed dancing and was immediately interested in the Ballet Club. Now she is the president of that organization. Sue also commented that she enjoys being behind the scenes and not always being in the leading role. She views this as her "service back to the community that has supported her." Sue's example highlights her commitment to enhancing the experiences of her peers, and suggests that peer leaders can lead from behind the scenes.

Dan cited similar motivations for serving as a Resident Assistant for two of his four years at Park University.

> It is one of the reasons I became an RA. It was sort of to branch out, meet people, and do more things besides just like hanging out with my friends and going out and playing video games and stuff like that. It was sort of a way for me to get involved in something with a little more weight and so to give back and help be part of shaping the experience of other students who may need someone to help them figure this place out.

Dan was motivated to apply for the resident assistant position by his desire to help shape the experiences of other students.

Paul identified similar reasons for pursuing leadership roles in his fraternity and in student government:

> I just felt really at home with everyone and I realized that like, Oh, here is like a community that I care about and like, you know, what do you do with the community that you care about? Then you like see things that you want, that other people want . . . That pushed me to run for student government just a few weeks afterwards, and pushed me kind of to take on everything else that like within my fraternity . . . I like saw common wants and goals and desires in the group.

The participants who identified a desire to contribute to the experiences of their peers reported that although their peers at times failed to appreciate their work, they nevertheless realized the work was necessary. Mary noted that her work is not "always appreciated by my peers, but [it is] necessary for improving the experience for kids that come behind me." Participants highlighted their sense of responsibility for the experiences of their peers, emphasizing their desire to serve and improve their peers' experiences. The participants' narratives convey that improving the experiences of their peers was a key motivation for taking on their peer leadership roles.

Improving the Campus Community

Ten participants referenced the importance of their peer leadership roles in improving the campus community at Park University. The elements of the community they focused on varied among the participants; some sought primarily to strengthen the academic community, while others hoped to enhance the social aspects of the community. April discussed how her leadership within her sorority and OBS helped advance the conversation around gender equity on campus.

April noted that she had worked "tirelessly" to facilitate dialogue around relationship violence among college students and to increase awareness of this issue among Park University students.

Robert noted that while running for student government, his three major platforms were improving the campus climate with respect to diversity and inclusion, addressing the issue of sexual assault, and providing better support services for low income and first-generation students. Robert developed a commitment to improving the racial climate at Park after his first year at Park. He recalled witnessing the "effects of a chilly racial climate at Park" and wanted to improve how "we have conversations about race" at the university. Robert shared his excitement about working with campus administrators to create a campus climate survey that is intended to elicit the thoughts of faculty, staff, and students regarding diversity issues.

Other students also reported leveraging their leadership roles to address campus issues of importance to them. Claire used her role as co-editor of the independent, student-run newspaper to "advance the conversation around sexual assault on campus." Lily, also a co-editor of the newspaper, described an incident in which she had to take the lead in covering an alleged sexual assault on campus. Covering this event necessitated coordinating with many campus officials and required making some tough decisions on her part. But for Lily this effort was necessary to bring the incident "to light for students to understand."

Lily's commitment to "advancing the conversation" is evident as she discusses her rationale for her diligence in reporting:

> You have to consider the impact that a story like this would have on the campus, let alone the victim and the accused. No one wants a sexual assault to happen on campus, but the reality is that they do happen, and it is a thing! For many of our students, they are way too relaxed about this topic and think it can never happen here, when in fact it does. I feel it is my duty to provide a place to inform the campus.

The experiences Claire and Lily discussed highlight the significant impact they can have on the campus community through their roles as newspaper co-editors. Although they initially felt their role was support their peers on the newspaper staff, they also acknowledge a greater responsibility to provide quality journalism to the Park University community. The experiences of these and other participants illustrated how their peer leadership roles helped them learn the importance of community. By requiring them to think broadly and consider the needs not only of the students they led, but also of the larger campus community, their peer leadership experiences enabled them to recognize their commitment to the community.

<u>Leaving a Legacy of Leadership</u>

Twelve participants identified their commitment to leaving a legacy as a motivation for their work as a peer leader. These participants expressed the importance of making an impact on the campus community and leaving a legacy for others to aspire to and follow. This purpose was evident in the participants' definitions of peer leadership and their descriptions of the tireless effort they invested in their roles. When asked to define peer leadership, the majority of participants made some reference to leaving a legacy or making a lasting impact.

Mary's definition of peer leadership conveyed her strong sentiments about the responsibilities associated with her role. Mary defined a peer leader as someone whom peers hold in high esteem. Mary defined peer leadership as more than a position or title, viewing it as a commitment to working to improve one's community:

> I don't think it has to be like a particular position. I think like leaders are definitely people who just are visible to their peers and someone that they--someone that all the students can go to to ask for advice or to ask for their opinions . . . They also are the people that work to make things better than what they were. For me, working with the coffee shop, I am working to make this the best shop on campus. It makes me feel good to know that I can make that kind of impact.

Mary's comments illustrate her commitment to making an impact as a manager at her shop and to leaving a legacy on campus.

Rex took a similar approach in describing his role as an orientation leader. Rex expressed great pride in serving in this role for three years; he feels he has influenced the orientation program and contributed to the "long line of OLs who have made an impact to the first-year experience." Rex noted the value of the training and support he received from the OLs ahead of him, which he later passed on when training the newer OLs, and emphasized the prestige of serving as an orientation leader.

When asked to define peer leadership, Rex responded:

> Peer leadership centers on the ability to get individuals who have no reason to trust you to actually trust you. And why do I say that? Because when you are talking about leaderships amongst peers, the word *peer* implies that you know the people that you are leading are in a similar position as you are. So in a sense as qualified as you are, right? So now the question becomes, Well, what's your value at? What is it that you can offer back to the other people? . . . [I]t is very different from being a teacher or very different from leading a congregation, you know, if you are a pastor, or very different from leading some other kind of work from this university, right? We are talking about peer leadership; a lot of it is about making a case to people who are clearly as qualified as you, equally motivated as you . . . And so I think really positioning yourself as a first among equals is I think is the essence of peer leadership.

Rex's vivid definition of peer leadership highlights his nuanced understanding of the dynamics of this role as well as his personal commitment to serving his peers.

Monica also described a strong commitment to her work leading the Model United

Nations (MUN), noting that the organization has been active on campus for 30 years and has

thousands of alumni members. MUN sponsors a large annual conference that invites nearly

3,000 high school students and trains them to debate world affairs. This conference is highly

respected on campus by faculty, students, and staff. The organization also has a group of alumni

who return each year to the conference to chaperone the high school attendees. Monica

expressed her gratitude for the opportunity to lead her 300 peers who participate in the

organization, reflecting:

> I really love my role in MUN; I really enjoy working with the high schoolers and like teaching them. I really like that for me it is kind of like giving back because I competed as a high schooler and came to the conference sponsored by Park's MUN. . . . Doing it for the fourth year in a row I have realized that I have given back to an organization that helped so many people before and after me. I am actually like helping a young kid learn something and like helping them grow. . . . Clearly, MUN is bigger than me; it's an institution.

Monica's strong affinity for the Model United Nations group offers her a way of

participating in a long-standing tradition. Monica characterized her peer leadership role within

MUN as an example of a "substantive" peer leadership role at Park University. Monica describes

her role within MUN as one with great responsibility and accountability. Monica's desire to

leave a legacy of leadership was guided by her definition of peer leadership. When asked to

define peer leadership, Monica replied:

> [I]f you are a leader you should, you know, sort of inspire people to want to, you know, do their jobs to the best of their abilities . . . I think you are most effective in leading your peers if they see . . . your ability to lead and your ability to like, command a room, and they want to, you know, hold themselves up to the standard that you have set as a leader. And I think if you can do that then that's like true peer leadership.

Monica's definition highlights the role of influence and inspiration in leading her peers, and emphasizes her goal of leaving a legacy of leadership within the Model United Nations organization.

Similarly, Robert described his commitment to establishing a legacy of leadership in student government:

> I ran for student government last spring and that was a really, really tough fight. There was a lot of friendships broken and I remember when I first was running I was like, I am going to build this coalition of students of color, low income students, students from underrepresented backgrounds and we are going to try to diversify the student government and I am going, you know, I have my partner running together and we are going to do this. And so I was all about "we" and as we got on, it turned into a fight, you know, and it turned into a kind of a brawl. I realized later though that we were doing this for the sake of our students and the impact that we both wanted to make for our peers. I wanted to be part of the long tradition of student government at Park; it really does have some prestige on this campus!

Robert's account of the election process highlights his goal of using student government as a conduit for promoting diversity and inclusion among his peers. His words express the importance of building coalitions as one of his contributions to the legacy of Park University.

Participants emphasized that their peer leadership roles contributed not only directly to their peers, but also more broadly to the legacy of leadership at Park University. Participants shared their nuanced definitions of peer leadership and described their contributions to the University's legacy of leadership. Their commitment to leaving their own legacy within their respective peer leadership roles was also evident in their descriptions of the amount of time and effort they invested in their peer leadership roles.

<center>Lack of Institutional Support</center>

Participants reported receiving very little support from Park University in their roles as peer leaders, specifically in the areas of training and professional development. Participants overwhelmingly felt the university had not provided the necessary training for their roles. At Park and many other colleges and universities, peer leaders serve as paraprofessionals who are integrated into the staffing patterns of the institution, and all participants reported having a supervisory or advisory relationship with a professional staff member at the university. Paraprofessionals on college campuses are typically students who are trained to assist and support those in professional positions (Ender & Newton, 2000).

Thirteen participants reported having received little to no training for their roles, and therefore having to learn on the job. Jessica shared her experiences as a new peer leader:

> I don't know if I can exactly point out formal leadership training that I have had. I think that it is more from experience. Yeah, I think that being student director this past year for orientation was very helpful and has changed what I think of leadership now, and before orientation I don't think that I had any formal training--I learned as I went. There were little meetings that we had initially with university administrators, but nothing that would be considered helpful in doing my job.

Jessica also explained that due to the nature and complexities of her role as orientation student director, she needed some sort of training to be successful. Although there was some training, Jessica felt that the training she received was not enough, noting:

> As a student director of orientation I am responsible for leading a team of orientation leaders to help shape the experience of entering new students. It is my job to supervise these students throughout the orientation week. I am also there to provide some additional support to the professional staff in the office. Usually my work is 24 hours nonstop. Although there was some training, [it was] not enough, I feel. But luckily I was definitely able to learn on the job.

Jessica's narrative reflects the lack of training she received for her role as an orientation leader

and her consequent need to develop skills without formal training.

Derek, who served on the executive board of OBS, also reported a lack of training for his

peer leadership role:

> There was no training. Oh God, none. Really, I had general conversations with the people
> who held my position prior to like getting involved, and saying, like . . . you know any
> tips, any advice, what is the timeline for things that I have to do for the events that you've
> planned, things like that. So like outside of like hour-long conversations, slim to none. . .
> . I did the Leadership Program here that the Multicultural Office sponsors, but that was a
> little while after I was already becoming involved in my capacity as a peer leader.

Derek highlights the informal nature of most his "training," noting that any more formal training

he received resulted from his interactions with other campus resources.

> Mary shared similar thoughts regarding her role as a coffee shop manager:
> The training that I received--that is hard because, I mean, I have worked at the coffee
> shop for a long time, and so training just kind of happened informally for me. I would say
> the first training I received is just like on the job, how to make espresso, how to interact
> with customers, how to ring up transactions, that kind of thing. As far as like the
> transition into management, the training was kind of up and down. I don't know if I
> received any. The previous managers sat down with me one day and answered questions
> for me, but I would not call that necessarily training. I guess that's weird, now that I think
> about it. I have a big job so you would think the training would be more robust, but not so
> much.

Mary's comments portray the inconsistency of the training she received, which was a

combination of random conversations with former managers and on-the-job training that

occurred only sporadically.

Dan reported that he received some training for his RA position, but he feels the

institution could have offered more. The Resident Advisor training program at Park University

consists of learning about referral resources and understanding crisis management procedures;

however, Dan noted that the training lacked leadership development components. He shared:

> We had training for a few days prior to first year as an RA and then repeated the training again prior to my second year as an RA. The training does a good job sort of, you know, giving you good expectations of what the sort of worst-case scenario events that you encounter as an RA, and what are the steps that you should go to in the scenarios. A lot of it was--it was very extensive and it gave a lot of information about resources and who to contact for what and a lot of it, you know, was lost on me. But you know I had to--they gave me plenty of papers to look back through in case I needed to, you know, refresher. It was very heavy on the policy and procedure end, and really did not cover those leadership development things that you think would be needed in this role. When I first started, I thought that was part of the training, but I have had to look other places for that type of training.

Dan's description of the training he received as a resident assistant highlighted its

procedural focus and its lack of opportunities to practice the concepts learned in the training. Dan

conveyed his lack of confidence in this training format that resulted in his decision to seek out

other opportunities for training. Dan also noted that there were campus-wide training programs

for students to attend sponsored by the Office Student of Involvement at Park University. The

goals of these trainings centered around college student leadership development theories. Dan

reported, however, that these programs are typically not well attended and are also not specific to

his role as a Resident Advisor.

> Claire described the training she received as editor of the newspaper:

> I didn't get any leadership-specific training. I basically, I actually haven't done any student journalism before. I came in as a writer, got better at that. I was hired as an editor, got better at that through the mentorship of actually largely students that were the same grade as me. So really very much peer taught, and then I feel like I shaped my ideas mostly on what kind of leader I wanted to be. A lot of that I think comes just from personality, and even if you want to be a certain type of leader . . . when you are actually put in a situation a lot of things will come out. But I watched two editors-in-chief teams before me and I knew that I really liked one style and I really didn't like the other style. So that is kind of the basis on which I put my platform and I actually think that initially

my nostalgia for the team that I like, which was also the team I liked when I first worked for the organization, might have been a little too exaggerated.

Claire's training for her role as editor of the student newspaper was comprised largely of on-the-job, peer-to-peer training. Claire highlighted how she was able to learn important aspects of her role by observing the two teams of editors who served before her tenure. Claire's comments suggest that the lack of institutional support promoted peer-to-peer training methods.

Mark also described the minimal training he received before taking on the presidency of his fraternity:

> Honestly, it was almost zero training, which is kind of a shame. Luckily I lived in the [fraternity] house at the time and the ex-president lived in the house, so I was always talking to him, getting advice from him. But the president before him kind of fell off the deep end and was never there, so he had zero training, absolutely zero training, which is not a good way to do it because I think a lot of times people don't, when . . . there is no training, they might not know what they are signing up for and I didn't. Luckily it went fine, but yeah, there was no--no formal or informal training of any kind really.

Mark's comments emphasize the lack of training available to him as president of his fraternity. Park University does offer leadership development training programs, but Mark reported that many students at Park do not participate in those programs. He described the importance of being able to rely on the experiences of his peers to help him lead the chapter:

> The president before me gave me a run-through on how to run meetings, and how to interact with our alumni members. He also showed me how to manage the house; although there's a house manager, the president also manages the house as well.

Mark's narrative conveys the importance of his relationship and interactions with the former fraternity president in helping him learn the key responsibilities of his role. The lack of training he received may be attributable to the lack of an official relationship between Park

University and the Greek community. Given the lack of formal University recognition for Greek organizations, students like Mark who accept leadership roles in these groups are expected to find their own sources of training, often from their national organizations or local alumni members. Mark felt that this training method was helpful, but not ideal, in preparing him to take on the role of president.

Despite this lack of support from the institution, the participants recognized and articulated important ways in which serving in a peer leader capacity has impacted their lives. Jessica emphasized the rewards of her involvement in all of her peer leadership roles. She described how her peer leadership roles represent the areas she is most passionate about:

> I am most passionate about, like, music, advocacy for cancer, and my background as a Taiwanese American. . . . As a student leader, one of our big roles is to be the face for that organization on campus. And so being able to kind of like see these three groups grow in recognition . . . it has been very rewarding to see like my own work kind of come through, but also to see younger second-years and first-years start taking on leadership roles and to actually maybe become president like where I was, and so I wanted to be a good role model for them. . . .

Jessica's words illustrate how the various aspects of her identity have shaped the peer leadership activities in which she engaged.

Lucy reflected on the impact peer leadership has on the campus community, noting, "I guess being involved in peer leadership has always shown me like the things that you do really affect other people and like it is always good to work towards like a goal and not just like be satisfied." Derek offered, "I think [peer leadership] has impacted my life in the fact that I really want to be an actively engaged member of a community." Derek's comment highlights the significant impact of his peer leadership experience in fostering his engagement in and commitment to the local community.

Monica's experiences also reflect the value of her peer leadership experience. She

reported that her peer leadership roles sometimes become a higher priority than her coursework,

and noted that this was not an uncommon practice among peer leaders at the University. She

attributes this approach to the "student leader culture here at Park." Monica shared that the

culture of Park University is very competitive and academically rigorous. Monica also felt that

Park University had done her a "disservice" by not providing what she describes as adequate

training.

Nevertheless, Monica regards her peer leadership experiences in a positive light,

believing that all the hard work she has put into her peer leadership roles will "pay off" in the

future. Monica offered an upbeat account of her experience:

> I just have generally positive feelings about, you know, the organization and what I have
> been able to do in my time there. And also at the same time I realize like my time is
> almost up, which is kind of weird, so I don't really know what I am going to do when,
> you know, it is all over. But for now I can attest to the positive effects of my peer
> leadership and I am sure I will always remember the work that I have done.
> Jessica's, Derek's, Sue's, and Monica's comments all reflect the significant impact

serving as a peer leader has had on their lives. Their accounts convey their strong commitment to

their roles and to Park University. This commitment persists despite the lack of training and

support provided to peer leaders by the institution. Participants reported that the training they

received was minimal or non-existent. The lack of support was described in broad terms, but

included a lack of involvement from Park University faculty and staff.

The lack of institutional support is unsurprising given the institutional context. As

mentioned above, faculty members at Park University are expected to produce research, and they

are not expected to be involved in student life programs. Although participants reported a lack of

institutional support, they described receiving some degree of training through the relationships

they had with their peers who had themselves held peer leader positions. Participants observed that they had to resort to a peer-to-peer training model to compensate for the lack of support provided by the institution.

Summary

This study sought to identify the transformational learning experiences and leadership development process of college students who participate in peer leadership positions. This chapter presented the findings of the study and offered an analysis of the data. Sixteen participants shared their experiences as peer leaders. Five themes emerged from the data: learning from interactions with diverse peers; identity exploration and reconciliation; enhanced personal, professional, and academic development; community responsibility as leaders; and lack of institutional support. Chapter 5 will address how the study's findings support the available literature on peer leadership and transformational learning and how the findings respond to the research questions. The chapter concludes by discussing the study's implications for student learning, offering recommendations for the practice of student affairs, and providing suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined the leadership development process of college students who serve in a peer leadership role at a private, highly selective university. The participants' responses to the interview questions provided data that yielded insight into college student involvement. This study contributes to our understanding of the role of peer leadership on college campuses. The research method of the study used semi-structured individual interviews with students who participated in peer leadership roles at Park University. Participants included students who hold various leadership roles in a student organization, fraternity, or sorority, or serve as a Resident Advisor or Orientation Leader. Although the participants conveyed similar understandings of their roles as peer leaders, each possessed unique experiences that impacted their views of peer leadership.

Discussion

Five themes emerged from the data: learning from interactions with diverse peers; identity exploration and reconciliation; enhanced personal, professional, and academic development; community responsibility as leaders; and lack of institutional support. These themes provided insight into the participants' experiences with peer leadership. The themes also provided insight into how participants made meaning of their peer leadership processes and experiences. In addition, the themes illuminated the knowledge, skills, and abilities participants reported gaining as a result of their peer leadership roles. The themes identified addressed the research questions outlined for this study.

The accounts gathered from this study appeared to be entirely positive; there were no accounts shared that provided evidence that peer leadership roles had a negative impact on the participants. However, participants in this study only recalled events related to peer mentoring that were beneficial and not harmful even if the interview questions would have allowed for negative events to emerge. Encounters with peers who were challenging to lead or collaborate with were identified, but such instances were not viewed as negative; rather, they were understood simply as part of the peer leadership process. This being the case, peer mentoring was seen as a positive, influential experience with beneficial outcomes.

Participation in Peer Leadership

Participants reported varied experiences with peer leadership roles, but all viewed their interactions with their peers as an important element in their peer leadership experiences. Learning from exposure to interactions with diverse peers refers to the transformation of a student's ideas, beliefs, or values as result of engaging in peer leadership activities. While the specific nature of the changes in perspective differed, all participants reported such learning as a result of their involvement in peer leadership.

The theme of learning from interactions with diverse peers indicates that there is some level of transformational learning taking place among the participants. Transformational learning theory suggests that a change in perspective allows individuals to develop new ways of understanding the world around them (Mezirow, 1981). Participants reported that the self-exploration and discovery prompted by their peer leadership roles led to changes in their

perspectives. For instance, Lily shared how her views about public education developed as a result of her community service work.

Participants also identified a sense of community responsibility that had developed as a result of their peer leadership roles and their resulting responsibilities. Mary shared how she was able to improve the experience of younger students through her work as a coffee shop manager. Participants reported that they hold themselves accountable for improving the experiences of the peers whom they lead, and their peers likewise hold them accountable as leaders. Mark shared how he was able to adopt a process within his fraternity that held members accountable for not fulfilling the expectations of the organization.

Participants viewed accountability as reciprocal, as they also held their peers accountable to their organizations and had no problem having confrontational conversations with their peers. The data suggests that these reciprocal expectations are necessary for success in their roles. Participants also conveyed their sense of responsibility beyond their specific organizations, encompassing the university community as a whole. They described their desire to leave a legacy of leadership and to enhance the campus community for future students.

Transformational learning can occur in four distinct ways: "by elaborating existing frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming points of view, or by transforming habits" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 19). Participants discussed experiences that prompted changes in the way they viewed a topic, idea, or problem. April provided an example of this in her response to the members of the Organization of Black Students who were trying to manage a traumatic incident. This theme supports the tenets discussed in transformational learning theory research.

Specifically, participants' narratives indicated that they had begun to challenge "existing frames of reference" and to adopt in their place "new frames of reference." When we encounter contradictions within our belief and value systems, we can reflect on these areas to gain greater insight and reach a satisfactory resolution. Mezirow (1991, 2000) suggests that the speed of this transformation may vary from sudden to gradual.

Meaning Making and Leadership Process

College students' values and beliefs are shaped, to varying degrees, by their experiences during their college years (Evans et al., 2010). These experiences may include interactions with faculty, staff, and peers; participation in co-curricular activities; and involvement in leadership roles, among others. Participants described the process through which they were able to make meaning of their peer leadership experiences. The participants shared how they used their peer leadership roles to support their peers, and also to make meaning of their personal identity.

The data provided evidence that participants used their peer leadership roles as spaces for affirming their identities and practicing leadership development. For example, Claire shared how her role in managing the newspaper provided an opportunity for her to begin to explore her sexuality. LGBTQ students represent an emerging demographic that has become more visible on college campuses in recent years. For many students college offers an environment in which they can begin to explore their sexual orientation and their definition of sexuality.

The theme of learning from interactions with diverse peers supported the social identity of the participants. Participants reported that their involvement in peer leadership activities gave them the space to explore their salient identities. For example, Pam shared how her involvement

in two student organizations allowed her to explore parts of her identity that were most salient.

Participants also shared how their social identities influenced the types of activities they chose.

For instance, Paul shared how his fraternity helped him find community among other Asian men

on campus. Although understanding the role of social identity in peer leadership is not an explicit

element of transformational learning theory or research and therefore is not germane to this

study, this theme was clearly reflected in the experiences and examples shared by participants.

The sense of community theme prompted participants to reflect on their experiences as

peer leaders as well as on their social identities. Participants reported high levels of

accountability to the marginalized communities with which they identified. April provided an

example of this as a result of planning the "Save Our Sisters" event with her sorority. April felt

that this was an opportunity to support Black women at Park University.

Participants like Paul shared the sense of responsibility they felt for improving and

advocating for the communities that represents facets of their identity. Paul shared how he was

able to use his peer leadership role within his fraternity as an opportunity to advocate for the

Asian community. This sense of responsibility was evident in the experiences discussed by the

nine participants who identified as members of an underrepresented group. Participants noted

that their peer leadership experiences changed how they viewed their commitment to their own

communities, suggesting a shift in their perspective on the communities they represented.

Participants reported that they were able to use the experiences afforded by their roles as

processes of leadership. Specifically, participants were able to engage in meaningful

opportunities as peer leaders that contributed to their learning and leadership development.

Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship suggests that college students are able to use

their experiences to assist in reconciling the meaning of the world around them. Participants presented evidence of using the questions identified in Baxter Magolda's work: *How do I know what I know? Who am I? And how do I want to create relationships with others?* These questions represent the three dimensions of self-authorship: epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Baxter Magolda argued that the ability to appreciate multiple perspectives demonstrates "cognitive maturity," a skill that is crucial for the 21st century.

Transformational learning literature emphasizes the importance of critical reflection in learning. Through this mode of learning our frames of reference, and thus the substance of our value and belief systems, may be altered (Mezirow, 2000). Transformational learning provides the conduit through which an individual can reconcile problematic frames of reference to make them more congruent (Mezirow, 2000). When we encounter contradictions within our belief and value systems, we can reflect on these areas to gain greater insight and reach a satisfactory resolution.

Peer Leadership Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

Participants' reports that they developed a variety of skills as a result of their peer leadership roles yielded the theme of enhanced personal, professional, and academic development. Participants identified development in three specific areas: life skills, leadership development skills, and skills necessary for post-graduation. For example, Rex shared how his peer leadership roles have taught him to graciously receive feedback from peers, as well as how to convey feedback effectively to his peers. Participants described "life skills" as general

competencies necessary for managing one's personal life. For instance, Mary shared how her coffee shop manager role encouraged her to adopt strategies for maintaining a balanced life.

The theme of community responsibility as leaders captures the participants' sense of accountability to their peers and supervisors to improve the experience of their peers, enhance the campus community, and leave a legacy of leadership. Participants articulated both their own accountability to the students they serve and the need to hold their peers accountable as well. Lack of institutional support refers to participants' reports that they did not receive adequate training from the university to prepare them for their leadership roles and for further skill development. This lack of support required the participants to rely on their relationships with peers who had previously held the same role to obtain on-the-job training.

Participants also reported gaining skills that would specifically benefit their post-graduate pursuits, whether they planned to attend graduate school or enter the workforce. For instance, April shared her reluctance to pursue a career that relied on work getting accomplished in a team environment, noting that her peer leadership roles have led her to seek career opportunities that will allow her to work autonomously. One of the key goals of higher education is to produce graduates who can be leaders and make a positive impact on the world (Clark, 1985; Cress et al., 2001). This goal can only be achieved when students obtain the necessary skills to become effective leaders.

Fourteen participants reported skill development as a result of their peer leadership role. The remaining participants were not able to articulate their skill development. This may be due to the fact that these students were fairly new to their peer leadership roles and needed more time

in the position. Such skills were most often reported among the participants who were closest to graduation.

The lack of institutional support for the training and professional development of peer leaders emerged as a salient theme for this study. The absence of adequate training programs was a theme articulated by almost all the participants. Yet despite the lack of institutional support, participants reported that they were able to navigate their peer leadership roles successfully and that these roles had a significant impact on their overall experience at the university. This suggests that the participants were able to obtain support elsewhere, and in fact, several reported receiving assistance from peers who had previously held the same or similar leadership roles in their organization.

Given the institutional context, the lack of faculty and staff presence in student organization and events affirms the notion that students received no institutional support, especially given the strict academic relationship that students have with faculty at Park University. At Park University informal, socially-based learning opportunities are not valued as much as classroom learning. The role of student governance at Park University also contributes to the participants' sense of a lack of institutional support. Students at Park University act independently, and often students search within themselves or their peer groups to find alternate means of support. The transformational learning literature does not discuss the role of support in the learning process, so it is unclear whether the lack of institutional support influenced participants' skill development.

Implications for the Practice of Student Affairs

The results of this study will benefit higher education institutions by showing how to potentially engage students and encourage their leadership development, as many university mission statements seek to do (Astin & Astin, 2000).The research literature identifies numerous benefits for college students of serving in peer leadership roles. Specifically, Komives et al. (2006) described the relational nature of leadership and how it encourages community among students. By design, the relational nature of leadership encourages college students to engage in relationships with their peers for the purpose of improving the communities in which they live and learn.

The findings of this study are fairly consistent with Collins-Shapiro's (2006) examples of how peer leadership fits into the relational model of leadership outlined in Chapter 2. The findings are aligned in that students in this study viewed leadership as an opportunity to benefit others, rather than as a means of gaining power. Similar to Collins-Shapiro, these findings suggest that leaders recognize some accountability to give back to and serve their communities. The study also provides a better understanding of how peer leadership roles promote broader leadership development. Student affairs practitioners can use these findings to inform the goals and outcomes of leadership programs on their campuses, as well as to guide the training and development of peer leaders. The findings suggest that the peer leader experience fosters skills and experiences that support student success and development, providing a meaningful learning opportunity for college students.

The findings of this study illuminated a number of differences in experiences among the participants, suggesting the need to construct peer leadership development training in ways that are tailored to varying leadership roles. In addition, providing different levels of training for new

and more experienced student leaders will insure that the diverse needs of today's college student leaders are met. This study can help guide student affairs practitioners in developing appropriate programs and services to promote leadership development among peer leaders. Participants in this study reported receiving minimal training for their roles. Although they reported feeling confident in their roles, they also recognized the need for training at the beginning of their experience. Providing training and professional development opportunities designed to fit the specific yet varying needs of students will ensure that peer leaders embark on their new responsibilities with an acceptable level of competence.

The findings presented in this study could be utilized as a foundation in understanding the need to integrate theory and practice when considering recruitment, selection, training, and implementation in peer leadership programs. Understanding the need to emphasize and market the learning gained as a result of peer leadership can assist professionals in engaging more students and aid in efforts to diversify existing peer leadership roles. Peer mentor program administrators should further develop and measure learning outcomes and learning processes, using approaches grounded in theory, for students who participate in peer leadership programs.

This study encourages institutions, and particularly those with profiles similar to that of Park University, to evaluate how they support and train peer leaders. This study shows the power of peer relationships and how these relationships support the needs of new students who are entering peer leadership roles. The participants clearly communicated their reliance on their peers to educate them on the nuances of their new peer leader roles. Institutions can use these findings to help identify the needs of peer leaders and to develop more formal programs that utilize the ability of students to effectively train and support their peers.

Implications for Student Learning

Mezirow (2000) defines transformative learning as:

the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (pp. 7-8)

Such learning occurs as a result of "a reintegration into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's new perspective" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22) among individuals who are capable of "acting on revisions, behaving, talking, and thinking in a way that is congruent with transformed assumptions or perspectives" (Cranton, 2006, p. 66). Participants in this study were able to critically reflect on their experiences to describe precisely such changes of perspective. The participants' experiences suggest that transformational learning did occur for some participants as a result of their peer leadership activities.

This study offers significant implications for student learning. The data provide insight into what college student peer leaders learn as a result of their peer leadership roles and how these students articulate their learning. Previous research offers some understanding of transformational learning among college students, but not from the perspective of peer leaders. Much of the transformational learning research studied college students broadly, but none has specifically examined the experiences of students who serve as peer leaders. Harmon (2006) found that college students' personal and intellectual maturity increased as result of the self-reflection prompted by their personal experiences and peer leadership experiences. Baker (2008) found that college students involved in student organizations were more likely to succeed in their coursework. The present study provides an understanding of the skills college students gain from

their involvement as peer leaders and how student learning may be advanced by co-curricular as well as curricular activities.

Campus leaders have invested enormous resources in providing academic support programs, retention programs, and staffing for retention (Keup, 2012). Peer leadership programs assist in retaining the students whom peer leaders lead (Cuseo, 1991; Ender & Newton, 2000) and are proven to further develop peer leaders (Hamid, 2001; Harmon 2006; Keup, 2012). University leaders should consider creating full-time positions dedicated to coordinating the peer leadership roles on college campuses. They should also consider creating continual, year-long training programs to enhance the learning and development of college student peer leaders.

This study provides insight into how students at highly selective institutions like Park University view their peer leadership experiences. The study supports a shift in the ways higher education professionals view learning and the contexts in which learning can occur, so they will not miss out on an opportunity to document student learning in meaningful ways. This study also introduced the notion that transformational learning can occur outside of traditional academic contexts, specifically the classroom, in a co-curricular context. Peer leadership has been shown to have a significant influence on academic achievement (Donahue, 2004), and to occur not only in a co-curricular context, but also in the classroom (Swenson et al., 2008). This study found that the role of reflection was crucial in participants being able to report the learning they had received.

Suggestions for Future Research

Further research is necessary to develop a more comprehensive understanding of peer leadership and its impact on transformational learning. Several directions for future research emerge as a result of this study. First, what role, if any, does institutional type have on the experiences of college student peer leaders? Given the academic rigor and highly selective nature of Park University, it is difficult to apply the findings of this study to institutions with a different institutional profile. Investigating the experiences of peer leaders at other types of institutions may illuminate how institutional variables impact the experiences of college student peer leaders. The findings of this study represent the experiences of the participants at Park University at a particular moment in time, and through the reflections and perspectives of the participants.

Interviews were the only form of data collection used in this study. Interviews were chosen to elicit the participants' self-reported perspectives of their learning and leading processes. The interviews were also helpful in allowing the participants to reflect on their peer leadership role and identify the knowledge, skills, and abilities they gained. All questions were open-ended and intentionally designed to capture the essence of the participants' feelings, behaviors, and values. Using other forms of data collection might provide an opportunity to gather additional data not captured through the interview format.

Researchers should also consider studying peer leadership from the perspective of students of color and other underrepresented groups. Although participants in this study included some students of color and LGBTQ students, it may be helpful to explore specifically how underrepresented students interpret their experiences of peer leadership. Questions might include: What experiences support the leadership development of student peer leaders of color and/or LGBTQ students? What is the nature of the relationships between student peer leaders of

color or LGBTQ students and the students they lead who are not members of the same underrepresented group? Do such differences impact how peer leaders provide leadership and mentorship? In addition, it may be helpful to examine differences in peer leadership among various types of co-curricular activities, investigating, for example, specific styles and outcomes of peer leadership among student organization leaders, managerial roles in campus services (such as dining services), orientation leaders, and resident advisors, among others.

Another area for future research focuses on how peer leaders acquire the necessary skills to lead their peers. Do they rely on knowledge gained through training? If there is no formalized training available, how do these students gain the knowledge and expertise to lead their peers? Does the existence of formal training impact the quality of leadership and mentorship these student leaders provide? How do the answers to these questions differ between new leaders and those who have served in previous leadership roles? These research questions represent opportunities for greater understanding of peer leadership roles and their impact on student learning and the practice of student affairs.

Recommendations for the Practice of Student Affairs

This study provided data that supports and affirms the work of student affairs professionals. The study also highlighted the need to reconsider how we support and develop college students who serve in peer leadership roles. The findings of this study provide some unique opportunities to provide recommendations for practice, especially for institutions similar

to Park University. The findings of the study suggest the following recommendations for the practice of student affairs:

1. **Create training and development programs that adequately and intentionally support the work of peer leaders.** These programs should address the complex nature of these roles and provide opportunities for personal, professional, and academic development. They should be led not only by student affairs professionals but should also include opportunities for peer-to-peer training. Incorporating peer-to-peer interactions into the training programs will promote greater leadership opportunities for seasoned peer leaders, as well as create a sense of community among peer leaders.

2. **Provide formal, institutionalized opportunities for peer leaders to share and critically reflect upon their experiences with peer leadership.** These opportunities will allow peer leaders to engage in reflective practices that support their ability to make meaning of their experiences. This method will also provide peer leaders with formal opportunities for reflection and making meaning of their experiences. Some suggestions include creating an online community through which peer leaders can share their experiences, or introducing an e-portfolio curriculum that supports critical reflection. These platforms can be used as opportunities for peer leaders to document their experiences, as well as an opportunity for students to provide examples of their learning.

3. **Develop a strategy for recognizing and supporting the work of college students who engage in peer leadership roles.** This strategy should outline specific and

measurable outcomes for acknowledging the work of these student leaders, as well as ways to support their work. The strategy should also provide opportunities for these student leaders to discern the impact these roles will have on their lives after graduation. These strategies can include developing intentional ways of recognizing the accomplishments of peer leaders, as well identifying opportunities for students to reflect on how their peer leadership roles can be translated on a résumé.

4. **Provide opportunities to incorporate peer leadership roles into the classroom environment.** Academic and student affairs professionals should collaborate to find innovative ways of incorporating the use of peer leaders within the curricular experience of college students. Specific ways to include peer leaders would include utilizing peer leaders in courses in ways that allow students to interact around academic content. Specific roles like peer tutors, peer teaching assistants are examples.

5. **Create and implement high-impact practices that provide opportunities for identity exploration for college student peer leaders.** Academic and student affairs professionals should seek to provide opportunities for college student peer leaders to discover, test, and reconcile their personal identities. These high-impact practices (lectures, programs, etc.) should be created intentionally to address the complex and diverse needs of today's college students.

Conclusion

Peer leadership roles are a valuable resource for institutions of higher education in the areas of retention and budget assistance. Peer leadership has a significant impact on college student learning and development (Astin & Astin, 2000; Cuseo, 1991). These roles have been shown to support the personal, professional, and academic experiences of students who participate in them. This study sought to understand the transformational learning experiences of college students who were engaged in peer leadership roles. The study contributes to the field of higher education by sharing interpretive data regarding the transformational learning experiences of college students who serve in a peer leader capacity. This study also illuminates the influence of peer leadership on student learning and development.

This study sought to identify the transformational learning experiences and leadership development process of college students who participate in peer leadership positions. The findings of this study provide an understanding of the transformational learning experiences of college student peer leaders at Park University. This study examined peer leadership in the context of transformational learning, providing evidence that learning occurred outside the traditional classroom context (Hill, 2000). The study also supported the notion that the faculty position is not the only position that supports learning in a collegiate setting, and that the roles of college student peer leaders also facilitate learning. The findings also provided critical insight into the relationship between leadership development and college student learning.

In conclusion, this study suggests implications for student affairs practice as well as for future research on peer leadership and transformational learning. The study advances our understanding of college student leadership development and the use of transformational learning theory in understanding college student involvement. This study provides a better

understanding of the influence of peer leadership not only on the peers whom these students serve, but also on the institution they serve. The study also emphasizes the significance of peer leadership roles in creating leadership opportunities for college students. As educators, it is our responsibility to support, create, and maximize opportunities for college student learning and leadership, to foster the development of college graduates who will be well prepared to make vital contributions to society, now and in the future.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

"Thanks so much for agreeing to participate in this study. Today we are going to talk about your experiences with leadership. I want to remind you that this is voluntary and you are welcome to skip questions, and end this interview at any time without consequence. As part of your participation in this study, I ask that you review and sign this informed consent document. This document deails the specifics of the study and affirms your particpation. Please let me know if you have questions."

"I will need to record this interview for the purpose of gathering your thoughts as accurately as possible. Do I have your approval to record? This interview will NOW be recorded and will be transcribed. After the interview is transcribed, I will send the transcriptions to insure your ideas were included. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Begin the interview with Question A as the beginning of the interview.

Interview Questions:

Background Information
   A. Tell me about yourself.
      a. How do you identify?
      b. Gender?
      c. Age?
      d. Socioeconomic status?
      e. Year? Major?
   B. What extracurricular activities do you participate in on campus?
   C. What leadership roles, if any, do you hold within these activities?

Becoming a Peer Leader
   D. Please describe the time when you first realized you wanted to be a peer leader.
      a. What made you apply?
      b. What were your feelings and emotions throughout this process?
   E. Please describe the duties of your position.
   F. How would you define the phrase *peer leadership*?
   G. Describe the training for your specific roles.

Relationship with Peers
   H. How would describe your relationship with the students you lead within your activities?

I. How many students would you say you are responsible for?
J. Please describe an instance where you had to hold your peers accountable.
K. How do you feel your peers perceive you?

Understanding Participant Lifestyle
L. Tell me a family proverb/saying/motto and describe a time you put this into practice.
   a. Have you ever gone against this motto?
   b. Tell me about a time you realized your thoughts differed from those of your family.
   c. Tell me about a time when you realized what your beliefs were.
M. Please describe your daily routine.
N. Please provide an example of a life event or situation that caused your prior knowledge of something to be changed.

On-the-job training
O. What skills and abilities have you gained as result of your work, if any?
P. What skills and abilities does your position require?
Q. Please tell me about a time you encountered a traumatic event while serving as a peer leader.
   a. What did you gain as a result of this experience?
   b. What made this incident traumatic?
R. In what ways, if any, has serving as a peer leader impacted your life?
S. In what ways, if any, has serving as a peer leader impacted you as you prepare for your career?
T. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Closing Remarks
Thank you for your participation and this concludes the interview. Is it fine with you if I reach out to you in a week or so to review the transcripts from this interview and so you can pick your gift card? Thanks again for your participation. Please feel free to contact me if you have questions or think of something you did not mention today. Also, please be reminded that I will contact you in a week to review your comments from this interview, as well as discuss themes that may emerge from this interview. These questions will be based only on what information is gathered from the first interview.

APPENDIX B

EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear [Student],

I am a doctoral student in the Adult and Higher Education Program at Northern Illinois University. I am working on my dissertation research study, which explores the transformational learning and leadership experiences of students who serve as peer leaders. I am seeking to interview students who have served as peer leaders in hopes of gathering information about their leadership experience. I am confident that you will contribute greatly to my study by sharing your experiences as a peer leader.

I am writing to invite you to be a participant in my research project. The study involves a total time commitment of 2.5 hours. This will include one 1.5 hour interview and another hour for you to review the transcript from the interview and to discuss the first interview. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you or your responses.

To participate: Participants need to meet the following criteria:

1. College students who are between 18-25 years old.

2. Students who have served in a peer leadership role (Resident Advisor, RSO leader, or Orientation Leader) for at least one academic year.

3. Students who are able to recall their experiences as a peer leader.

Compensation: In return for your time, I will give all participants a $10 gift card at the conclusion of your review of the transcript.

How to Participate: If you are willing to share your experiences for the purpose of this study, please reply to this email (alexmiller@uchicago.edu) to let me know how to get in touch with you to schedule an interview. If you have questions, feel free to contact me.

Thanks in advance,

Alex Miller

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Dear [Student],

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The principal investigator of this study is Alex Miller, a doctoral student in the Adult and Higher Education Program in the College of Education at Northern Illinois University (NIU). The study will include 15-20 students at a private institution who have served as peer leaders. Your participation as an interviewee will require a total of approximately 2½ hours of your time as the researcher seeks to learn more about your experience as a peer leader.

The purpose of this study is to seek to understand the transformational learning experiences of college students who participate in peer leadership positions. It also explores the leadership development of students who serve in these peer mentor roles. The study includes a 1½-hour interview, and an hour for you to read over the transcript of your interview and follow up on the information shared. I am seeking to understand what experiences you participate(d) in as a peer leader, as well as the learning you received.

During the interview you will be asked questions about your experiences, values, feelings, and experiences that have shaped your values and beliefs. You will be asked about your decisions and the leadership development you feel you have gained from serving as a peer leader. These questions will serve as a guide to the interview, but the format is open, so that you can feel free to share what you wish. You can choose to skip questions that you do not want to answer. You are not required to participate in this study, and can end your participation at any time.

You will receive a $10 gift card to thank you for your time. In addition, participating in this study may provide you the opportunity to critically reflect on aspects of your collegiate experience, which may prove to be helpful in your development as a student leader. The transcript of the interview will be provided to you for review prior to the researcher's analysis of the data. The researcher does not expect this study to cause you harm in any way, and your confidentiality will be maintained throughout this study.

Confidentiality Statement: All of your answers are private and confidential and will be maintained in the following ways:

1. You will choose a pseudonym that will be used in the interviews and all documentation.
2. The recording and transcript of your interview will be identified by the chosen pseudonym.

If you would like more information about this research study, please feel free to contact Dr. Carrie Kortegast, the chair of this dissertation, at ckortegast@niu.edu.

__ I consent to have myself audio recorded for this research project and interview.

__ I consent to participate in this study but not to be audio recorded.

Your signature below indicates that you have read this document, that all of your questions have been answered, that you are aware of your rights, and that you are willing to participate in this study.

_____   _____   _____
Signature of Participant   Printed Name   Date

I have explained the research procedures and participant's rights and answered questions asked by the participant. I have provided a copy of this consent form.

_____   _____   _____
Signature of Researcher   Printed Name   Date

If you have questions about the study, please call (312) 550-6450 or email alexmiller@uchicago.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Northern Illinois University, at researchcompliance@niu.edu, or Faculty Sponsor Dr. Carrie Kortegast at ckortegast@niu.edu.