Using arts-facilitated reflection to elicit meaning-making explorations from adult and higher education master's-level students on topics related to diversity, social justice and inclusion

Amy S. Franklin

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ABSTRACT

USING ARTS-FACILITATED REFLECTION TO ELICIT MEANING-MAKING EXPLORATIONS FROM ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION MASTER’S-LEVEL STUDENTS ON TOPICS RELATED TO DIVERSITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND INCLUSION

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Northern Illinois University, 2018
Carrie A. Kortegast, Director

The purpose of the study was to investigate how student affairs graduate students make meaning of their prior significant experiences or professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion (DSJI). The study examined how participants describe a significant experience related to DSJI; how participants believe that these experiences regarding DSJI influence their work as student affairs educators; how participants describe an emerging professional identity as an inclusive practitioner because of these experiences; and how participants describe the influence of arts-based research practices on their reflection about topics related to DSJI. Findings included participants’ understandings of DSJI; that diversity-related learning occurs both formally and informally; that participants are becoming inclusive and socially just practitioners by developing an emerging professional identity, developing an emerging expertise, and developing an emerging framework of professional practice that supports DSJI; that diversity-related learning changed their lives; and that arts-based activity facilitated reflection. Recommendations from the study include: (a) enhance opportunities for applying diversity-related learning, (b) encourage meaning-making dialogue, and (c) experiment with arts-based reflective activities.
USING ARTS-FACILITATED REFLECTION TO ELICIT MEANING-MAKING EXPLORATIONS FROM ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION MASTER’S-LEVEL STUDENTS ON TOPICS RELATED TO DIVERSITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND INCLUSION

BY

AMY S. FRANKLIN

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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 A. Kortegast
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my parents, Suzanne and Daniel, who had the patience, skills, and love that inspired me to be a lifelong learner and to whom I will be forever grateful. They taught me how to learn and to love, two of my highest callings, and to love learning.

They taught me and showed me how to love as we have been loved by the One who is Love. They taught me and showed me how to learn and how to help others learn. From my earliest memories, I remember the exhortation they often repeated, “Each one, teach one.” I later learned that they had heard about that strategy from a literacy program developed by Frank Laubach, who had also been a speaker at a family camp I grew up going to. At that camp, I first learned and practiced arts-facilitated reflection—although we called it Creative Art—long before I knew what that was from an academic or research perspective.

This little “book report” (as my friend, Jill, calls it) is a bit of a full-circle moment for me, bringing together my past as a learner, and as one who reflects through expressive arts activities, with my present and future as an educator. I take this step, as this “book” is published, to share what I have learned.

This project would not have been possible without my participants, students who shared their journeys with me and trusted me with their stories. I am humbled by this next generation of higher education professionals who are committed to learning and to growing and to nudging all of us along to being more inclusive in our practice and attentive to issues of social justice.

Besides my participants, there are also countless people who have come alongside me and supported me in more ways than I can remember.

Before I even thought about a doctorate, my friend and colleague, Sarah, helped me complete my master’s degree. She also was a constant source of encouragement and coaching as I learned to improve my writing. Her guidance provided an important foundation for my doctoral work as she helped me figure out how to write and edit and compose an argument. I wish you were still here to share in some of the fruits of your labors…you made a difference in my life and I miss you!

Nancy taught me lessons about life and being a professional and helped me gain the skills to navigate the challenging road of a dissertation while working full time, even though that wasn’t the initial intention of our time together at numerous professional development workshops she taught over the years. The impact was that those lessons early in my professional career have carried with me and have even “spilled over” to various other relationships with friends and family who sometimes quote Nancy back to me!
When I knew Brian was coming to lead us, I wondered more seriously about continuing my education. His energy and passion for students and the field was inspiring. Then, when Donna came, she continued to inspire my academic pursuits. Next, I had the opportunity to work with Brandi, who forever changed my views on my work and career and academic pursuits by showing the way. Her encouragement and challenge and support kept me moving. And then there was Clair, Sweet Clair … she was a mentor, friend, and colleague, who is not still here to enjoy this moment with me, although I know she would be celebrating with me. All of this was built on the foundation that was started by Micki, who first encouraged me to think about Student Affairs differently. She led the way in getting her doctorate … thank you to all of you; each of you has been a mentor and friend to me and I wouldn’t be here today without your guidance and support.

The Good Earth Sweet & Spicy tea, my frequent writing companion, that was first introduced to me by my dear friend, JT, who was also interested in my topic and offered support and encouragement throughout this long process. She listened to me discuss my research and asked great questions and kept me going when I wasn’t sure how to.

To Gail and Oliver and William …you were frequent in-person guests in the early stages of my doctoral work and later supporters from afar. Our long talks and fun adventures encouraged my heart. It’s time to plan a visit soon!

Carrie, my coach and mentor….the moment you interviewed at NIU, I hoped we’d get to work together. The way you talked about research and learning were (and are) inspiring to me. Your patience and guidance throughout the writing process have been major components of my finally finishing this little book report. Thank you!

And Katy, and Suzanne…..who also supported and inspired me to think and to write and to grow….thank you!

My early professors who have moved on to new adventures, Lisa, Gene, Billy, Rhonda, Amy, Eric and more … you all impacted my journey and guided me along the way. Thank you.

My other friends, fellow graduate students, and work colleagues….Jill, Donna, Melanie, Dawn, Debbie, Eileen, Sandi, Mike, Kelly, Evelyn, Cindy, Michelle, Eric, Trish, Val and many others, you know who you are….and the girlfriend crew … Judy, Lynn, Penny, and Pam, you all served many different roles for me such as hand holder, butt kicker, prayer supporter, and cheerleader during this long slog….thank you!

To the Diane who helped get the words and formatting in this document into shape and the Diane who helped me get the images into shape….thank you! Your efforts helped create the final work so that my research could be more clearly shared with others.

To my family, who has been patient and supportive in spite of holidays and vacations lost to the writing process …. your love and kindness and smarts and humor and understanding are a constant source of comfort and blessing to me and I will be forever grateful.
To Woody, my dear companion and partner … you kept me going. You believed in me and encouraged me and gave your abiding support on this journey. I’m not sure that I would have kept going without you by my side. Your heart and your mind and your being inspire me every day and I am blessed to be on this journey with you. Your parents, Mary Alyce and Woody Junior, created a beautiful gift in you and have inspired me along the way, themselves. Thank you, Smiths!

To the One who made this all possible, without Whom I would not have completed this project … I know that the only way this was completed was by a miracle. I’ve relied regularly on the words, “When we are weak Thou art strong.” All thanks and glory be to God for the grace to complete this project. I wonder what’s next ….
DEDICATION

To my parents, Suzanne and Daniel, my first and best teachers
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

When I was growing up and someone in my family faced what seemed like an insurmountable challenge, my father would ask, “How do you eat an elephant?” Once my siblings and I got old enough, we learned, and repeated, our expected response, “One bite at a time!” All these years later, I think of this proverb when I consider how to meet the challenges in higher education today. ACPA: College Student Educators International (formerly the American College Personnel Association) along with NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (formerly referred to as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators) produced a document entitled “Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs” (1998) that includes some of the current challenges facing higher education, including:

- New technologies, changing student demographics, demands for greater accountability, concern about the increasing cost of higher education, and criticism of the moral and ethical climate on campuses. Institutions of higher learning are also influenced by social and political issues, including multiculturalism, personal responsibility, and equal opportunity. Our response to these challenges will shape our role in higher education. (p. 1)

The context within which higher education operates, in some ways, is not new. Thelin (2011) noted that change is a constant in colleges and universities, “both by accident and design. The temptation is for each generation of academic leaders to consider its own time to be the critical juncture” (p. ix; italics in original). This notion of constant change is supported by Berdahl, Altbach, and Gumport (1998), who contended that “The university has by no means been a static institution but has changed and adapted to new circumstances” (p. 16). Being mindful of some
of the history of higher education offers a broader lens through which to view the challenges of today.

From an historical perspective, higher education has undergone significant changes. During the earliest colonial times, students allowed to pursue higher education were white, male, and focused on religious and social matters (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011). However, this view has evolved, with higher education becoming more focused on being inclusive of a broader demographic and more diverse areas of study. Legislation such as the Morrill Acts (1862 and 1864) increased participation in higher education and expanded training in technical fields, as well as in the liberal arts such as education (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011). The GI Bill introduced after World War II further increased access to education, particularly for returning soldiers (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011). These national legislative measures helped increase access to higher education for a broader demographic of individuals, somewhat increasing the diversity of students on campus.

In the 21st century, higher education environments have continued to diversify. Smith (2011) stated, “diversity represents one of the most dramatic societal changes … with significant implications for American higher education” (p. 465). Because of shifting demographics, along with “the increasing visibility of issues related to numerous identity groups … [the indication is that] … the context for diversity is expanding” (Smith, 2011, p. 465). Numerous opportunities to navigate the changing profile of students within higher education resulted from this expanded diversity context. Within this environment, institutions of higher education have a unique opportunity to provide students with education and skill development to help them engage in civil discourse about numerous areas of diversity such as race, gender identity, and other social justice-related issues. With the ever-present news headlines focusing the nation’s attention on
these and other issues related to diversity, there are daily opportunities to dialogue about these areas that highlight differences between individuals and groups.

Within this context of change and challenge, student affairs professionals have an opportunity to develop programs and services that will support students in their educational aspirations. In many cases “changing societal conditions and institutional needs require staff to remain current with contemporary events and sometimes to broaden areas of expertise” (Winston & Creamer, 1998, p. 31). Remaining current and strengthening competencies will be vital for student affairs professionals if they are to successfully navigate the opportunities ahead that are inherent in the changes and challenges in higher education. Learning more about topics related to diversity—more specifically, through formal education and professional development experiences—are important strategies that can help ensure student affairs professionals and graduate students are fully prepared to meet the challenges facing higher education by enhancing their cultural competency.

Besides the value of ongoing professional development in increasing the cultural competency of student affairs educators, many student affairs educators have also come through professional preparation graduate programs where they have learned at least some diversity-related content. These programs, many of which use general standards outlined by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS, 2015), help guide the preparation of student affairs professionals. As the demographics in higher education change, all aspects of higher education change, including student affairs graduate preparation programs, in response to these changing demographics and a stronger focus on multiculturalism.
Statement of the Problem

The current national public conversation in the media and within the greater culture about issues such as racism and gender identity highlight the importance of addressing diversity-related issues within the context of higher education. It is crucial that current faculty and administrators in student affairs participate fully in preparing the next generation of student affairs professionals to participating in this dialogue. Faculty and staff have an opportunity to help ensure future professional educators are skilled in practicing effective dialogue about these and other issues, as well as engaging in effective diversity-related professional development for themselves and for those with whom they work. According to Watt (2015), “Being able to invoke strategies to effectively negotiate conflicts related to difference is essential when living in diverse society” (p. 11). It will be vital to be able to discuss a variety of diversity-related issues, thereby facilitating the development of this competency in the students with whom these future professionals will work. Beginning with future professionals will at least model for students what it looks like to engage in these dialogues on topics related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. In addition to modeling effective dialogue for future students, graduate students who are also current student affairs staff could also benefit from the modeling. Understanding more about how future student affairs professionals have learned about diversity, social justice, and inclusion will create a richer context from which to develop more effective professional development opportunities focused on improving graduate students’ cultural competency and civil discourse.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate how student affairs graduate students make meaning of their prior significant experiences or professional development activities related to
diversity, social justice, and inclusion. Participants described their experiences and the meaning they made from them. Some participants also described how they understood the terms *diversity*, *social justice*, and *inclusion*. These experiences may include a variety of encounters such as a class, a workshop, a book or some other formal training activity. They may also include a more personal, informal experience which a participant describes as related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion.

The overarching research question, along with the four sub-questions, includes the following: How do graduate students learn about and make meaning from their experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion?

1) How do participants describe a significant experience related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion?

2) How do participants believe that these experiences regarding diversity, social justice, and inclusion influence their work as student affairs educators?

3) How do participants describe an emerging professional identity as an inclusive practitioner because of these experiences?

4) How do participants describe the influence of arts-based research practices on their reflection about topics related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion?

The intent of these questions was to help uncover the ways in which graduate students learn about and make meaning from issues related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion, through personal encounters or through informal or formal professional development experiences. Through participants’ use of art media such as paper and crayons or clay, they had an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and share how they made sense of them. The arts-
based approach to the research was intended to enhance their reflection and provide the opportunity to uncover additional detail and context related to their prior personal or professional development experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. More detail about this methodology is included below and in Chapter 3.

Significance of the Study

The higher education environment offers a unique opportunity for students, faculty, and staff alike to embrace diversity, inclusion, and social justice. Particularly in student affairs work, where professionals embrace the development of the whole student (American Council on Education, 1949), and where students interact with numerous functional areas outside the classroom, there are myriad opportunities to create environments in which everyone is included and invited to become part of the community. One approach that guides this work is a recent publication of student affairs competencies for professional practice. This publication, *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators* (ACPA: College Student Educators International & NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2015), outlined the 10 competency areas important for student affairs work. One of those competencies is Social Justice and Inclusion, demonstrating that the field of student affairs has identified this as an important competency. First published in 2010, the ACPA/NASPA Competencies updated the specific focus on equity and diversity from the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion competency in 2010 to the broader Social Justice and Inclusion competency in 2015. The shift frames inclusiveness in the 2015 publication such that the dominant culture does not establish the norm; rather, all groups demonstrate equity and diversity compared to others (ACPA/NASPA, 2015).
This change in focus highlights the important, relevant, and timely competencies for today’s student affairs educator which are inclusive and do not privilege a dominant culture.

Besides the publication of the ACPA/NASPA (2015) competencies, other researchers have also published information about important competencies for student affairs professionals. One example is Herdlein, Riefler, and Mrowka (2013), who asserted that the top two characteristics (or competencies) important for student affairs professionals included multicultural/diversity issues and student development theory. Similarly, the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) has also focused on competencies, outlining the competencies and standards for master’s-level student affairs programs. The CAS Self-Assessment Guide for master’s-level student affairs professional preparation programs (2015) includes an *Equity and Access* portion of the CAS review of the program. Within this section, the standards include “goals and objectives related to diversity, equity, and access” (CAS, 2015, p. 21). This inclusion of topics related to diversity and social justice as part of the CAS program review process provides evidence that the Council members consider them to be an important part of a master’s preparation program in student affairs.

The literature also includes information about graduate preparation programs in student affairs or higher education, including diversity-related literature. This research includes studies on the perspectives of student affairs master’s students on diversity issues in their graduate education (McEwen & Roper, 1994; Talbot, 1996), the diversity requirements in these programs (Flowers, 2003), and diversity experiences in the curriculum (Gayles & Kelly, 2007).

In one of the earlier research studies addressing diversity in higher education, Talbot (1996) studied the perspectives of graduate students in student affairs preparation programs regarding their diversity-related education. Her findings indicated “there were no clear cut
explanations for how diversity was addressed in the student affairs graduate program” (Talbot, 1996, p. 176). However, Talbot (1996) also noted that students who were in programs where there was a more diverse student body felt more comfortable with and knowledgeable about diversity than those students who were in programs with a less diverse student body. Further, Talbot (1996) noted, “the place where many students felt they received the most diversity education or training was in their assistantships, especially those who worked in residence life” (p. 174). This finding related to supervised practice may be a potential area of focus for diversity-related learning in a graduate preparation program in student affairs. Later research on diversity as a component in student affairs graduate preparation programs is included in more detail in the literature review.

Linder, Harris, Allen, and Hubain (2015) conducted a more recent study of students of color in student affairs graduate preparation programs. While this study did not focus on all graduate students in such a program, it does provide some detail about students of color in the graduate programs. Students of color valued classroom experiences where faculty were willing to talk in depth about racial identity development, as well as those where faculty facilitated an open conversation about microaggressions in which all students participated (Linder et al., 2015). By being willing and able to facilitate deeper dialogue around issues of race, faculty have the opportunity to help prepare student affairs administrators to effectively serve a diverse higher education student population. If graduate program administrators strengthen their diversity-related education, the implication may be that future student affairs professionals are more likely to exhibit “racially inclusive practices” (Linder et al., 2015, p. 178) after they graduate.

Besides the higher education professional associations, higher education standards, and student affairs/higher education preparation programs identifying topics related to diversity
demonstrating the significance of addressing these topics within the higher education environment, both society as a whole and individual students, staff, and faculty may benefit from a focus on diversity, social justice and inclusion.

Society as a whole benefits from addressing topics related to diversity if for no other reason than that “most projections suggest that by 2050 the United States will be a majority minority nation” (Smith, 2011). That implies that the diversity of the U.S. population will be significantly larger than it is now, so understanding more about issues related to diversity may help increase understanding of the perspectives and experiences of those who are different from any individual.

Higher education provides a unique opportunity for students, faculty, and staff to learn more about a diverse and complex world. Individual students, staff, and faculty may benefit from a focus on diversity through coursework opportunities, research experiences, and through living, working and interacting with individuals who hold different identities and cultural practices than they hold. Thus, learning more about topics related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion could have wide-ranging impacts on numerous constituencies.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that informed this study was the role of reflection in learning and the value of arts-based activities in facilitating reflection. In approaching this study of graduate students in a student affairs preparation program, my assumption was that reflective art-making activities would uncover richer descriptions of participants’ meaning-making experiences related to professional development focused on diversity, social justice, and inclusion.
The first concept that informed my conceptual framework was that reflection is vital to the learning process. Reflection is crucial given the fast-paced world of today, where new information and technologies regularly bombard us and others expect us to develop immediate proficiency in managing both. According to Dyke (2006),

Rapid change and reflexivity forces [sic] people to think afresh, to reflect upon, and engage with, their social world. In late modernity, people are guided less by tradition and past experience, as they are increasingly forced to reflect and make decisions amidst a whirlwind of changing information. It is therefore argued that a more reflective approach to learning helps people make more knowledgeable decisions. (p. 105)

Higher education is not immune to these rapid changes, resulting in the need for professionals working within that environment to be reflective in their practice in order to make the best decisions possible.

A number of researchers have posited definitions and descriptions of reflection related to learning. For example, Boyd and Fales (1983) define reflective learning as “the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self and which results in a changed conceptual perspective” (p. 100). In this way, individuals think about experiences critically and then explore how their perspectives may have changed based on their thoughts on those experiences. Freire (1970) describes the act of reflection resulting in action. When Shor (1992) discusses participatory learning in critical classes, he asserts, “We can reflect on reality and on our received values, words, and interpretations in ways that illuminate meanings we hadn’t perceived before. This reflection can transform our thought and behavior …” (p. 22). Boyd and Fales (1983), Freire (1970), and Shor (1992) all describe change, either in conceptual framework, action, thoughts, or behaviors. These ideas inform the work of professionals working in higher education as they reflect on their practice and learn how to advance their practice.
For instance, Mountford (2005) investigated the experiences of doctoral students in an educational leadership program and asked them to participate in a reflective activity. The activity aimed to help facilitate the students’ understanding about the connection between their coursework and their practice, including their leadership (Mountford, 2005). By reflecting on how coursework might relate to their leadership and practice, students have the opportunity to enhance their future practice. Montford (2005) did not specify whether this was the case. However, whether or not those students enhanced their practice or more explicitly applied their classroom learning to their professional environments after their reflective activity is a topic for future research.

Boud (2001) asserted, “Reflection involves taking the unprocessed, raw material of experience and engaging with it as a way to make sense of what has occurred,…exploring often messy and confused events and focusing on the thoughts and emotions that accompany them” (p. 10). This process of exploring experiences—and uncovering any related thoughts and emotions—can help deepen the understanding of the meaning made of those experiences. One way to further that reflective practice is by facilitating an arts-mediated reflection.

When various arts-based strategies facilitate reflection—whether they be the visual or performing arts or another form of creative expression—people have the opportunity to think in a different way about the area of reflection. Knowles and Cole (2008) asserted that various “forms of representation give us access to expressive possibilities that would not be possible without their presence” (p. 5). Cruickshank (1996) provided one example of an arts-integrated approach designed to determine student learning in a nursing course. Faculty formally assessed student learning through their clinical experiences by means of a group reflective activity. Groups of students drew what they were learning, such as images of an operating theater, an elderly patient,
and other staff in the clinical setting (Cruickshank, 1996). The images, along with students’ descriptions of them, helped uncover students’ reflections on what they had learned and identify the degree of student learning that had occurred.

Thus, students had the opportunity to learn more through their arts-facilitated reflection. In addition, as noted above, reflection itself is an important component of learning even without the integration of arts-related reflection. So, both concepts—the role of reflection in learning and the benefits of arts-facilitated reflection—will both help frame the study.

Research Design

The current study used a constructivist epistemology and focused on “the meaning-making activity of the mind” (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). To interpret the results, I used an interpretivist theoretical perspective to constructivism. An interpretivist approach “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67; italics in original). This epistemological and theoretical perspective helped uncover how participants described and made meaning of their personal and professional development experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion from a cultural and historical perspective.

Using an arts-based research methodology to facilitate participants’ reflections on their experiences was an opportunity to reveal data and perspectives unavailable through a traditional data collection strategy. Barone and Eisner (1997) asserted that arts-based educational research “is not aimed at a quest toward certainly…, [but] the enhancement of perspectives” (p. 96; italics in original). Further, Barone and Eisner (2012) noted that arts-based research is “an effort to extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings
that otherwise would be ineffable” (p. 1). This methodology offered an opportunity to develop deeper, richer data about students’ personal and professional development experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion.

Participants included 17 graduate students enrolled in one of two sessions of a required capstone course as part of a higher education/student affairs preparation program. Students participated in an in-class activity that included a reflective art-making component and in individual semi-structured interview after the in-class activity. The in-class activity explored participants’ personal and professional development experiences with diversity, social justice, and inclusion. The follow-up individual interviews covered topics such as participants’ definitions of diversity, social justice, and inclusion; their formal and informal diversity-, social justice-, and inclusion-related personal and professional development experiences; and the impact of those experiences on their practice.

Factors such as explicitly stating the epistemology and conceptual framework determine the goodness of this qualitative research, according to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006). The current study demonstrates a strong alignment between the conceptual framework, the epistemology, and the methodology, as stated above. Thus, the resulting data have the potential to result in a richer understanding of graduate students’ experiences with personal and professional development encounters related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. Chapter 3 will discuss additional details regarding the methodology.

Implications of the Research

The urgency of providing graduate students in student affairs—who may also be new or soon-to-be new student affairs professionals—with strong professional development experiences
related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion cannot be overstated. The current public conversations about race, gender identity, and other issues of difference are getting louder and louder in the public discourse. In addition, in the current political climate, it is vital that professionals are well trained and culturally competent enough to help today’s university students navigate these conversations. Ultimately, creating culturally engaged citizens who are able to participate in civil discourse about important current cultural issues will fulfill the mission of many institutions of higher education to lead the next generation forward. A good first step toward a more engaged citizenry may be to improve the quality of professional development programs and experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion for graduate students in higher education preparation programs.

Summary

This chapter introduced my study of the personal and professional development experiences focused on diversity, social justice, and inclusion of students in a student affairs and higher education preparation program. I included a brief statement of the problem, the purpose of the study and research questions, an overview of the significance of the study (including a brief review of the literature), the conceptual framework, implications of the research, and the nature of the study.

In Chapter 2, I will review the historical context of diversity in higher education, particularly in student affairs work. In addition, I will discuss the foundations of student affairs, the historical changes in higher education, and diversity in higher education and student affairs. I will also review the role of student affairs competencies, diversity topics in student affairs graduate preparation programs, and diversity-related topics in the program and curriculum.
Further, I will describe how and where students learn about diversity (coursework/curriculum, supervised practice, graduate assistantships and internships), alternative breaks, and lived experience and the recommendations from the research. After this review of the literature, I discuss the gaps in the current literature and how, through the current study, I addressed some of those gaps. Finally, I will present research about the theoretical framework for this study, self-authorship, that provided the structure for my interpretation of the findings.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Three general areas of the literature frame this study: the historical context for diversity and social justice in higher education, particularly within student affairs areas; the role of professional competencies for student affairs educators; and diversity topics in student affairs graduate preparation programs. The historical context for diversity and social justice in higher education and student affairs provides a foundation for the study as the general area within which the research is situated. In addition, the literature frequently cites diversity-related competencies as important for student affairs educators. Further, diversity topics in higher education programs are also important, because this study investigated the experiences of graduate students in one of these programs. Finally, the theory of self-authorship provides the conceptual framework for the study, helping to frame how students made meaning from their personal and professional development experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion.

Historical Context

The historical context for this study includes information from various points on a timeline that address historical changes in higher education, foundations of student affairs work, and diversity and social justice in higher education and student affairs. The brief review of literature pertaining to these topics broadly frames the discussion for investigating the more specific topic of how students in a student affairs and higher education graduate preparation program describe their diversity-, social justice-, and inclusion-related personal and professional
development experiences. This historical context for student affairs work provides the background that continues to influence the work of student affairs professional educators today.

**Historical Changes in Higher Education and the Foundations of Student Affairs Work**

Throughout the history of higher education, some aspects of the institution have adapted along with changes in the world around it. Geiger (2011) asserted that some things change while others do not, such as the basic form of college in America. As can be seen below, higher education has adapted and changed according to a variety of influences, which have also influenced the work of student affairs practitioners.

**Colonial higher education.** The time between 1636 and 1780, according to Rentz and Howard-Hamilton (2011), is the period of “colonial higher education” (p. 31). This period of higher education is characterized by “responsibility and concern for the whole student, described by the concept *in loco parentis*” (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011, p. 31; italics in original). While this concept of *in loco parentis* is linked to Harvard, the “earliest colonial college” (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011, p. 31), the concept of concern about the whole student is one that has been important over time. This idea of the whole student emerges later in the document produced by the American Council on Education in 1937, *The Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Education, 1949), discussed in more detail below.

**The shifting profile of higher education.** According to Rentz and Howard-Hamilton (2011), during the time between 1790 and 1865, when there was a “plurality of higher education institutions” (p. 33), needs in society emerged that influenced the existing profile of American higher education, which was “male-centered, private, paternalistic, and residential” (p. 33). In particular, curricular innovations, the participation of women in higher education, and the
development of black institutions all influenced this profile (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011). Issues within higher education, as well as those in the larger society, served as antecedents to student personnel work (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011). “Efforts on the part of students to move away from the campus’ narrow classical curriculum and the emphasis on piety and discipline led ultimately to the establishment of debate clubs, literary societies and eventually the Greek-letter social fraternity movement” (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011, p. 39). This shift in student needs and behaviors contributed to setting the foundation for work in student affairs.

Expansion. From 1855 to 1890, which Rentz and Howard-Hamilton (2011) refer to as “a period of intellectualism” (p. 40), the mission of higher education narrowed due to “society’s need for scientific and technical professionals prepared in the hard sciences [such as] mathematics, physics, [and] astronomy…” (p. 40). During this time, Rentz and Howard-Hamilton (2011) asserted that this “primary focus on rational development… [meant that] other aspects of students’ social, psychological, physical, and spiritual development were devalued” (p. 40). Besides the focus on the sciences during this time, there was also an increase in support through public higher education through the passing of two Morrill Land Grant Acts in 1862 and 1864 (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011). While the Acts themselves were focused more on expanding the technical fields, Thelin (2011) asserted that education was “the professional field that enjoyed the most growth, first in student enrollments and then in employment” (p. 86).

Thelin (2011) further asserted, “The Civil War provided a political opportunity to push through legislation that had been stalled for several years” (p. 75), such as the Morrill Act of 1862. Also after the Civil War, besides legislation, the “rapidly growing population [and] unprecedented industrial growth … dramatically altered the nature and purpose of public higher
education” (NASPA, 1987, p. 5). This resulted in an expansion of purpose for higher education to include “education for responsible, enlightened citizenship as well as vocational training” (NASPA, 1987, p. 5). Thus, the focus and purpose of higher education in general, and student affairs work within that context, changed in response to the expanding population and historical events.

**Deans of Men and Women.** The time between 1870 and 1920 was the period of “The Pioneer Deans” (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011, p. 41). During this time, “Presidents increasingly endorsed the need for an administrator to coordinate or supervise students” (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, p. 41). Waple (2006) noted that early professionals working in student personnel, or student affairs work, were Deans of Men and Deans of Women. Professionals serving in these roles focused on student discipline, course registration, and other matters concerning students’ out-of-classroom experiences. Rentz and Howard-Hamilton (2011) contended that Deans of Men and Deans of Women were “student personnel pioneers … [who] valued the uniqueness and individuality of each student. They were committed to the holistic development of students and held an unshakable belief in each student’s potential for growth and learning” (p. 44). Professionals in these roles created the foundation for today’s student affairs professional educators. Historically, the work of student affairs educators was called “student personnel” work (Waple, 2006).

**The emergence of student personnel.** The time between 1916 and 1936, according to Rentz and Howard-Hamilton (2011), resulted in “the emergence of student personnel and its associations” (p. 43). The American Council on Education released one of the first formal documents that grew out of discussions between professionals doing student personnel work who
hoped to identify standards of practice for the field. Specifically, a report that was released after a 1937 meeting of the Council, *The Student Personnel Point of View*, focused on the work of student personnel in institutions of higher education. The two-day conference that created this report was intended to focus on “the clarification of the field of student personnel work, the relationship of [that work] … to other phases of institutional programs, and the need for research and special studies to determine the nature and direction of future developments” (American Council on Education, 1949, forward, paragraph 1) in the field.

The Council updated the report in 1949 and aimed to “[present] a new formulation of the philosophical basis for personnel work and detail ... the elements in a comprehensive institutional program” (American Council on Education, 1949, forward, paragraphs 1-3). Central to this view was the perspective that the institutions consider students whole persons who interact in social environments, which is central to the work of student personnel administrators and others working in education (American Council on Education, 1949). The statement was clear in outlining that a student in a higher education institution was more than just a student. It was an explicit statement that students’ “whole persons” were important in their college or university experience. In particular,

The individual’s full and balanced development involves the acquisition of a pattern of knowledge, skills, and attitudes consistent with his abilities, aptitudes, and interests. Through his college experiences, he should acquire an appreciation of cultural values [and] the ability to adapt to changing social conditions…. (American Council on Education, 1949, present-day objectives, paragraph 4)

In this view, college is an experience full of opportunities to acquire new ways of knowing and doing, as well as new attitudes. This was also a time for students to learn to appreciate cultural values and adapt when and if the social conditions changed. The broader view of the student
experience during this time, while matriculating through a college or university, remains focused on the whole student and supports an historical foundation for focusing on issues of diversity and social justice.

**The GI Bill.** After World War II, “the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (the GI Bill) provided funds for direct college costs and subsistence that allowed returning veterans to pursue a college education” (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011, p. 49). The result was that more students were entering higher education and those students were not as homogeneous as they had been (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011). The updated document by the American Council on Education (1949) noted above, also recognized the increasing diversity of students and highlighted the need to consider the totality of a student’s experiences—and the individualities therein—as important considerations in creating university programs to support them.

**The 1950s and 1960s.** During this time, areas of responsibility for student affairs professionals expanded along with the changing student demographic, which included variations in ability levels, “age, aspirations, and racial and ethnic backgrounds” (NASPA, 1987, p. 6). This historical reality, along with the increasing population of college-aged students, further demonstrates the shifts in the academy that have resulted from changes in the larger society. In addition, during this time, “the federal government invested unprecedented resources for facilities, research, and student aid” (NASPA, 1987, p. 6). This influx of resources, in addition to, “civil rights legislation, judicial intervention, the Vietnam War, and a change in the age of majority fueled student activism on many campuses and forced a reassessment of the relationship between student and college” (NASPA, 1987, p. 6). Rentz and Howard-Hamilton (2011) referred to this time as “the downfall of *in loco parentis*” (p. 51; italics in original). The influx
of resources and the shifting student demographics provided a natural opportunity to reassess how the institution interacted with this new variety of students.

**Shifting to student development.** After the “turbulence, riots, sit-ins accompanying student activism….and the burning and looting of several major cities during the Civil Rights movement, college and university administrations began to reevaluate their thinking…and the nature of the student-institution relationship” (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011, p. 52). All of this reevaluation eventually resulted in “a view of the undergraduate years as a continuous developmental sequence” (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011, p. 52). Also during this time, “the growing diversity of the student body suggested that previous services and programs, designed for a more homogeneous student body, be evaluated and perhaps redesigned” (Rentz & Howard-Hamilton, 2011, p. 54).

By 1987, NASPA (at that time known as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators), one of the professional associations for individuals doing the work of student personnel known more commonly as student affairs today, released a statement on the 50th anniversary of *The Student Personnel Point of View* (1946). The statement included a set of assumptions about the field. Two of the assumptions that are most closely aligned with the current study include “Each Person Has Worth and Dignity” (NASPA, 1987, p. 9) and “Bigotry Cannot Be Tolerated” (p. 9). Descriptions of these assumptions include:

*Each Person Has Worth and Dignity* (italics in original)

Colleges…must help their students become open to the differences that surround them: race, religion, age, gender, culture, physical ability, language, nationality, sexual preference, and lifestyle…these matters are learned best in collegiate settings that are rich with diversity, and they must be learned if the ideals of human worth and dignity are to be advanced.
**Bigotry Cannot Be Tolerated** (italics in original)

Any expression of hatred or prejudice is inconsistent with the purposes of higher education in a free society...there must be a commitment by the institution to create conditions where bigotry is forthrightly confronted. (NASPA, 1987, p. 9)

These basic assumptions—of the worth and dignity of each person and the intolerance for bigotry—align with the earliest work by ACE (1937) that describes the focus of student affairs personnel work as addressing the whole student. The consistent focus on assisting students in becoming competent and informed adults, who are able to respond to the diversity of experiences and people they encounter throughout life, is at the core of work in student affairs.

**Student learning focus.** A number of factors resulted in the next shift in the higher education environment. According to ACPA: College Student Educators International (1996), these included “economic conditions, eroding public confidence, accountability demands, and demographic shifts resulting in increased numbers of people from historically underrepresented groups going to college” (ACPA, p. 1). With resources available for higher education not keeping pace with the needs of higher education, as well as other pressures, “legislators, parents, governing boards, and students want colleges and universities to reemphasize student learning and personal development as the primary goals of undergraduate education” (ACPA, p. 1). This focus on student learning is also supported by one of the guiding values of the Higher Learning Commission, a focus on student learning, that helps inform their criteria for accreditation (2017).

Given these pressures, the profession is likely to develop new frameworks within which student affairs professionals can continue to assist students in achieving their educational goals. One example of a professional association helping frame the discussion around student learning and the work of student affairs educators is *The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for*
Student Affairs (ACPA, 1996) which intended “to stimulate discussion and debate on how student affairs professionals can intentionally create the conditions that enhance student learning and personal development” (p. 1). This document highlighted five main characteristics of student affairs work that is learning oriented including:

1. The student affairs division mission complements the institution’s mission, with the enhancement of student learning and personal development being the primary goal of student affairs programs and services.

2. Resources are allocated to encourage student learning and personal development.

3. Student affairs professionals collaborate with other institutional agents and agencies to promote student learning and personal development.

4. The division of student affairs includes staff who are experts on students, their environments, and teaching and learning processes.

5. Student affairs policies and programs are based on promising practices from the research on student learning and institution-specific assessment data. (pp. 2–4)

These characteristics relate to the importance of the mission, resources, staff competency, and policies and programs and are aligned with a learning orientation that demonstrates the expectation of what is necessary for student affairs areas in higher education. This focus reinforced more the shift from student development to student learning and development, particularly in the work of student affairs educators.

Each of these changes in the larger society had an impact on higher education. Student affairs, as part of the academy, responded by providing programs and services to address these changing realities (NASPA, 1987). This was an opportunity to participate fully in students’ higher education experience by providing programs and services to support students as they pursue and achieve a holistic experience in higher education.
The next section of this chapter focuses more explicitly on topics related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion in higher education and student affairs, including a brief description of some pertinent definitions.

**Diversity, Social Justice and Inclusion in Higher Education and Student Affairs**

Diversity is “shaping higher education…and higher education’s role in society” (Smith, 2011, p. 465). Diversity, broadly defined, represents “not only race, ethnicity, gender, and class, but religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability, among others” (Smith, 2011, p. 465). This expanded view of diversity, along with demographic shifts, creates a context within which higher education can achieve “the promise of democracy—developing a pluralistic society that works” (Smith, 2011, p. 465). Thus, these changes to the higher education environment, if coupled with competency in facilitating the growth and development of students as whole persons, has the potential to influence the larger society. Smith (2011) went so far as to say that “Reframing diversity as central to institutional effectiveness, excellence, and viability will no doubt be a requisite for higher education” (p. 475). This statement affirmed the possibilities for the academy in the future. A college or university that holds diversity as a central component of an effective institution is an institution well situated for the future.

Within the higher education environment, student affairs educators have a unique opportunity to embrace diversity, inclusion, and social justice as guiding principles for their work. The research on student affairs includes investigations of topics related to diversity, cultural competency, multiculturalism, and social justice. Over time—and in a variety of settings with various populations—the field of student affairs has used a number of words and phrases that reflect various iterations of these diversity-related terms. No matter the words used,
however, the research is clear in the importance of learning more and applying that knowledge to help create a more inclusive learning environment on the college campus.

Ebbers and Henry (1990) asserted that the efforts of student affairs professionals might increase staff members’ cultural competence. They contended that “the greatest challenge for America’s colleges and universities in the 1990s may be to create a climate in which the student body not only accepts and appreciates diversity but learns to celebrate it as well” (p. 319). They further discussed the importance of addressing both students and staff, emphasizing the value—for both minority and majority staff and students—of learning about “how individual mannerisms, speech, values, and behaviors are bound by culture” (Ebbers & Henry, p. 321). This more holistic view of individuals within a learning environment has the potential to positively influence each member of that community and enhance the cultural competency of that community. While it is difficult to determine if this has occurred, there is some evidence to suggest that there remains a continued focus on diversity-related issues in higher education.

Factors such as the inclusion of the topic in professional competencies, the focus of coursework in higher education/student affairs preparation programs, and the hiring of on-campus Chief Diversity Officers at numerous colleges across the country all confirm the ongoing focus in higher education on topics related to diversity.

More recently, Cuyjet and Duncan (2013) used the term “cultural competence” in their study of its impact on the moral development of student affairs professionals. Their focus “on efforts to increase cultural awareness and competence among student affairs professionals …[assumes]… a corresponding expansion of worldview [that] will enhance their moral and ethical decision-making abilities” (Cuyjet & Duncan, 2013, p. 308). This more recent use of the
term demonstrates the ongoing use of cultural competence as well as research into various applications of earlier research.

Pope and Reynolds (1997) stated multicultural competence “is a necessary prerequisite to effective, affirming, and ethical work in student affairs” (p. 270). They defined multicultural competence “as the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to work effectively and ethically across cultural differences” (Pope and Reynolds, 1997, p. 270). Pope and Reynolds (1997) further outlined specific aspects that represent multicultural awareness, multicultural knowledge, and multicultural skills. For example, as included in a comprehensive chart offered by Pope and Reynolds (1997), multicultural awareness includes “a belief that differences are valuable and that learning about others who are culturally different is necessary and rewarding,” multicultural knowledge includes “knowledge of diverse cultures and oppressed groups (i.e., history, traditions, values, customs, resources, issues),” and, multicultural skills include the “ability to identify and openly discuss cultural differences and issues” (p. 271; italics added). Each of these aspects of multicultural competence—awareness, knowledge, and skills—provides an opportunity for training and education to enhance that area.

Another phrase used more recently in the literature is social justice. Hemphill (2015) noted, “The term social justice began to appear in the literature during the 1840s. A Jesuit priest, Taparelli d’Azeglio, coined the term” (p. 1). More recently, the literature specifically related to student personnel administrators in higher education also referenced the phrase. For example, a search of the *NASPA Journal* for “social justice” identified the earliest use in 2005, Volume 42, Number 4 in the article “Affirmative Action: From Before Bakke to After Grutter” by Lehmuller and Gregory. A similar search in the *Journal of College Student Development* for “social
justice” identified the earliest use in 2000, Volume 41, Number 1 in the article “The Development of Social Justice Allies During College: A Phenomenological Investigation” by Broido. These two examples from journals associated with student affairs professional associations demonstrate that the use of this term is more recent in the student affairs field, at least within the literature. Bell (2016) provides a very recent reference and definition of social justice. In describing social justice, Bell (2016) noted that

Social justice is both a goal and a process. The goal of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. The process for attaining the goal of social justice should also be democratic and participatory, respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change. (p. 3)

The goal and process components of Bell’s (2016) definition of social justice demonstrate some consistency with Pope and Reynolds’ (1997) view that multicultural competency involves awareness, knowledge, and skills. There is an active component in each approach, an aspect that demonstrating multicultural competency and demonstrating social justice are active approaches. This is not to say that they are the same, only that aspects of them are similar.

While the literature includes studies referencing varied terminology, some publications also use multiple terms or phrases. For example, Watt (2007) asserted that “If student affairs practitioners are to foster more diverse and welcoming campus environments for our students, then we must find ways to have more meaningful discussions about diversity, privilege, and social justice” (p. 114). Engaging in and facilitating these deeper dialogues about issues of difference is one small part of an intermediate outcome of the ACPA/NASPA (2015) Social Justice and Inclusion competency. The specific outcome states that student affairs educators at this level should be able to “effectively facilitate dialogue about issues of social justice,
inclusion, power, privilege, and oppression in one’s practice” (ACPA/NASPA, 2015, p. 31). Additional details regarding the ACPA/NASPA (2015) competencies is included below. The fact that the two major professional associations for student affairs educators (ACPA: College Student Educators International & NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) have identified Social Justice and Inclusion as a competency supports the assertion that student affairs educators need to embrace diversity, inclusion, and social justice principles to guide their work, regardless of the specific terminology used.

For the purposes of this study, a variety of these diversity-related terms noted above were used, depending on the specific area of discussion. In addition, participants themselves helped describe these terms, as they understand them, as part of this study.

The next area that frames the current study is the role of professional competencies. A number of researchers have been working to identify areas of competency for student affairs educators for many years. An overview of some of this research is included next.

Role of Student Affairs Competencies

Research on student affairs has included investigations of competencies important for student affairs professionals working in higher education administration. This literature on competencies includes studies of entry-level competencies important for student affairs educators (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005; Dickerson et al., 2011; Kretovics, 2002; Kuk, Cob, & Forrest, 2007; Waple, 2006), general student affairs competencies important for all student affairs educators (ACPA: College Student Educators International & NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2010, 2015; Herdlein et al., 2013), and helping competencies important to student affairs work (Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Reynolds, 2011).
wealth of studies on the topic of competencies helps demonstrate the value of identifying competencies to both professionals and researchers doing higher education administrative work.

**General Student Affairs Competencies**

One recent approach to outlining the competencies important for professionals who work in student affairs areas is the *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators* (*Practitioners* was used instead of *Educators* in the 2010 edition; ACPA & NASPA, 2015, 2010). First released in 2010 and revised in 2015, this joint effort by the two major professional associations for student affairs educators produced a document that outlines and describes the 10 professional competencies for student affairs professionals (ACPA/NASPA, 2010; 2015). The intention behind the competencies was “to lay out essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions expected of all student affairs educators, regardless of their functional area or specialization within the field” (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 7).

Each competency included a brief description along with specific outcomes for achievement at three levels—foundational, intermediate, and advanced (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Areas of competency presented in the most recent release include the following: personal and ethical foundations; values, philosophy, and history; assessment, evaluation, and research; law, policy, and governance; organizational and human resource; leadership; social justice and inclusion; student learning and development; technology; and, advising and supporting (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). According to the document (ACPA/NASPA, 2015), one of the most substantive changes between the 2010 publication and the 2015 publication was to update the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion competency from 2010 to the Social Justice and Inclusion competency in the 2015 publication.
The intent behind the change was “to frame inclusiveness in a manner that does not norm dominant cultures but that recognizes all groups and populations are diverse as related to all other groups and populations” (ACPA/NASPA, 2015, pp. 4-5). In this way, the competency focuses on the value of inclusivity and openness without putting a positive judgment on the dominant culture, while also not privileging the dominant culture and identifying the non-dominant culture as less important or less “normal” than another culture. Clearly, as a way to highlight the important, relevant, and timely competencies for today’s student affairs educator, the focus is much more broadly stated in the revised ACPA/NASPA competencies (2015) than in the earlier (2010) publication.

**Entry-Level Competencies**

Even before ACPA/NASPA published the professional competencies for student affairs educators, others in the student affairs field were conducting research on the aspects of student affairs work that demonstrated professional competency. Burkard et al. (2005) discussed entry-level competencies for new professionals that included 32 competencies that are essential for student affairs staff in entry-level positions (p. 293). The top seven ranked competencies that emerged from this study of mid- and senior-level student affairs professionals were from the personal/preprofessional category: flexibility, interpersonal relations, time management, ability to manage multiple tasks, oral communication, written communication, and problem solving (Burkard et al., 2005). The next highest-ranked competency area, after personal/preprofessional qualities, was associated with professionals’ human relations skills, including areas such as collaboration, teamwork/building, counseling/active listening, and multicultural competency (Burkard et al., 2005). These top two sets of qualities, personal/preprofessional and human
relations, seem to have some overlap in that individuals with communication and problem-solving skills might also have skills related to counseling/active listening, for example.

NASPA/ACPA (2015) asserted that, within their 10 competency areas, “there is significant overlap or intersection among the outcomes associated with the various competency areas” (p. 9). Thus, it is likely that individual competency areas or skills are not discrete, leaving room for addressing more than one competency area at a time through professional development or curriculum-focused activities.

**Helping Competencies**

Reynolds (2011), in her study of helping competencies of student affairs professionals, identified 28 helping skills which emerged from her research with entry- and mid-level student affairs professionals. When asked about the kind of information that would assist them in being effective helpers, participants noted “a need for information on communication, diversity, and crisis management” (Reynolds, 2011, p. 367). The need for information on diversity to enhance effectiveness for helpers, in particular, seems to align to some degree with other studies which noted the importance of diversity-related issues for student affairs professionals (Herdlein et al., 2013; Waple 2006).

**Faculty and Staff Perceptions of Competencies**

Dickerson et al. (2011) found few significant differences between the views of senior student affairs officers’ expectations of entry-level professionals and those of faculty in student affairs preparation programs. In their review of the literature on competency, they identified 51 possible competencies (Dickerson et al., 2011), for which 49 held some degree of consistency between groups relative to the level of importance of the competency. The authors asserted that
this consistency between faculty and chief student affairs officers confirmed a consensus regarding usefulness of the competencies in practice as well as agreement in the research literature regarding areas of competency that are important for student affairs professionals (2011). However, they did note that there were differences in perspective between senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) and student affairs faculty about desired and possessed competencies. For example, faculty believed that there was a larger gap between “new professionals’ knowledge of diversity-related issues and their commitment to social justice, whereas SSAOs saw more significant gaps in…[entry-level professionals’] ability to use current and future trends data as well as their ability to apply theory in practice” (Dickerson et al., 2011, p. 475).

These differences may have been due to the types of interactions each group has with graduate students. For example, if current senior student affairs professionals have noticed that newer professionals seem unable to link new initiatives to student development theory, they may identify that as a larger gap. This may also be a factor of how closely senior leaders in student affairs interact with newer professionals. In reality, neither senior student affairs professionals nor student affairs preparation faculty may have the direct experience with newer professionals, at least in a work environment, through which to accurately perceive or judge their competencies.

Even though significant areas of agreement in the importance of specific competencies exist between senior student affairs officers and faculty in student affairs preparation programs, there are still areas where these two groups differ, as briefly noted above. As a result, it could be beneficial for each of the groups to be aware of the perceptions and perspectives of the other group. When student affairs preparation programs and divisions of student affairs enjoy a strong
collaborative partnership, they are aware of potential differences in perspectives between faculty
and administrators of what graduate students and new professionals need.

This awareness could help inform discussions about how to address learning and
experience gaps through either classroom or practice (internships or graduate assistantships)
activities for graduate students, or through professional development or coaching for new
professionals. In particular, the “SSAOs and other practitioners who work with entry-level
professionals should anticipate a greater need for on-the-job training and development for new
professionals, especially in competency gap areas such as collaboration, reflection, and the
application of theory to practice” (Dickerson et al., 2011, p. 476). Being aware of perceptions of
need and being intentional about helping address those needs can assist administrators in
divisions of student affairs to develop programming or other initiatives to smooth the transition
into professional work for new professionals. Further, senior leaders can assess the
competencies of new professionals in their own institutions, checking those against their own
perceptions, and develop professional development plans accordingly.

Larger-Scale Research on Competencies

Muller, Grabsch, and Moore (2017) published the most recent large-scale analysis related
to student affairs competencies that investigated various factors that influenced the degree to
which student affairs professionals attained specified professional competencies. While the
study by Muller et al. (2017) does not provide a deep analysis of competency attainment, it does
provide an initial, broad look at how factors such as participant demographic, pre-professional,
and educational characteristics influence the attainment of professional competencies identified
by ACPA/NASPA (2015). In one example of differences related to demographic characteristics,
Muller et al. (2017) found that “participants who identified as White reported significantly higher attainment of PEF [Professional and Ethical Foundations] and LPG [Law, Policy, and Governance] … and participants who identified as People of Color, as having a disability, or as a lesbian or gay/homosexual reported significantly higher attainment of SJI [Social Justice and Inclusion]” (p. 9). While Muller et al. (2017) did not offer an explanation as to why participants who identified as White were more likely to attain the competencies noted above, they did suggest that individuals from non-marginalized groups may be “less competent and may not be as effective in their social justice efforts” (p. 9). These demographic differences help to demonstrate that competency attainment may be influenced by an individual’s specific demographic characteristics.

Also, Muller et al. (2017) found that the pre-professional experiences of on-campus living and fraternity or sorority involvement impacted competency attainment. As one example showed, “participants who did not live on campus as an undergraduate reported higher attainment of PEF [Personal and Ethical Foundations], OHR [Organizational and Human Resources], and LEAD [Leadership]” (p. 9). While the researchers noted that this finding was surprising, they did suggest that on-campus living might be “confounded by a different variable, but … [their] study was unable to determine if that was the case” (Muller et al., 2017, p. 9). This finding helps demonstrate, at a minimum, that the Muller et al. study did not provide in-depth analysis of individual competencies.

Further, Muller et al. (2017) identified that the educational experiences of “participants with a master’s degree but not a doctoral degree reported higher attainment of AER [Assessment, Evaluation, and Research], LPG, OHR, and A/S [Advising and Supporting]” (p. 9). Further
attainment of a doctoral degree was associated with attainment of all but TECH [Technology] competencies (Muller et al., 2017). According to the authors, these findings related to educational experiences of participants “are consistent with anecdotal evidence and common assumptions” (Muller et al., p. 9).

While Muller et al. (2017) identified a number of characteristics that influence attainment of published competencies (ACPA/NASPA, 2015) such as demographic, pre-professional, and degree-related, other earlier studies reviewed the competencies identified through previous research. In particular, Herdlelin et al. (2013) published another larger-scale study, a meta-analysis of previous studies published over a 17-year period, which extended similar research published by Lovell and Kosten (2000), who had also conducted a meta-analysis of previously published research. Herdlelin et al. (2013) organized their analysis into studies that addressed the areas of skills and competencies, curriculum (in graduate preparation programs), multicultural competency, and professional development. Herdlelin et al. (2013) found that the majority of the studies included in the analysis “used a combination of different groups including middle managers, graduate preparation program faculty, senior student affairs officers, graduate students, and new professionals” (p. 257). The top two characteristics (or competencies) that Herdlelin et al. (2013) noted as important for student affairs professionals included multicultural/diversity issues and student development theory, with legal issues and research and assessment tied for third place. The top skills set identified for student affairs professionals was research/assessment/evaluation, and tied for second place on the skills list were communication, administration and management, supervision, and leadership (Herdlein et al., 2013).
Herdlein et al. (2013) also compared the results of their study with the one conducted previously by Lovell and Kosten (2000). Lovell and Kosten’s (2000) study did not include a multicultural/diversity competency analysis and yet it was the top competency in Herdlein et al.’s study (2013). In addition, the 2013 study noted a research and assessment competency not found in the Lovell and Kosten’s 2000 analysis. However, Lovell and Kosten (2000) did note that assessment, as a competency, was a gap in the literature at the time. The difference in these two studies highlights a possible shift in student affairs practice, and related competencies, over a 10-year period. Herdlein et al. (2013) explained the distinction:

…as institutions of higher education have become more diverse, complex, technologically sophisticated, and financially challenged, there has been a shift in focus from a counseling and interpersonal orientation to an administrative and managerial approach. This shift is evident when comparing research data with preparation program curricula where coursework on research and assessment, legal issues, leadership and supervision, and strategic planning and budgeting are far from uniform in both required and elective courses. This subtle but persistent change in direction has led to contrasts in expectations for our graduate programs and differences in perceived competencies needed for successful practice. (Herdlein et al., 2013, p. 266)

As the climate of higher education continues to shift, it will be more important than ever to continue to conduct research on multiple areas of competency needed to navigate these shifts and be prepared to meet the needs of each generation of incoming students.

Lovell and Kosten’s (2000) earlier study of research published between 1967 and 1997 synthesized information related to the successful administration of student affairs. The authors reviewed “the literature relating to the skills, personal traits, and knowledge bases of successful student affairs administrators” (Lovell & Kosten, p. 554), addressing a broad array of audiences from entry level to senior administrators. Lovell and Kosten (2000) found “that to be successful as a student affairs administrator, well-developed administration, management, and human
facilitation skills are key” (p. 566). In addition, administrators also must possess knowledge about higher education and student development theory and the ability to work collaboratively and with integrity (Lovell & Kosten, 2000).

The researchers also noted that it was difficult to make inferences from some of the data in the study due to the variability in the level of detail provided about the research process itself in some of the studies (Lovell & Kosten, 2000). One implication of these differences in this meta-analysis of published research is that Lovell and Kosten (2000) recommended that “the profession rethink the research training for graduate students in higher education and student affairs” (p. 569). In this way, Lovell and Kosten (2000) contended that future published research in the field might include the detail needed for other researchers and for professionals as they review the literature and assess how it may be applicable in their individual contexts. While a focus on research, along with assessment and evaluation, is included as a recommended element of the curriculum in the CAS Standards for master’s-level student affairs professional preparation programs (2015), the diversity of programs and faculty addressing the topics might make it challenging to provide the exact same research training across programs.

Herdlein et al. (2013) also noted the relationship between published research on competencies and graduate preparation programs. The authors not only addressed specific competencies important for student affairs professionals, they also strongly encouraged “future researchers, program faculty, and practitioners [to] attempt to discover ways to include the known competency areas into graduate preparation programs and enhanced professional development opportunities for current professionals” (Herdlein et al., 2013, p. 265). The ACPA/NASPA (2015) competencies also noted this endorsement in the recommended
applications for the competencies that include using them for self-assessment and individual professional development planning as well as curriculum review and planning for student affairs graduate preparation programs.

**Acquiring Skills and Competencies and their Perceived Need**

Waple (2006) identified “selected skills and competencies attained by entry-level student affairs professionals through master’s-level graduate education and the degree to which these skills and competencies were perceived as necessary for entry-level student affairs work” (p. 1). Further, the author noted 11 skills that were:

- acquired at a high degree including History of Student Affairs, History of Higher Education, Cultural Foundations of Higher Education, Student Demo-graphics [sic] and Characteristics, Student Development Theory, Career Development, Ethics in Student Affairs Work, Multicultural Awareness and Knowledge, Effective Program Planning and Implementation, Effective Written and Oral Communication Skills, and Problem Solving. (p. 8)

Those skill areas reported by Waple (2006) which were attained at a lower degree than other skills were “Budget and Fiscal Management, Strategic Planning, and Use of Microcomputers in Higher Education” (p. 8). The difference in skill areas reported—between those attained to a higher degree and those attained to a lower degree—align somewhat with other research. In particular, Herdlein et al. (2013) similarly found that a multicultural/diversity-related competency was a top competency area, while Waple (2006) noted that multicultural awareness and knowledge was a skill acquired to a high degree. Of note is that while Waple (2006) found that strategic planning was one of the skills areas attained to a lower degree, Herdlein et al. (2013) identified assessment and planning as a top competency. As was noted above, these
differences may be due to the changing dynamics of higher education and increasing needs for accountability.

Another explanation for some of the difference may be that Waple (2006) studied entry-level professionals who had been working in student affairs for no more than five years post-graduate degree attainment, while Herdlein et al. (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of research related to competencies conducted with a variety of study populations including entry- and mid-level professionals, senior administrators, and faculty. It is likely that there would be some differences in perception and experience between these groups. In addition, Herdlein et al. (2013) noted that the reason for their more recent meta-analysis of the student affairs competency-related literature was to identify a consensus as to the important topic of professional competencies necessary to engage effectively in the work of student affairs. The publication of professional competencies by ACPA and NASPA (2015) further supports this focus. In the future, while research on competencies will continue to be important, the work that ACPA and NASPA have done to present competencies to both professionals and graduate students who aspire to do work in student affairs is an important and proactive step forward.

Overall, Waple (2006) found that entry-level professionals were adequately prepared, to a moderate to high degree, by their student affairs professional preparation programs and used the knowledge gained through these programs in their entry-level positions. However, the four areas noted previously that entry-level participants said they gained to a lower degree were also those areas that they said they used in their entry-level positions to a high degree (Waple, 2006). This discrepancy is one area that faculty and staff could address through curriculum adjustments or professional development opportunities for entry-level staff.
The number of competency-related articles in the literature supports the view that identifying professional competencies is important to the student affairs field. The development of ACPA/NASPA *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators* (2015) provides additional evidence of the importance of competencies in guiding the work of student affairs educators.

Despite this strong support for the application of competencies in student affairs work, another perspective about the over-application of the competencies is also worth noting. Eaton (2016) examined “the limitations and possibilities of the emerging competency-based movement in student affairs” (p. 573). Eaton’s (2016) discussion presents an examination of competencies within the frameworks of “complexity theory and postmodern educational theory” (p. 573). The cautious application of the competencies proposed by Eaton (2016) might avoid “privileging certain epistemological and ontological frameworks to the exclusion and detriment of others” (p. 576). By being intentional about applying the competencies such that individual ways of thinking and individual approaches to working are also considered, it may be possible to maximize the value of applying the competencies to student affairs training and practice. Eaton (2016) asserts that the application of these competencies to areas of student affairs, including preparation programs and student affairs practice, “should be critical, deliberative, engaging, and approached with an understanding of their potentially complexity-reducing impacts” (p. 588). In this way, student affairs educators and professionals can use the competencies to continue to move the field forward and to develop ways of addressing the increasingly complex higher education environment.
Functional Area Standards

The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) provides one final area related to competencies that is important in student affairs work. CAS has developed a Self-Assessment Guide for master’s-level student affairs professional preparation programs (2015). The purpose of this guide is to “translate functional area CAS standards and guidelines into tools for conducting self-study” (CAS, 2015, p. 6). As with other functional areas for which there are standards, the master’s-level student affairs professional preparation programs functional area includes the same common criteria, referred to as the “General Standards” (CAS, 2015, p. 6). These General Standards include the following: mission; program; organization and leadership; human resources; ethics; law, policy, and governance; diversity, equity, and access; internal and external relations; financial resources; technology; facilities and equipment; and, assessment (CAS, 2015).

Besides the General Standards including diversity, equity, and access, the self-assessment itself includes two sections that address diversity-related topics (CAS, 2015). Both the review of the Curriculum section and the review of the Equity and Access section reference diversity-related topics. The “Student Learning and Development Theory” (CAS, p. 11) criterion of the Curriculum section notes that in a review of the master’s preparation program in student affairs, one essential component is to assess to what degree there is “extensive examination of theoretical perspectives that describe students’ growth in the areas of intellectual, moral, ego, psychosocial, career, and spiritual development; racial, cultural, ethnic, gender, abilities, socioeconomic status, and sexual identity; the intersection of multiple identities; and learning styles throughout the late adolescent and adult lifespan” (p. 11). This element of the curriculum demonstrates the
importance of considering the range of identities and areas of difference that represent the students in the program and in the higher education environment and beyond. Students who examine the theoretical perspectives noted above through their coursework might be more knowledgeable about a range of topics related to diversity and social justice, if they do not also exhibit some degree of competency in those areas.

In the Equity and Access portion of the CAS review of the program, the standards note that “goals and objectives related to diversity, equity, and access” (CAS, 2015, p. 21) are one area that provides documentation of that portion of the program review. This is the other explicit example of where topics related to diversity and social justice are part of the CAS program review process, providing additional evidence that this is an important part of a master’s preparation program in student affairs.

The synergy between the ACPA/NASPA standards and the CAS standards demonstrates the close alignment between the academic preparation provided to future student affairs professionals and the professional competency needs of current professional educators. Further, the initial Joint Task Force on Professional Competencies and Standards, referenced in the ACPA/NASPA (2015) competencies document, analyzed the CAS standards as part of their process to create the initial Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners (ACPA/NASPA, 2010). This alignment between professional preparation programs and professionals doing student affairs work demonstrates a professional commitment to alignment by those involved in both sets of competencies and standards.
Diversity Topics in Student Affairs Graduate Preparation Programs

The literature on graduate preparation programs in student affairs or higher education, particularly diversity-related literature, includes research on the perspectives of student affairs master’s students on diversity issues in their graduate education (McEwen & Roper, 1994; Talbot, 1996), the diversity requirements in these programs (Flowers, 2003), diversity experiences in the curriculum (Gayles & Kelly, 2007), the internationalization of graduate preparation programs (Schulz, Lee, Cantwell, McClellan, & Woodard, 2007), strategies for building inclusive pedagogy (Linder et al., 2015), addressing the perceived skill deficiencies in these programs (Cooper, Mitchell, Eckerle, & Martin, 2016), diversity interactions on alternative breaks (Niehaus, 2016), and increasing competencies through a graduate intern exchange (Blanchard, Broido, Stygles, & Rojas, 2016). Each of these areas of focus provides a perspective on some aspect of diversity in student affairs graduate preparation programs.

Diversity-Related Topics in the Graduate Program and Curriculum

McEwen and Roper (1994) explored the “perceptions of graduate students in student affairs regarding their interracial experiences, knowledge, and skills” (p. 81). Most participants noted some experience with race, with 25% of respondents noting extensive experience (McEwen & Roper, 1994). Further, participants reported the most knowledge in “general areas related to race, such as demographics, racism, and cultures of different racial and ethnic groups” (McEwen & Roper, 1994, p. 85). The authors contended that students would reasonably have some knowledge about these general areas—that are regularly discussed in the media and more likely gained through experience and interaction—although the depth or complexity of students’ knowledge on these topics was not known (McEwen & Roper, 1994, p. 83). Also, although
McEwen and Roper (1994) found that most students were comfortable with their skill level in this area, a large number of students “did not feel capable of designing programs sensitive to issues of race or of teaching others about issues of race” (p. 85). These findings demonstrate the many opportunities for further investigating the perceptions of students in graduate preparation programs for student affairs professional educators. If students report they have some knowledge and seem comfortable with their skills, it will be important to learn what students need to be able to prepare programming for the students with whom they work, both now and in the future. Work by Gayles and Kelly (2007), presented in more detail below, discussed the challenge that students have in applying their diversity-related learning, further confirming the need for additional investigation into this topic.

Talbot (1996) also studied the perspectives of master’s students’ graduate education related to diversity issues. Her findings indicated that “there were no clearcut explanations for how diversity was addressed in the student affairs graduate program” (Talbot, 1996, p. 176). However, Talbot (1996) also noted that students who were in programs where there was a more diverse student body felt more comfortable with and knowledgeable about diversity than those students who were in programs with a less diverse student body. General knowledge level and comfort with race and diversity issues in studies by both Talbot (1996) and McEwen and Roper (1994) seem to support that these issues, to some degree, are influenced by experience with diverse populations and through exposure to the topic in the media. It is still less clear which aspects of diversity and race that students learn about explicitly through their graduate preparation work. It may be that it is too difficult to distinguish between what students learn through experience and what they learn through coursework.
Flowers (2003) surveyed 53 directors and administrators of student affairs graduate preparation programs to determine to what degree those programs included a diversity requirement in the curriculum. Of those who responded, 74% included diversity courses in the curriculum, with 25% of those programs having had the requirement in place for 10 or more years and 75% having had the requirement for five or more years (Flowers, 2003, p. 77). The time between Talbot’s 1996 study of students in graduate preparation programs in student affairs and Flowers’s 2003 study of administrators in student affairs graduate preparation programs represents what appears to be a shift in content focus. The lack of clarity described by students in the Talbot (1996) study seems markedly different from the percentage of programs that included a diversity component in the curriculum in the Flowers (2003) study.

Another study, published after Talbot’s initial work 1996, investigated areas that were perceived skill deficiencies in student affairs graduate preparation programs. Twenty years after Talbot (1996) found a lack of clarity as to how diversity-related information was conveyed through the curriculum, a literature review conducted by Cooper et al. (2016) noted that diversity and social justice training were not listed as “perceived skill deficiencies” (p. 107) in graduate preparation programs. It is not possible to determine whether this finding resulted from any increased focus on diversity. However, it is noteworthy that diversity-related topics were not included in the list of deficiencies (Cooper et al., 2016).

Gayles and Kelly (2007) noted that even though they asserted that most student affairs preparation programs include a diversity course in the curriculum, individual perceptions of these courses are not known, nor is it known how well students can apply their diversity-related learning in practice. Participants noted that they had often learned about topics related to
diversity in their out-of-classroom experiences (Gayles & Kelly, 2007). Because of this out-of-classroom element, these students “relied on their personal experiences to enhance their understanding of and effectiveness in working with diverse populations” (Gayles & Kelly, 2007, p. 198). While it is important to know that students learn about diversity issues outside the classroom, it is also important to understand more about where, specifically, students learn about these topics so as to have a comprehensive view of their diversity-related learning. The next section addresses the variety of out-of-classroom learning opportunities that research demonstrates influence students’ diversity-related experiences during their graduate preparation program.

**How and Where Students Learn About Diversity-Related Topics**

The literature on diversity and social justice topics in student affairs graduate preparation programs addresses several areas through which students learn about the topics, including through their coursework (Gayles & Kelly, 2007; Linder et al., 2015; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008), through supervised practice such as graduate assistantships and internships (Blanchard et al., 2016; Gayles & Kelly, 2007; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008), through alternative breaks (Niehaus, 2016), and through their lived experiences (Gayles & Kelly, 2007; Hubain, Allen, Harris, & Linder, 2016).

**Coursework/curriculum.** Gayles and Kelly (2007) found that while some participants noted that having a required course on diversity showed the value of such a course to the program, other study participants “intentionally sought out multicultural courses in other programs and took these courses as electives. Yet for some participants, diversity issues were infused in other required courses, particularly student development theory and the American
college student” (Gayles & Kelly, 2007, p. 198). Still, they also noted, “one course on diversity was not enough” (p. 199). Therefore, while students learned about diversity-related topics through their coursework—either in a single course or in multiple courses—some students were proactive in increasing their exposure to the topic through other venues.

Linder et al. (2015) investigated “the racialized experiences of 29 students of color in higher education and student affairs graduate programs...[and] the strategies they recommend[ed] for inclusion” (p. 178). Linder et al. (2015) surmised that students might have experienced microaggressions in their classes and feelings of distance from faculty because of some faculty members’ lack of cultural competency. Whether or not faculty intend to create this environment or not, it may be that students still experience this through their graduate preparation programs. Further, students expect that faculty will intervene in situations where the language in class discussions includes racial microaggressions, thereby taking the burden off students of color to serve as racial experts (Linder et al., 2015). This type of faculty intervention demonstrates their commitment to providing an effective environment for learning. In addition, through creating a space where students are able to share their perspectives openly, other students present can learn from them (Linder et al., 2015, p. 191). Further, these more in-depth conversations about students’ experiences with racial identity development contribute to deeper-level learning for all students (Linder et al., 2015). By being willing and able to facilitate deeper dialogue around issues of race, faculty have the opportunity to help prepare student affairs administrators to effectively serve a diverse higher education student population.

Beyond facilitating an environment in which students can share about their experiences, another recommendation offered by Linder et al. (2015) is to help “students become aware of the
ways in which their identities have influenced their experiences, helping to make the subconscious conscious” (p. 191). Including classroom activities that help all students—regardless of their racial identity—reflect on their own process of development related to their racial identity may accomplish this outcome (Linder et al., 2015). Through such activities, the expectation is that all students intentionally reflect on their own racial identities and may discover similarities with other students who seem to have had very different experiences (Linder et al., 2015). Ideally, this individualized reflection on racial identity, coupled with sharing those reflections with classmates, could help create an environment of greater understanding about the influences on students’ identities.

The work of Bondi, Heasley, Kolko, and Young (2003) provided another approach to facilitating a supportive and effective learning environment in which students can learn about diversity-related topics. Their findings noted differences between males and females related to racial attitudes and social ease, for example, and between those who had previous contacts with people of color (Bondi, et al., 2003). In particular, Bondi et al. (2003) noted, “Men harbor more negative racial attitudes than women and are more likely to desensitize the effects and causes of discrimination” (p. 89). They also noted that men in their sample “report being more uncomfortable than women in social interactions with people of color” (Bondi et al., p. 89).

Although Bondi et al. (2003) studied undergraduate students, there may still be applicability to a student affairs graduate preparation program.

Besides the gender differences noted above, Bondi et al. (2003) also reported differences between those who had come from environments of either a predominantly white high school or one that was more multicultural in nature. Specifically, Bondi et al. (2003) found that
White students who have experienced greater contact with people of color due to the racial makeup of their previous environments are more likely to behave desirably toward those of another race by not conveying negative attitudes or behaviors toward people of color. (p. 91)

The implications of these findings—that gender differences exist in racial attitudes and social ease and that differences also exist between students who come from a predominantly white high school background and those who come from a more racially diverse environment—may continue to influence students at the graduate level. Thus, faculty in student affairs preparation programs and student affairs administrators both need to be mindful of creating intentional learning and development environments and activities that account for these possible differences in their own environments so that all students may benefit from those activities.

**Supervised practice through assistantships and internships.** Besides learning about diversity and social justice issues through formal coursework, students also report learning about these topics through supervised practice in graduate assistantships and internships. According to Talbot (1996), “the place where many students felt they received the most diversity education or training was in their assistantships, especially those who worked in residence life” (p. 174). Gayles and Kelly (2007) also found that assistantships, as well as internships, offered “the most opportunity to work effectively with individuals from many cultural backgrounds. . .” (p. 202). Students who learn about theory in the classroom may or may not have the opportunity to apply that theory to a real-world setting right away. In addition, those real-world settings may be operating using other theories. Gayles and Kelly (2007) suggested that faculty and staff could facilitate graduate student learning by identifying and creating spaces for applied learning. In this way, students can “experience a seamless link between theory and practice in multicultural settings” (Gayles & Kelly, 2007, p. 205). A strong collaboration between faculty and
administrators can help facilitate the out-of-classroom learning experience so students know how theory applies in a work setting, for example.

Another out-of-classroom opportunity for students to learn more about diversity-related issues was through a Graduate Intern Exchange Program between two schools. Students at “Florida International University, a large, urban, Hispanic-serving institution, and Bowling Green State University, a rural, residential, Midwestern university” (Blanchard et al., 2016, p. 190) had an opportunity to learn about an institution much different from their own. Overall, participants gave positive responses regarding their growth in addressing diverse populations (Blanchard et al., 2016). This is a reasonable finding given the differences in the types of home-campus environments of the students in this program.

Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) discussed the value of such supervised practice for participants, who noted that their “assistantships, practicum placements, and internships were essential components in their preparation for full-time positions…” (p. 329). Although students did not explicitly tie this view to their experiences with diversity-related content, there may be more broad applicability as part of a student affairs graduate preparation program, including applicability with topics related to diversity.

Alternative breaks. Much like the findings in the internship exchange program (Blanchard et al., 2016), students who participated in an alternative break program during their graduate studies supported the diversity-related learning that can occur through these activities (Niehaus, 2016). Niehaus (2016) noted that even if positive outcomes do not result from experiences in diverse cultures, they do provide the opportunity to learn. In particular, research by Niehaus (2016) supported previous studies that found the value of students’ reflective
activities with each other as being predictive in what students participating in an alternative break experience learned from one another.

Also associated with a positive learning environment was community engagement in that service project and the value of the service project itself (Niehaus, 2016). These findings may have implications for other out-of-classroom, diversity-related experiences. The intentionality of providing a positive learning experience—where students have the opportunity to engage with a group, or department, and be confident that the work they are doing is making a difference—could result in stronger diversity-related learning outcomes for students.

**Lived experience.** A final aspect that could affect where and how students learn about diversity, social justice, and inclusion is through their lived experience. Hubain et al. (2016) noted that “many ... microaggressions happen in learning spaces outside of classrooms, including study groups, and assistantship sites” (p. 958). In addition, as noted above, Gayles and Kelly (2007) asserted that students learned about diversity issues during their out-of-classroom experiences and relied on those experiences to help them work more effectively with a variety of populations. Therefore, regardless of what students’ classroom experience is in learning about diversity-related issues, or in becoming multiculturally competent, students still have other encounters that influence their diversity-related learning. Whether or not these are positive or negative learning experiences, or somewhere in between, they are learning experiences nonetheless.

When it comes to how graduate students apply what they have learned about diversity-related issues, students have reported challenges. Gayles and Kelly (2007) found that “participants overwhelmingly pointed out the difficulty they experienced applying what they
learned in diversity courses to practice” (Gayles & Kelly, 2007, p. 200). Students said that they needed guidance in how to translate the knowledge they were gaining and their new awareness into being more effective in their practice (Gayles & Kelly, 2007, p. 201). Given the complexity of addressing diversity-related topics and the range of topics included, it is not surprising that students seem eager to improve their skills in applying the knowledge they have learned about topics associated with diversity to their practice.

**Gaps in the Literature**

While the literature related to diversity in graduate-level graduate preparation programs in student affairs includes important information about current programs and for improving programs in the future, there is little detail about how graduate students make meaning of their prior significant personal and professional development experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. The literature includes information about general knowledge and comfort level with diversity-related issues (McEwen & Roper, 1994; Talbot, 1996), the diversity requirements in graduate preparation programs (Flowers, 2003), students’ experiences with the diversity-related content in their master’s program curriculum (Gayles & Kelly, 2007), and recommendations for building inclusive pedagogy from a study of students of color in graduate student affairs preparation programs (Linder et al., 2015).

While this research informs the current study, student affairs professionals and preparation program faculty need a deeper understanding of the personal and professional development-related experiences of students in graduate preparation programs related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. Faculty and staff who understand students’ experiences can help identify knowledge gaps or experiences necessary to develop the cultural competency
of their students. Therefore, in this study I investigated how adult and higher education graduate students make meaning of their prior significant personal and professional development-related experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. Learning more about how students define the phrases “significant personal and professional development-related” and “related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion” also provided guidance and recommendations about how to enhance students’ experiences and education in their graduate programs.

The benefits of strengthening diversity-related education as part of a student affairs graduate preparation program go beyond the program itself. For example, Linder et al. (2015) assert that “When graduate students experience racially inclusive practices in their HESA [Higher Education and Student Affairs] graduate programs, they are likely to continue those practices in their student affairs work” (p. 178). If this is the case, learning more about students’ experiences related to their graduate school coursework, and adding to the knowledge base about these experiences, could positively influence the experience of students in colleges and universities for generations to come.

Theoretical Framework

Graduate students in an adult and higher education or student affairs preparation graduate program benefit from knowing more about topics related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. As individuals who will be working in higher education, understanding more about these topics during graduate school can help prepare them for student affairs work, where social justice and inclusion have been identified as an important competency (ACPA/NASPA, 2015). Exploring how graduate students learn about and make meaning from their personal and professional development experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion involves
investigating students’ knowledge and beliefs, as well as how they see themselves within this learning context. In addition, how students interact with others regarding their learning and meaning making related to these topics adds to the investigation. Students’ knowledge and beliefs about diversity, social justice, and inclusion, their understandings of themselves related to these topics, as well as their interactions with others about diversity-related topics all influence their practice. Thus, a theoretical framework that is useful to explore students’ understandings of these topics in this study is self-authorship.

Self-authorship is defined as “the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity, and social relationships” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269). Baxter Magolda’s (2009) work in self-authorship developed from earlier work by Kegan that described meaning making as more holistic and related to “focusing on the core activity of how we make meaning rather than on the particular meanings we make” (p. 626). Kegan (1994) first described a “complex system for organizing experience” (p. 185) that includes a variety of elements that make up the whole.

This new whole is an ideology, and internal identity, a self-authorship that can coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and intrapersonal states. It is no longer authored by them, it authors them and thereby achieves a personal authority. (Kegan, 1994, p. 185; italics in original)

The “personal authority” that results from authoring oneself includes a number of phases, according to Baxter Magolda (2009a). The first phase is “following external formulas” (p. 628), the next phase is crossroads, and the final phase is self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). Each phase includes elements that address individuals’ perspective on knowledge and how they know what they know, on identity and who they believe that they are, and on relationships and how they interact with others (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Each of these phases is discussed next,
along with additional information related to how ethnic identity may influence the elements of the phases.

*Following formulas* describes a phase in which individuals who carry their “transitional knowing assumptions into their early twenties … followed ‘formulas’ they obtained from external sources to make their way in the world” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 71). During this phase, immediately post college for many participants in Baxter Magolda’s (2001) study, when participants were confronted with uncertainty, they relied on authority to help them. They followed the rules, the authority, the “formula” for how to address their challenges.

A second phase that individuals generally move into after the following formulas phase is *crossroads* (Baxter Magolda, 2001). During crossroads, individuals are between following the formulas of others and fully knowing what their own beliefs are outside of those of the authorities. When faced with a conflict or dilemma to an initially believed formula, individuals in crossroads are discovering that “external formulas did not produce the expected results….or [the formulas] lead to crisis…..or left them feeling unfulfilled” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 93). Within this context, individuals began a process of discovering their own ways of knowing and belief systems. Baxter Magolda (2001) notes that “The process of developing internal sources of meaning making—or voice—was most often a struggle in light of concern regarding others’ expectations and how one’s internal voice would affect one’s relations with others” (pp. 93-94). When individuals are identifying for themselves their own beliefs, those potential changes in beliefs could be in conflict with their perceptions of the expectations of others. It might also influence how others see them, potentially creating additional interpersonal conflict. “The crossroads was a turning point that called for letting go of external control and beginning to
replace it with one’s internal voice” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 94). While this process may take some time, it was necessary to address the conflicts experienced with individuals who are questioning authorities.

The next phase in self-authorship is “becoming the author of one’s life” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 119). During this phase, individuals begin to have stronger internal voices, while external influences are less prominent: “The internal voice, or self … [becomes] the coordinator and mediator of external influence” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 119). As individuals negotiate this phase, they are “reshaping what they believed (epistemology), their sense of self (intrapersonal), and their relationships with others (interpersonal)” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 119). Each of these elements can change as individuals gain a firmer sense of what they know, who they are, and how they want to interact with others.

The final phase of self-authorship is to achieve a strong internal foundation (Baxter Magolda, 2001). During this phase, individuals have solidified their internal selves, their belief systems, and their approach to relationships. “Becoming comfortable with the internal voice yielded a security to explore others’ perspectives; complex ways of knowing meant ambiguity and uncertainty would always be commonplace” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 155). By coming to a place of confidence in their own beliefs, individuals can be secure in trying to understand the viewpoints of others.

Another way of framing a final phase in self-authorship is to describe it as building a self-authored system (Baxter Magolda, 2008). A somewhat more nuanced approach than simply focusing on the internal foundation component of this system encompasses three specific elements of building a self-authored system. This approach includes one element that focuses on
the internal foundation and describes individuals as exhibiting the element of “Trusting the Internal Voice” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 279; italics in original). Individuals demonstrating this element recognize “that reality, or what happened in the world and their lives, was beyond their control, but their reactions to what happened was within their control” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 279). When they trust their internal voice, they are less concerned by views and voices that are different from their own perspectives.

The second element of building a self-authored system is “Building an Internal Foundation” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 280; italics in original). As discussed above, when individuals are secure with their inner voice, they can strengthen the foundation of their beliefs and actions. Exhibiting this element of a self-authored system, individuals “refine their personal, internal authority in determining their beliefs, identity, and relationships” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 280). This sense of security in what they believe, who they are, and how they interact with others provides the foundation they need to navigate life.

The third and final element of building a self-authored system is “Securing Internal Commitments” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 280; italics in original). In this element, individuals both understood and lived out their commitments to what they believe, who they are, and how they interact with others (Baxter Magolda, 2008). They experienced a sense of certainty and freedom without being afraid of what was out of their control, but rather “trusted that they could make the most of what they could control” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, 281). Further, “They were open to learning about and developing new parts of their self-authored systems, often recognizing context in which they needed to refine or develop some aspect of themselves”
(Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 281). By securing what they were committed to internally, they had the ability to respond to the challenges and opportunities of life.

Another aspect of self-authorship as a theoretical framework describes the movement between phases as inconsistent as well as the influence of social contextual factors. Baxter Magolda (2009b) noted, “…the path toward self-authorship is not a steady march forward. Instead, it could be described as two steps forward and one step back or, at times, one step forward and two steps back” (p. 322). In addition, “personal characteristics and environmental context both mediate the evolution of self-authorship” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 273). Further, “socialization based on their gender, sexual orientation, faith orientation, race, or ethnicity predisposed participants to seek particular experiences” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 282). The development of self-authorship, mediated by contextual factors, and experiences influenced by social contextual elements, includes multiple elements of the lives of individuals. Given the comprehensive and holistic nature of the theory, influencing how individuals know, how they identify, and how they interact with others, the forward and backward movement helps explain the time it takes for individuals to achieve self-authorship in all aspects of their lives.

As a theoretical framework, the consideration of social contextual factors within self-authorship strengthens the value of applying this framework to the current study of students’ experiences with diversity, social justice, and inclusion. Various identity factors may influence the movement toward self-authorship of individuals. For example, “Research evidence suggests that adults who experience oppression and marginalization develop self-authorship prior to or during their 20s” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 271). In particular, as one example:

Students at the Crossroads began to recognize negative stereotypes as racist and, as a result, made deliberate choices about how these negative images would influence how
they saw themselves as Latinos/as. As part of this meaning-making experience, these students understood that there are both positive and negative choices in the development of one’s own cultural identity. (Torres & Hernandez, 2007, pp. 564-565)

These aspects of identity as they influence the road to self-autorship will be addressed further in the discussion section.

Summary

This chapter provided a review of the historical context of diversity in higher education, including student affairs. It included a discussion of the foundations of student affairs, the historical changes in higher education, and diversity in higher education and student affairs. In addition, I provided a review the role of student affairs competencies, diversity topics in student affairs graduate preparation programs, and diversity-related topics in the program and curriculum. I discussed how and where students learn about diversity (coursework/curriculum, supervised practice, graduate assistantships and internships), alternative breaks, and lived experience. I also discussed the recommendations from the research as well as the gaps in the current literature and how the current study addressed some of those gaps. Finally, I also provided research about self-authorship, the theoretical framework for this study.

In the next chapter I review the methodology of the study, including the purpose of the research, research questions, and research design. In addition, I address the theoretical perspective and conceptual framework, including the role of reflection in learning and the value of arts-based activities in facilitating reflection. Further, I describe the methods of data collection including participant demographics, the in-class reflective activity, and researcher journal. Finally, I discuss the methods of data analysis, narrative structure and representation of the data, goodness of the study, and ethical issues and considerations of the study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative research study, I used a constructivist theoretical perspective and an interpretivist approach that uncovered detailed information about participants’ experiences with diversity, social justice, and inclusion. After I present the purpose of the research, the research questions, and the research design, I discuss how the use of an arts-facilitated reflective activity assisted participants’ sharing about their experiences with personal and professional development related to diversity. The conceptual framework for this study included the role of reflection in learning and the value of arts-based activities in facilitating reflection. Each of these helped frame my assumption that reflective art-making activities uncover richer descriptions of participants’ meaning-making experiences related to professional development focused on diversity. The methods of data collection included using the student data information system to identify participant demographics, the in-class reflective activity with follow-up interviews for some participants, and my researcher journal. Finally, I discuss the methods of data analysis, narrative structure, and representation of the data, goodness of the study, and ethical issues and considerations of the study.

Research Purpose

There is a need to continue to develop competent graduate students and future professionals skilled at facilitating dialogue about diversity- and social justice-related issues such as race, sexual and gender identity, and privilege and power. Understanding more about how these individuals have learned about and made meaning from diversity-related topics can provide
administrators and faculty with some understanding about how to further develop graduate student competencies in facilitating effective diversity-related personal and professional development, for themselves and others. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the diversity-related personal and professional development experiences of graduate students in an adult and higher education program. Participants defined their own diversity-, social justice-, and inclusion-related personal and professional development experiences and included activities such as taking a class, conducting or participating in a workshop, reading a book, or some other formal training experience. They also included more personal, informal experiences such as having a conversation with a family member or colleague that a participant described as diversity-related.

Research Question

The overarching research question, along with four sub-questions, included the following: How do graduate students learn about and make meaning from their experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion?

(1) How do participants describe a significant experience related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion?

(2) How do participants believe that these experiences regarding diversity, social justice, and inclusion influence their work as student affairs educators?

(3) How do participants describe an emerging professional identity as an inclusive practitioner because of these experiences?

(4) How do participants describe the influence of arts-based research practices on their reflection about topics related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion?
These questions addressed how graduate students learn about and make meaning from diversity-related issues in personal experiences and in informal and formal professional development opportunities. The study provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences and share how they have made sense of them. The use of art media such as paper and crayons or clay was used to enhance their reflection and provide the opportunity for them to uncover additional detail and context related to their prior diversity-related personal and professional development experiences.

Research Design

In this qualitative study, I investigated graduate student experiences with diversity-, social justice-, and inclusion-related personal and professional development. Through this investigation, I uncovered detailed information about these students’ experiences. Using a “qualitative research approach demands that the world be examined with the assumption that nothing is trivial, [and] that everything has the potential of being a clue that might unlock a more comprehensive understanding of what is being studied” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 5). Using a reflective art-making activity (Barone & Eisner, 2012), coupled with a semi-structured interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), can uncover richer descriptions of participants’ meaning-making experiences related to diversity-, social justice-, and inclusion-related personal and professional development. Using this approach, I was able to identify significantly more information about these students’ experiences than I had prior to the study. In addition, by sharing the results of the study through my dissertation, others in the field will have access to the findings which may, in turn, help inform them about some of the experiences that graduate students at their own institutions may have had related to diversity experiences and education. Ultimately, this
research can provide information for the field to help further the dialogue about creating stronger
diversity-related educational experiences.

Through understanding more about individual students’ experiences with personal and
professional development related to diversity topics, I now have a deeper understanding of how
they make meaning out of those experiences. The epistemological approach most aligned with
understanding how individuals make meaning out of their experiences is constructivism. Crotty
(1998) noted that the term constructivism should be reserved “for epistemological considerations
focusing exclusively on ‘the meaning-making activity of the individual mind’” (p. 58). Crotty
(1998) further explained that since “constructivism . . . points up the unique experience of each
of us. . . [and]. . . suggests that each one’s way of making sense of the world is as valid and
worthy of respect as any other, [the approach tends] to scotch any hint of a critical spirit” (p. 58).
With this perspective, the information generated through the research helps build a broader
picture of students’ experiences without discounting any of their interpretations because they are
different from my own or because they seem difficult to believe or understand.

Theoretical Perspective

The specific form of constructivism used in this study is an interpretivist approach.
Through an arts-facilitated reflective activity, participants shared about their personal
experiences and professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and
inclusion, along with the meanings that they made—or constructed—related to those
experiences. An interpretivist approach “. . . looks for culturally derived and historically
situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67; italics in original). This
“uncritical exploration of cultural meaning” (Crotty, p. 60) helps uncover and describe elements
of the experiences of individuals, without judging those experiences or the individual interpretations of them. Interpretivist traditions “share the goal of understanding human ideas, actions, and interactions in specific contexts or in terms of the wider culture” (Glesne, 2011, p. 8).

Because the purpose of the study was to investigate how student affairs graduate students make meaning of their prior significant experiences or professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion, an interpretive approach to constructivism helped guide the study so that I would be able to understand more deeply how participants made meaning of their diversity-, social justice- and inclusion-related experiences.

Methodology

The methodology guiding this study was arts-based research. As a methodology, arts-based research aims to utilize methods sometimes more often used by artists in their craft than by researchers. The use of various art media (e.g., drawing, painting, poetry, performance), in this study crayons, colored pencils on paper and/or modeling clay, when employed for research purposes, helped facilitate reflection for participants related to specific reflective prompts. Ultimately, the participant-generated artifacts, as well as their follow-up interviews, helped illuminate the meaning they made out of their experiences related to the topic of the study. Barone and Eisner (2012) asserted that arts-based research is “an effort to extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable” (p. 1). Through this approach, I was able to uncover deep and rich meanings that participants ascribed to their diversity-, social justice-, and inclusion-related personal and professional development experiences. Greenwood (2012) noted that “The use of arts-based
approaches to research . . . has grown from the desire of researchers to elicit, process and share understandings and experiences that are not readily or fully accessed through more traditional fieldwork approaches” (p. 2). By asking participants to engage in an art-making activity, they were able to uncover within themselves a different way of telling the stories of their diversity-, social justice-, and inclusion-related experiences.

This arts-based approach offered an opportunity to reveal data and perspectives unavailable through a traditional data collection strategy. Further, arts-based educational research, according to Barone and Eisner (1997), is not intended to identify certainty, but rather to enhance perspectives. In this way, an arts-based methodology provided additional opportunities for participants to share about the meanings they have made and are making from their experiences. Specific data obtained through this study are discussed in further detail in Chapter 4.

Because a constructivist framework involves individuals making meaning out of their experiences, using arts-based research as a methodology, as well as a method, allowed for study participants to more fully express those experiences. Besides an enhanced perspective, it was also possible to see relationships between ideas using an arts-based approach, as discussed by Barone and Eisner (2012). Accordingly, “our attention is called to other possibilities beyond those that exist for talking about or writing about the . . . issue at hand” (Barone & Eisner, pp. 159-160). With the opportunity to surface a more diverse collection of reflections, using an arts-based research methodology had the potential to help participants construct a more meaningful reflection on and about their experience.

Arts-based strategies have been used to facilitate reflection in a variety of settings, including in a capstone business course (Ryman, Porter, & Galbraith, 2009) and with student
nutrition interns (Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, & Kasl, 2006). Each of these will be described in more detail below.

Conceptual Framework

This study was informed by two major components that make up the conceptual frameworks: the role of reflection in learning and the value of arts-based activities in facilitating reflection. My working assumption in approaching this topic was that reflective art-making activities uncover richer descriptions of participants’ meaning-making experiences related to professional development focused on diversity. The research noted below will help frame this assumption.

The Role of Reflection in Learning

Reflection is crucial given the need to develop proficiency in managing new information and technology that is abundant in a fast-paced world. As a general strategy, reflection has been implemented in a range of learning environments, from educational leaders, pastoral and nursing training, to computer training with non-traditional university students (Day, 2000; Jones, 2006; Langer, 2002; Thorpe, 2004). Day (2000) stated the use of reflection and reflective practice by educational leaders is an important role for “effective leadership in successful schools” (p. 113). According to Day, who studied effective leadership in various educational settings in England, principals “must engage in reflective practices and revisit and review their own commitments, qualities and skills if they are to encourage others to do so” (p. 116). A group of stakeholders who were interviewed for Day’s study identified important characteristics in principal effectiveness which include using reflection to focus on what schools need and where they are going from a holistic perspective (Day, 2000). In this way, educational leaders who use
reflection are learning about best practices as they work to lead their institutions. It may be that other educational leaders, such as student affairs professionals, could also benefit from enhanced reflective practice. As they encourage those with whom they work to reflect, they also could reflect on their own work to improve their practice.

Another example of reflection in learning is highlighted by Mountford (2005), who discussed a reflective technique used in an educational leadership doctoral program to promote reflection in the learning environment. Through a series of connection statements, students in the doctoral program were asked to “critically reflect on their own leadership practice within their own organizational setting” (Mountford, 2005, p. 221). In this way, students were able to reflect on the ways in which their coursework might have been influencing their professional practice and leadership (Mountford, 2005). Through this learning experience, students had an opportunity to experience deeper learning through their critical reflection and analysis of their own behaviors and practices. This reflective activity highlights the potential learning outcomes possible by an intentional opportunity to reflect on practice. As with Day’s (2000) research, Mountford’s (2005) may also be applicable outside of the specific context within which it was studied and is worth considering with student affairs professionals. Students in an educational leadership doctoral program likely have some similar characteristics to those working in student affairs, so the applicability of this technique in a student affairs professional development environment could be an important application.

Both Day (2000) and Mountford (2005) offered examples of the implementation of specific strategies to enhance reflection for the purposes of enhancing learning. These are representative studies of the potential value of reflection as a strategy to uncover learning and to bring to mind deeper understanding of coursework or practice. For this study, I anticipated that
incorporating a reflective activity would uncover additional meanings or understandings that participants may have of their diversity-, social justice-, and inclusion-related personal and professional development opportunities.

The Value of Arts-Based Activities in Facilitating Reflection

When looking at the literature related to arts-based activities facilitating reflection and learning, one sees a number of terms that are used, including an “arts-integrated approach” and “arts-based learning.” Regardless of the specific term used, the conceptual basis operating in each of these studies is the idea that the arts—in forms ranging from visual arts to performing arts to other forms of creative expression—have been used inside and outside the classroom as tools to promote the growth and development of those involved.

Before reviewing examples of the use of arts-based activities for facilitating reflection, it is important to provide a brief discussion of the activity of reflection, itself. Reflection “involves reliving experiences and emotions in order to evaluate and judge what occurred, and why, and to seek knowledge from the experience” (Cruickshank, 1996, p. 127). This process of reflection allows individuals to make sense of their experiences. Besides simply thinking about those experiences and emotions, additional techniques are sometimes used to facilitate the reflective process. This study implemented an arts-based approach. Participants generated artifacts in response to specific prompts aimed to elicit meaning and reflection. By asking participants to express those reflections via a specific art medium, they had the opportunity to reflect more deeply than they may have been able to by using only words. Various “forms of representation give us access to expressive possibilities that would not be possible without their presence” (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 5). Thus, by using additional means of representing experiences and
feelings, the participants in this study may have been able to express more fully their thoughts and feelings about their experiences.

Ryman, Porter, and Galbraith (2009) provided one example of an arts-based reflective activity that examined the impact of an arts-integrated approach in a capstone business school course. The authors studied this approach, in part, because they “believe that the symbolic creation and interpretation of art encourages creativity, deeper insight, and a more critical thinking process, particularly with a non-art oriented audience such as business students” (Ryman et al., 2009, p. 6). As part of the course, students were asked to create a final project using a variety of art media to demonstrate a concept of management they selected from a list provided. According to Ryman et al. (2009), “These concepts included topics such as organizational change, leadership, strategic management process, organizational culture, competitive dynamics, etc.” (p. 9). Students selected an art format from areas such as “visual art (paintings, sketches, sculpture), music and performance art (drama, dance)” (Ryman et al., p. 9). These various arts-based strategies offered students a wide range of approaches by which to convey their course concept as a metaphor embodied in a medium.

One student described his experience of creating a metaphor of a business concept by using an artistic medium as forcing him “‘to think about management in a different light’” (Ryman et al., 2009, p. 19). Once this student was able to think of how he would depict his business concept, he described his experience like this:

Once I actually had something tangible to look at from different angles, it all fell into place. Suddenly, I had a rush of ideas and concepts I had learned over the semester and could not write them down quickly enough. From that point on the project became fun. I enjoyed analyzing my artwork and turning it into management in its physical form. (Ryman, et al., p. 19)
This student’s experience demonstrated that his project helped him see his concept in a different way, perhaps more broadly or deeply, because he could step back and view the concept visually. He could see and think about how those physical elements he had created represented the course concepts. This example of arts-based educational research demonstrates how the creative depiction of a coursework idea created a richer understanding for the student of his course experience. The current study used this strategy to facilitate participants’ deeper reflection related to their significant personal and professional development experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion.

Cruickshank (1996) provided a second example of an arts-integrated approach that investigated how drawing demonstrated students’ grasp of course content in a nursing program. Students who participated in clinical learning experiences also participated in group reflective activities. As part of one such larger-group reflection, students were divided into smaller groups and assigned a task of working together to “draw their learning” (Cruickshank, 1996, p. 128). Each group of students was given an hour to work on demonstrating their learning by using supplies of colored markers and a large piece of cardboard, after which they presented their poster to the class and described what they had drawn. Groups depicted images of an operating theater, an elderly patient, and other staff in the clinical setting. Supervisors in the clinical environment were able to informally assess what students were gaining from their clinical experience through viewing the students’ posters and listening to their discussions of their experiences as students.

According to Cruickshank (1996), through the reflective activity, “students were able to describe elements of empirical knowledge and applied science to their role in administration of medicine” (p. 128). One specific area noted by Cruickshank (1996) that students discussed as
part of the reflective activity was the importance of communication. In particular, “students recognized the value of nurse-patient interaction and discussed how the development of social skills enabled them to become effective communicators” (Cruickshank, 1996, p. 128). While Cruickshank is offered as an example of how an arts-integrated approach can help students learn course content—and help instructors assess whether or not students have done so—it is also related to learning through the collective activity of developing a drawing and sharing it with a class. This experience is similar to Ryman et al.’s (2009) research regarding the deeper thinking and reflecting related to course content.

Davis-Manigaulte et al. (2006) provide a final example of the arts facilitating reflection in their study that included a facilitated reflection with a group of student nutrition interns. The goal of the project was for students to “strengthen their critical reflection skills in order to improve their understanding of the connections between field placement experiences and what they were learning in the classroom” (Davis-Manigaulte et al., 2006, p. 28). Students assembled periodically with peers and a facilitator to reflect on their internship experiences. Student reflection was facilitated through a guided visualization. This was used to help them “all come down a notch” (Davis-Manigaulte et al., p. 29). Once the mood was set by settling down or “coming down,” students used “various art activities—drawing, making collages, and using clay—to help [them] with reflection” (p. 29). The authors contended that the use of artistic expression helped to facilitate the “surfacing of [their] underlying thinking” (Davis-Manigaulte et al., p. 29). With their deeper-level thoughts brought to the surface, students were able to use their new insights to “act in new ways” (Davis-Manigaulte et al., p. 29). In the current study, the use of a reflective art activity was designed to help elicit deeper reflections related to significant experiences with diversity, social justice, and inclusion.
In this study, I investigated how student affairs graduate students in a capstone course made meaning of their prior significant experiences or professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion by using a strategy similar to that which is reviewed above. Specifically, the strategy I used to investigate these experiences was to have participants use crayons or clay to create a visual expression of those experiences to help facilitate their reflection about their experiences and their sharing of those experiences with the class during the in-class activity and with me in a follow-up interview. In the process of creating an artifact on paper or with clay, they were asked to reflect on a significant experience related to diversity, social justice, or inclusion, and then share it with the class. In addition, they were asked to describe why they identified their experience as significant and how they had applied what they had learned through their experiences. Finally, they were asked to reflect on their experiences using the art supplies as part of their reflective activity. Additional details about the specific methods of data collection are described in more detail below.

Methods of Data Collection

The following section outlines the site and participant selection process as well as the data collection methods employed to answer the research questions. Specific methods of data collection include an in-class reflective activity that incorporated an arts-based strategy, individual interviews, and the researcher journal. Each of these is described in more detail below.

Site and Participant Selection

Participants in this study were graduate students enrolled in a higher education/student affairs preparation program. This purposeful sampling strategy was intended to result in a homogenous sample discussed by Patton (1990) with the goal of “describing some particular
subgroup in depth” (p. 173). I worked with the faculty instructors of two sections of a capstone course to align the data-collection process within the course needs. In addition to securing permission from the faculty members to identify possible participants, I also obtained authorization to complete the study from the Northern Illinois University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I completed the IRB application during fall 2016 in preparation for spring 2017 data collection. I secured informed consent from all participants for both the in-class activity and the follow-up activity (See Appendices A and B), and secured all data collected in a locked cabinet inside my personal residence, accessible only by me. I kept all identifying data collected confidential. I reported data using pseudonyms and altered characteristics of individual identities as needed to maintain participant confidentiality.

While practical considerations initially influenced my selection of my participant group, further investigation into the literature revealed that my study population of interest was also a population identified for other studies of related topics. I work in the same institution and am a doctoral student in the same program that was the site of my data collection. As noted, there is some support in the literature for investigating diversity-, social justice-, and inclusion-related experiences with this population. In particular, diversity issues have been identified as being important competencies for entry-level professionals in student affairs (Burkard et al., 2005) as well as student affairs professionals overall (ACPA/NASPA, 2010).

My research questions are related to understanding more about how graduate students in a higher education/student affairs preparation program have made meaning of their personal experiences or professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion, so the population noted above—as well as the topics addressed—are both aligned with these questions.
Participant Demographics

I collected participant data between February 7, 2017 and March 4, 2017. I collected data from a total of 17 participants in an in-class reflective activity and through follow-up interviews (Table 1). I discuss these methods of data collection in more detail in the next section. Eleven individuals participated in the first in-class arts-based reflective activity. As identified through the student data information system, 7 were female and four were male. Additionally, the race/ethnicity characteristics of the class included five White/Non-Hispanic students, three Hispanic or Latino/Latina students, two Asian students, and one Black or African American/Non-Hispanic student. Six individuals participated in the second in-class arts-based reflective activity. Of those, four were female and two were male. The race/ethnicity characteristics of the class included four White/Non-Hispanic students, one Hispanic or Latino/Latina student, and one Black or African/Non-Hispanic student.

Eight students participated in the post-class follow-up interviews. Of those, five were female and three were male. The race/ethnicity characteristics of the interview group included four White/Non-Hispanic students, three Hispanic or Latino/Latina students, and one Black or African American/Non-Hispanic student. The next section will discuss specific information about the in-class activity and the follow-up interviews.
Table 1

Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics as Identified through the Student Data Information System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Biological Sex</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Follow-Up Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anahí</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latino/Latina</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White/Non Hispanic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White/Non Hispanic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilana</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black or African American/Non Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White/Non Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White/Non Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White/Non Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marissa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White/Non Hispanic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White/Non Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black or African American/Non Hispanic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latino/Latina</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White/Non Hispanic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rena</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latino/Latino</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White/Non Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheldon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latino/Latino</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In-Class Reflective Activity

I collected information from participants during an in-class reflective activity that included a reflective art-making activity and through individual semi-structured interviews at another time after the activity (See Appendix C for activity description). Topics included how participants described their selected activity as significant as well as how they described those diversity-related learning experiences as influencing their professional practice or personal lives. By conducting the interviews, I was hoping to “[understand] the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9).

The topic of the initial in-class reflective activity was to explore participants’ experience with diversity-, social justice-, and inclusion-related personal experiences and professional development activities. The primary focus of the activity was to facilitate a reflective art-making activity, with specific reflective prompts, using select art supplies, where participants were asked to represent a part of their personal experiences or professional development activities related to diversity. For simplicity’s sake, and to provide some limits, I selected art materials with which I am personally familiar: paper/crayons and clay (or both, at the discretion of the participant). In addition, I have facilitated reflective activities using these materials in the past, though around a different topic area. While this approach to qualitative research has only recently been more widely adopted by qualitative researchers, according to Butler-Kisber (2010), it developed once qualitative research was more accepted:

as a legitimate form of research . . . [and researchers began experimenting] with artful forms and processes in their research. They wanted their work to be more embodied and capable of evoking intellectual, aesthetic and affective responses and to reach wider audiences and ignite social action and change. (p. 4)
The “specific, meaningful, and animated” (Patton, 2002, p. 388) feedback possible through the in-class reflective activity, coupled with a reflective art-making activity, was intended to uncover a much richer picture of the meaning that participants make from their diversity-related personal experiences and professional development activities.

As part of the activity, I gave participants the following reflective prompt, both verbally and on individual handouts: “Think about your prior experiences or professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion.” They were asked to identify something they would describe as significant and told that it could be a personal experience, a class experience, or something related to either formal or informal professional development (formal professional development may include a workshop, training, course, or some other formal program). Students were asked to use the materials provided to construct a visual representation about that experience. The purpose of this activity was not to create a masterful art piece, but rather to provide participants with an opportunity to reflect on how to communicate their learning experiences by using these specific media. I encouraged participants not to be too concerned about the appearance of their final product, but rather the process of reflecting on their experience. I then offered participants the opportunity to select specific media with which to complete the activity, for which they had 30 minutes.

During the activity, I was nearby taking notes on my observations and reflections, while helping to maintain a relaxed environment within which participants could reflect on the prompt and express their ideas. Also, after the participants had finished their assignment, we gathered in a circle and I asked for volunteers to share with the class the experience upon which they reflected for the activity, with as much detail as they were comfortable sharing. I also asked them about their experiences while creating their project. I audio and video recorded this
discussion of their project and then transcribed and coded according to procedures described below. Although I gave all participants the option of having me photograph their reflective artifact so they could keep it, all participants provided their reflective artifacts to me after the activity so I could further analyze them as data related to the study.

**Individual Semi-Structured Interviews**

I conducted individual interviews with eight class participants not more than one month after the reflective art-making activity in the class. I interviewed these participants for approximately an hour to an hour and a half, depending on the amount of information they were interested in sharing with me about the questions I asked them. I scheduled follow-up interviews for 90-minute blocks of time for participants to talk about topics such as how they described their reflective topic as significant; how that experience affected them; and what they had come to believe about diversity, social justice, and inclusion. In addition, I asked them about the formal and informal professional development activities that they had they participated in related to diversity, social justice, or inclusion, how those activities influenced the way they viewed themselves, and how those activities affected the way they formed relationships with others. Further, I asked how their experiences with those professional development experiences influenced how they do their job. Finally, I asked them about their early learning experiences that included art supplies and activities and what parts of the reflective activity came to mind for them after the in-class discussion (See Appendix D for Interview Protocol).

By using this combination of an arts-facilitated discussion and follow up interviews, I expected to uncover more rich data regarding participants’ experiences with diversity-, social justice-, and inclusion-related personal experiences and professional development activities.
Further, as Huss (2012) observed, “while images reflect the subjective experience of the creator and have universal components, they are always constructed within a specific social and cultural context that also defines them” (p. 1443). Also, part of this interaction between the participant and the researcher is the impact of the asking of the question about the stories being told and the meaning being communicated by the participant to the interviewer. Seidman (2006) noted that even if the researcher strives to encourage the meaning-making described in an interview to be solely focused on the participant’s reflections and reconstructions, "the interviewer must nevertheless recognize that the meaning is, to some degree, a function of the participant’s interaction with the interviewer” (Seidman, p. 23). Throughout the follow-up interviews, as part of establishing a relational and interactive climate with participants, there were several instances where it seemed appropriate to share, briefly, personal information and observations with participants. I included some of those personal reflections in my researcher journal described below.

**Researcher Journal**

Because of this relational and personally self-reflective experience as a researcher, I maintained my own written reflections of the research process as part of the data collection. The combination of the art piece and the participants’ discussion of the art piece were intended to uncover participants’ perceptions of their experiences and begin to provide understanding related to how those experiences align with the larger cultural context within which the experiences occurred. Although this component is more an aspect of a constructionist epistemology instead of the constructivist epistemology framing this study, it is difficult to separate an individual’s reflections and meanings about her or his experiences from the cultural context within which
those experiences occur. Further, the addition of my researcher reflections in a Researcher Journal helped me identify—and take into consideration—any ongoing biases or assumptions that arose during the interviewing process. I will address these reflections in the discussion section. Further, my notes created during the data-collection phase helped identify potential meanings that emerged through participants’ reflections. In addition, as part of the writing process, dissertation committee members had the opportunity to review select reflections included in the discussion and confirm the strength and value of these reflections to the current study.

Methods of Data Analysis

Methods of data analysis for the various forms of qualitative research vary accordingly. This is also true of the qualitative arts-based research employed in this study. In addition, arts-based research, itself, also varies based on the form of art utilized in the study. There is no one way to analyze arts-based research because there is no one way to do arts-based research. Nonetheless, the data have text and image components that I have analyzed according to specific protocols as described below. Recommendations regarding methods of data analysis cited from qualitative researchers noted below, although not explicitly related to arts-based strategies, still provided guidance on specific techniques applicable to arts-based qualitative research.

Data analysis began as soon as I began collecting data. This timeline was possible because my qualitative data collection occurred over time and I was directly participating in the analysis throughout the data collection. In this study, as participants were sharing their experiences with me as the researcher, it was impossible to refrain from trying to make sense of what they were saying while they are saying it. Patton (2002) asserted that “ideas for making
sense of the data that emerge while still in the field constitute the beginning of the analysis” (p. 436). Further, my own internal reflections on what they were saying contributed to my understandings as the researcher.

Data collected during the in-class reflective activity as well as the semi-structured interviews was audio recorded, transcribed, and coded. Participants’ descriptions of their arts-based project artifacts were also recorded, transcribed, and coded. In addition, I video recorded the in-class reflective activity. This allowed me to double-check the audio transcript to note which participants contributed which dialogue to the discussion, particularly as they described their artifact. A video recording also allowed me to review the in-class activity afterward to identify any observations I may have missed while in the room facilitating the activity, including those in my Researcher Journal. Further, I generated researcher reflections during the data-collection process, and used those to help make sense of the data that were still being generated. Finally, I compared transcripts of the in-class reflective activity and subsequent individual interviews to participants’ reflections about their art piece.

Besides recording, transcribing, and coding transcripts, I also began the process of reading and re-reading the transcripts, identifying common ideas, or themes, or codes. By reading through the data in the transcripts, I was able to identify if anything stood out or was repeated such as “certain words, phrases, patterns of behavior, subjects’ ways of thinking, and events” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 173.). Dey (1993) advised that researchers “retain ‘coding’ as a term for replacing full category names by brief symbols, [and that] …we should not confuse this with the analytic process of creating and assigning the categories themselves” (p. 60). However, while this is an important consideration, for the purposes of simplicity, I will use various forms of the word “code,” including coding categories, while describing the analysis
process. Codes and coding questions naturally arose from the research questions, themselves, as well as the theoretical framework. “Particular research questions and concerns generate certain categories. Certain theoretical approaches and academic disciplines suggest particular coding schemes” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 173). Through the process of reading and analyzing the data, these codes and categories emerged organically. Because I based this study on a constructivist framework, some of the codes related to how participants were making meaning of their experiences.

Once I transcribed several transcripts, I continued writing researcher reflections related to the transcripts to further the data analysis process. I continued to assign categories, reading and re-reading the transcripts to look for patterns and codes and writing researcher reflections; this process of analysis helped identify overarching themes and demonstrated potential saturation with at least some themes. Erickson (1986) discussed pattern analysis as a way to pull together these themes in the data, stating, “The task of pattern analysis is to discover and test those linkages that make the largest possible number of connections to items of data in the corpus” (p. 148). This pattern analysis process relates to the categorization process Dey (1993) described: “Categorizing involves differentiating between the included and excluded observations” (p. 102). Dey added, “This selection is made by the researcher in terms of what seems significant, puzzling or problematic, and the criteria used in selecting data can provide a rich source of ideas for generating a category system” (Dey, 1993, p. 105). The creation of codes and their analysis through researcher reflections helped integrate the data from all sources: in-class reflective activity, researcher field notes, individual interviews, and artifact analysis.

Once I created initial and sometimes secondary categories, throughout my analysis I continued to look for opportunities to combine and split categories, dissecting them to uncover
additional categories or ways of looking at the data. Dey (1993) contended that this process of splitting and splicing categories enhances the analysis, stating, “We split categories in a search for greater resolution and detail and splice them in a search for greater integration and scope. The fewer and more powerful our categories, the more intelligible and coherent our analysis” (p. 147). This ongoing process of coding, categorizing, and analyzing through reflective writing and memos can help develop a richer, more complete understanding of all data available.

To analyze the created artifact of drawings on paper and/or a clay piece, I used reflective writing to record my perceptions and observations of the works. To augment and deepen the analysis in these reflections, I used the coded transcripts from the in-class reflective activity and semi-structured interviews, noting areas of alignment and incongruity between how participants discussed their experiences and artifacts and how I reviewed their created artifacts. Maxwell (2013) noted that researchers “should regularly write memos while [they] are doing data analysis; memos not only capture [a researcher’s] analytic thinking about [his or her] data, but also facilitate such thinking, stimulating analytic insights” (p. 105; italics in original). Thus, the use of analytic memos, what I refer to as researcher reflections, were a key strategy in analyzing the data, making sense of the totality of the data collected, and discussing how and if those data answer the research questions.

Narrative Structure and Representation of the Data

In Chapter 4, I will share the data through demonstration of common themes, unexpected themes, and emerging categories. Through the process of analyzing the data, creating codes and coding categories, I created overarching categories or themes, which were used as areas for communicating the data. In addition, because of how the analysis unfolded, I did not create
individual participant narratives or profiles. However, numerous participants are cited multiple times so that the reader will gain a general picture of some of my participants. Seidman (2006) contended that

> We interview in order to come to know the experience of the participants through their stories. We learn from hearing and studying what participants say. Although the interviewer can never be absent from the process, by crafting a profile in the participant’s own words, the interviewer allows those words to reflect the person’s consciousness. (pp. 119-120)

By citing participants’ experiences multiple times and creating a general picture of those individuals, I intended to help illuminate the data and create a compelling narrative for the reader of the study’s findings. This approach aligns well with both the interpretivist theoretical perspective and methodology in that participant profiles, or general pictures, can illuminate “the essence, the invariant structure, of the meaning of the experience” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 93) of graduate students’ personal experiences and professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion.

Further, integrating images of the visual artifacts created in the data representation provided rich data about participant experiences. I include scanned copies or photographs of these artifacts created through the arts-based educational inquiry in my presentation of themes in Chapter 4.

**Goodness of the Study**

Trustworthiness of the data is a term used by some qualitative researchers versus the word “validity,” which is more often used in quantitative research. Butler-Kisber (2010) asserted that “transparency, persuasiveness and plausibility are what create trustworthiness” (p. 46). Because one of the elements that can help demonstrate trustworthiness is transparency, it
was important for me to investigate the biases and assumptions that I have as the researcher and to share them as part of my presentation of my results. My own biases or assumptions, if left unchecked, might challenge the trustworthiness of my conclusions. I did my best to uncover my biases and assumptions through the proposal phase and in advance of collecting and analyzing the data. In addition, I continued to reflect on my biases and assumptions through my researcher journal. Further, I asked my dissertation advisor about some of my reflections during our discussions of my data to help uncover how they could be considered in my discussion of my research. I listened to the recordings multiple times to confirm accuracy in transcription, trusting that participants’ first discussions of their experiences represented their true reflections of those experiences. Also, I trusted that if participants’ views demonstrated consistency throughout the interview process, in both the classroom discussion and with their follow-up interviews, this demonstrated internal consistency, further strengthening the credibility of the data. Seidman (2006) asserted that “internal consistency over a period of time leads one to trust that [the participant] is not lying to the interviewer” (p. 25). These actions helped confirm the trustworthiness of the data in the current study.

The goodness of a qualitative research project is determined through a number of factors, according to Jones et al. (2006). Explicitly stating the epistemology and conceptual framework is one such factor. “Studies must be grounded in an epistemological and theoretical stance. Goodness requires that the stance is stated and that evidence is offered that the stance was followed” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 122). I have described the epistemology for this study as constructivist, the theoretical perspective as interpretivist, and the methodology and methods as arts-based research. This strong alignment of aspects of the conceptual framework, as has been stated above, resulted in a richer understanding of graduate students’ personal experiences and
professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. As students expressed their experience through the method of creating a reflective art piece, they participated in an arts-based methodology intended to provide a more comprehensive expression of the meanings they were making about their experiences learning about topics related to diversity. As I have written up and analyzed the data as described, it was clear that the aligned stance had been followed, thus demonstrating the goodness of the study.

Ethical Issues and Considerations

The most significant ethical issue and consideration is that my professional position is one in which I have some degree of oversight for professional development activities in the student affairs division at the university within which the capstone course was taught. Some of the students in the class were also graduate student employees of the division. There were no current staff members in the division, however, who were students in this course. That particular area of my responsibility might not have been evident to these students who were participants, though, since there have been significant staff transitions in that area within the past several years, impacting the number of professional development offerings for graduate students.

In addition, I worked in the central administrative office of the division, so it is possible that participants would have perceived that I had a position of power and believed there was some expectation that they participate if they had an affiliation with the division. Further, participants may have been less likely to provide their genuine responses to the questions that I asked them because of my position. Even with these considerations, however, I did my best to assure participants that their involvement in the research project was voluntary and would not result in any negative employment consequences. In addition, I was intentional in maintaining
my role as student and researcher, taking care to not focus on or encourage interactions clearly related to my professional position. These reassurances were clearly outlined in the informed consent document, which I reviewed with participants before beginning the study.

One consideration is the applicability of the findings to other settings. Because this study was conducted on one campus, with a small group of participants, there is not the expectation that the findings will be generalizable to a larger population. In addition, neither is there any anticipation that the findings that I achieved would be the exact same findings that other researchers studying other groups might find in a similar study. However, it is possible that other researchers might identify some similarities in other groups of graduate students in similar academic programs or on other campuses. This could be the case if the similarities in major (as graduate students in a higher education/student affairs preparation program) and environment (in a higher education environment) are stronger influencers on personal experiences or professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, or inclusion than are particular experience levels of current and future student affairs professionals.

One last consideration with this research topic is my personal interest in both the topic and the methods used to uncover participants’ stories of their personal experiences or professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. I have both intellectual and personal goals that led me to initiate this research project. An intellectual goal for this study was to understand more about how graduate students and new professionals learn about diversity-related issues—in particular, what formal and informal professional development opportunities they have experienced related to diversity and how they have made meaning from those experiences. As part of this process, I was also personally interested in incorporating an arts-based activity approach—and learning about it—as a strategy for uncovering the stories of
future student affairs professionals’ diversity-related personal and professional development experiences. I had seen this type of approach used successfully—in a family camp context and in a department planning meeting activity—and I was very curious about how it might help facilitate a discussion about the important topic of diversity. Ultimately, learning more about this topic was important in identifying possible approaches to working with graduate students or future student affairs professionals in facilitating their learning about diversity issues.

Summary

I designed this arts-based research study to collect data related to personal experiences and professional development activities of students in a higher education/student affairs graduate program related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. By using an in-class reflective activity, a follow-up interview, and a researcher journal, I identified information from participants that could help increase my understanding of their experiences. Ultimately, having more information related to students’ experiences can help inform the development of more robust formal and informal learning opportunities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion in the future. The next chapter outlines the significant findings from this study.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings related to the overarching research question: How do graduate students learn about and make meaning from their experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion? Specifically, the chapter outlines the findings related to four primary research sub-questions:

1) How do participants describe a significant experience related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion?

2) How do participants believe that these experiences regarding diversity, social justice, and inclusion influence their work as student affairs educators?

3) How do participants describe an emerging professional identity as an inclusive practitioner because of these experiences?

4) How do participants describe the influence of arts-based research practices on their reflection about topics related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion?

The key findings that emerged were: 1) Understandings of DSJI concepts, 2) learning about topics related to DSJI occurs in formal and informal ways, 2) becoming an inclusive and socially just professional is a process, 3) learning about diversity-related topics can be life changing, and 4) arts-based reflection can facilitate a discussion about diversity-related topics.

The first research finding that will be addressed is participants’ understandings of DSJI concepts. Second, learning about topics related to DSJI occurs in formal and informal ways. Third, the process of becoming an inclusive and socially just professional will be addressed. Fourth, uncovering how diversity-related learning can be life changing will be presented. Finally, findings related to the outcome of the arts-based reflection will be reviewed.
Understandings of DSJI Concepts

Participants described their learning about and meaning-making experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion (referred to as DSJI) in multiple ways. Overall, when asked to talk about their experiences and professional development activities related to these concepts, participants interpreted these topics seemingly without being influenced by how other participants were interpreting the concepts. Because of the range of understandings expressed by participants, throughout this chapter, these experiences will be referenced as “diversity-related learning experiences.” Some of the understandings participants had about diversity-related learning experiences included concepts related to gender identity and sexuality, understandings of disability status, beliefs and practices related to the use of pronouns, views about race and ethnicity, discussions of privilege and white fragility, and understandings of what it means to support social justice and be inclusive in professional practice. Participants’ various experiences with learning about concepts related to DSJI are also discussed in terms of a diversity-learning journey.

Throughout the in-class reflective activity and the follow-up interviews, participants provided reflections on experiences related to DSJI concepts. While they did not explicitly define the concepts, their reflections provided some guidance on how they operationalized DSJI concepts. For example, both Chris and Fiona described the concept of “diversity” as a “buzzword,” and did not explicitly describe how they defined the word. They did, however, both discuss their views that more could be done to focus on the “inclusion” concept in DSJI. Chris said he wished “that they didn't lump all diversity together … [and that they would allow for] separate conversations for specific things … ongoing throughout the semester.” From his
perspective, there seemed to be a need to be more inclusive with training topics. He seemed to believe that the focus in formal training activities related to diversity was not often enough on the range of tenets of diversity.

Fiona also described a desire to have a more inclusive approach to her learning about DSJI concepts. When describing how she applied her diversity-related learning to her work, Fiona noted that she did not learn much about how to help people with different ability levels. In her undergraduate teacher education program, Fiona noted, "I feel like when we think about abilities, … there's a lack of training, at least there was in my program in undergrad, of what we can really do about it.” Her desire, as she reflected back, was that she wished she would have known more about how to assist students who seem to have a difficult time learning.

When asked how her diversity-related learning experiences impacted how she does her job, Anahí noted, “We don't talk about students with disabilities. That's a topic that a lot of counselors are concerned with ... Students with disabilities would still go through the same financial aid process.” She reflected that “Because their financial aid process is the same, we don't, I guess, in a way have to, according to some of our superiors, talk about it.” As Anahí indicated, “the process of applying for financial aid is the same for a student with a disability as a student who doesn't have a disability,” so she expressed that there was not a place where talking about disability-related issues fit into a discussion of financial aid. However, Anahí reflected on being inclusive in her practice and wanted to make sure she was able to address any differences in financial aid counseling that students with disabilities might have. For her, this reflection was indicative of her views that learning about diversity-related topics includes thinking through how to address possible differences that might exist in her professional practice when responding to students with disabilities.
Rena was also interested in being inclusive in her work and as an individual. She noted that she is “looking for ways to be more inclusive, but also be able to educate those who might not understand the ways that I'm trying to be inclusive.” By being inclusive, she means that she is mindful about how she can be more inclusive and notes, “the more I learn about things, the more I seek ways to be inclusive.” This intentional commitment to be inclusive of the experiences, perspectives, and identities of other people helps demonstrate how Rena may define, describe, or understand DSJI concepts.

One final example related to perceptions of a participant’s understanding of DSJI concepts is Matt’s view on how to integrate his diversity-related learning into his work practice as a Graduate Assistant. On the one hand, Matt talked about needing to be inclusive of multiple students’ needs when hosting an event for students by providing a range of food choices; on the other hand, he also suggested that applying his diversity-related learning to his current Graduate Assistantship is not something that impacts his everyday work with undergraduate students. He noted, “I’m not saying that social justice, diversity and inclusion is not something I don't think about, but it’s something that doesn’t necessarily directly affect, it affects it, but not on an everyday scale like with my office.”

The above examples help illuminate the variety of perspectives that participants shared regarding their understandings of DSJI concepts. While there are certainly similarities, particularly in participants’ ideas about being inclusive in their practice, there are also variations in how they operationalize those concepts. Through the information shared below, I highlight other participants’ perspectives that will further describe their perceptions of what they have learned about their understandings of DSJI concepts, how they have applied those concepts to
their practice, how the ideas have impacted what they understand about themselves and others, and how the concepts influence how they interact with others.

Learning Occurs Formally and Informally

Participants discussed significant experiences they encountered related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. They noted that they learned through graduate school coursework, their undergraduate co-curricular activities, and their work experiences, either as a Graduate Assistant or full-time professional staff member. These experiences are categorized as formal and informal learning experiences below.

Formal Diversity-Related Learning

Formal learning about concepts related to DSJI occurred through graduate school coursework and work-related professional development activities. Graduate school coursework was, by far, the most frequently addressed formal learning example that participants discussed. When asked about other formal training they had experienced, participants noted activities such as Ally Training, professional conference attendance, and workshops. Specific examples about formal diversity-related learning discussed below focus on participants’ experiences through the graduate school curriculum.

Learning through graduate school coursework. Many of the graduate student participants in this study described that they had learned about topics related to DSJI through their graduate school coursework. Participants described concepts that were important to their diversity learning journey such as privilege, voice, feminism, and diversity story. For Isabelle, the first semester in the graduate program was a time during which she was frequently reflecting on the concept of “privilege.” Her drawing illustrated a light bulb going off over her head with the
word “privilege” written over the light bulb (see Figure 4.1). She initially had put a period after
the word and later changed it to a question mark. She described that she could “change this to a
question mark because . . . my ideas are always challenging and it’s always learning more and
understanding more.” Her reflections on her experiences highlighted that she was coming to
understand them through the lens of the privileges she had experienced resulting from part of her
identity.

Nicole described that before graduate school, she was “embarrassed [about] being white
because of what’s happening in the world currently and how angry I’ve been with the way we
see things happening in the media with racial relations and things like that.” She described that
taking graduate classes have had the effect of helping her “be less angry” and “see[ing] where
it’s coming from.” After taking courses in graduate school, she believed she had the information
needed to talk with others who hold different views than she does. She shared, “I have the
background knowledge [and] … information and I’m able to use my voice now to speak up in
situations much more efficiently and much more, with information backing it, with facts backing
it, which I think is important.” She described her class experience, as well as an experience
presenting at a conference with one of her faculty members, as significant opportunities for her
to learn about the role of using her voice (see Figure 4.2).

Overall, Nicole described experiences in graduate school as being important in her
learning to use her voice. She noted:

The one thing that really stood out to me that has made a lasting impact and has affected
every other area……it definitely had to do with the way I have been able to express
myself and understand myself and my personal identities … the overarching theme I feel
for everything that I've been learning [is the use of "voice" to help explain] how to
express myself in certain situations … and maybe how to advocate for other people who
don't have the privilege of a voice, having a voice.
Figure 4.1. *The light bulb of privilege* by Isabelle.

[Image depicts a photo of a drawing using colored markers on white paper. The yellow light bulb is drawn over the top of a person’s head and the word “privilege,” with a question mark over it, is written over the light bulb.]
Figure 4.2. *The importance of voice* by Nicole.

[Image of drawing using colored marker on white paper with “Importance of Voice” at the top. Two sides to the drawing, split by a blue barrier, represent two topics related to voice: white fragility and trans* inclusion. The left side of the drawing represents drawings of students made with varying marker colors in a classroom discussion. One of the participants is saying, “I am white. If I don’t speak up then I am part of the problem.” The right side of the drawing represents two individuals presenting at the Midwest First-Year Conference. One of the participants is saying, I am not Trans* and I will not speak over trans* voices but I will use my privilege for support.]
For Nicole, her experiences in graduate school have helped her learn to express herself and to advocate for others. She has developed confidence in her knowledge and sees this as being part of how she has been developing her voice.

Besides the topic of “voice” that Nicole described, other participants also discussed other concepts from coursework that impacted them. For Marissa, the concepts she learned more about through her graduate study surrounded topics related to feminism. Even the word “feminism” stood out for her and served as the reflective prompt for her drawing (see Figure 4.3). She noted:

I guess I would just say that since it was one of the first classes that I took in the program . . . that's where I started focusing on the idea of feminism and women as an underrepresented group sometimes . . . that's where I latched onto that. Then I carried it through the rest of the program as one of my focuses. It also helped me to solidify that as an identity for myself and something that I was proud to have.

Marissa identified her experience as significant because, as she reflected on it later, she thought about how she had made her own meaning out of that experience and realized how her studies have influenced her understanding of who she is and what she believes.

Sean described a diversity course that included an assignment to “tell the story of your life, where you grew up, where you went to school, and what your experience was like with diversity in those education spaces.” His drawing depicted this class activity (see Figure 4.4). The image represents a person giving a presentation in front of a group of other people. On the board behind the presenter are the words "My Diversity Story." The person presenting is shown dropping a microphone and the words next to the microphone are "Mic Drop!" Perhaps that sentiment is that the presenter's story is so unique and so completely different that there is no more to say except “drop the mic.” Sean described that experience as:
Figure 4.3. *Feminism stood out* by Marissa.

[Image depicts colored pencil on white paper with the word “feminism” in a dark pink color. On the upper left and lower right corners of the block of text are orange starbursts. Under the word are three other graphics, aligned in a second line, one with a green circle that includes a strike-through line and the words “included or not” underneath it; another graphic with a blue question mark with the words “question why” underneath it; and the third graphic with a teal equal sign and the words “equal treatment” written underneath it.]
Figure 4.4. *My diversity story* by Sean.

[Image drawn with colored marker and crayon on white paper shows a graphic of a person giving a presentation while standing in front of a group of stick figure people giving a presentation. A rectangular box near the top of the page represents a whiteboard and includes the words “My Diversity Story.” The speaker is shown dropping a microphone and the words “mic drop” are written near the mic.]
Really eye-opening for me … because … everyone had a really unique story. It was just completely different, there was never one that resembled another … there was just some unique backgrounds and cultures that we were able to learn so much more about.

Sean noted that “It just made me more aware of how your background can influence … your perspective and obviously just made me more aware of how my own background is definitely helped to….my own perspective, as well.” Sean’s diversity learning journey included reflecting on his own diversity story through graduate school.

The graduate school course learning noted above provides several examples of how learning about concepts related to DSJI impacted participants. Concepts such as “privilege,” “voice,” “feminism,” and “diversity story” stood out for participants. Each of them had their own reasons for reflecting on those specific terms. However, they all also were clearly able to identify those words that they studied through their coursework as significant to their own learning about diversity-related topics.

Besides participants’ learning about diversity through formal opportunities through their graduate coursework, participants also noted that informal experiences, such as co-curricular activities while undergraduate students, also impacted them. These experiences will be described next.

**Informal Diversity-Related Learning**

Participants learned informally about concepts related to DSJI through their experiences as undergraduate students active in co-curricular activities and through work, either as Graduate Assistants or as professional staff members. These informal activities frequently provided opportunities for them to understand and make meaning from the diversity-related content they had learned through their graduate program.
Learning through undergraduate co-curricular experiences. Participants discussed specific co-curricular experiences in their undergraduate school programs as settings for their learning related to DSJI. The examples provided are related to students’ participation in student organizations.

Matt's drawing said, "Best Roll Call and Most Spirited," which represented awards that his group received at a conference (see Figure 4.5). It also said, "Student by day, Superhero by night," which represented a conference activity. This conference stood out as significant for Matt, because it put him on a professional track towards future work in the student affairs field. Matt provided numerous examples of his experiences at this conference, and with the student organization that made his conference experience possible. Through this organization, and his participation in the organization’s conference, Matt learned about networking with people at other schools, developing interpersonal skills through dialogue with a diverse group of students and professionals, and learning about how to be a more effective student leader through workshops and practical experiences. Wearing a superhero-themed t-shirt and cape, Matt had a memorable experience getting to know other students, which seemed to be partly due to his attracting attention by his wearing a hot pink shirt. He embraced the experience and took it as an opportunity to get to know others in attendance. The conference helped him get to know others and to strengthen his emerging identity as a future student affairs professional.

Savannah reflected on her experiences in a sorority during her undergraduate years. As an advisor for that same sorority now, she has a new appreciation of the value of being a part of such an organization. In her role as a Graduate Assistant, working with multiple student
Figure 4.5. *Student by day, Superhero by night* by Matt.

[Image depicts colored pencils on white paper. The top of the page includes a graphic representing a belt of a superhero with the words written on it “Best Roll Call” on the left side and “Most School Spirit” on the right side. In the center of the belt is a red diamond-shaped image with the initials IRHA in the middle. Under the belt are the words “Student by day, Superhero by night.” Also included in the drawing is a representation of Altgeld Hall at EIU, an NIU marked vehicle, and a row of six stick figures in capes.]
organizations, she has seen students working together in harmony, all as members of the same Greek Council. She noted:

I think that, in the past, in my undergrad [years] when I was in that moment in my own sorority and I kind of just thought about myself and what I was doing, kind of took me a step back and see all these different organizations. Just seeing how they collaborate with each another in being multicultural and keeping up with their studies. I don’t know, it’s just, it’s a good feeling. For example, today someone asked me to write a recommendation letter for them and I thought that was pretty cool.

Savannah’s experiences as a Graduate Assistant provided the opportunity for her to reflect back on her experiences as an undergraduate student and sparked a positive recollection of her experiences during that time. Her drawing depicted the experience of the various Greek organizations working together (see Figure 4.6). Seeing the students collaborating in out-of-class activities and still focusing on their studies provided a source of inspiration for Savannah.

Both Matt and Savannah described these co-curricular experiences as being influential for them on their diversity-learning journey. Matt discussed learning to network and work with a diverse group of students and professionals, which seems to have given him some confidence that he can talk with many different types of individuals, regardless of how they identify. Savannah’s learning does not seem to be related to her personal skill development like Matt’s was, but rather her expanded perspective about the value of multicultural organizations working together for a common purpose. As an undergraduate student, that was not something she understood in the same way as she described as understanding it now that she advises undergraduate student leaders in multicultural student organizations.

The next section will address how participants learned about topics related to DSJI through their experiences in the workplace. These informal learning opportunities provided the
Figure 4.6. *United Greek Council meeting* by Savannah.

[Image depicts a representation of a United Greek Council meeting drawn in colored marker on white paper. Thirteen different Greek letters are written on the tables drawn in a u-shape. Shown standing behind the u-shaped table are two stick figures for each of the sets of Greek letters noted. The front table depicted includes the word “E-Board.”]
experiences that seemed important to them to understand the practical applications of what they had learned more formally.

Learning through work. Participants noted that their experiences at work provided opportunities for them to apply their diversity-related learning. Whether those experiences be in full-time professional positions or through Graduate Assistantships, both provided significant opportunities for both learning about DSJI and for applying their learning related to those topics. In addition, these work experiences also provided opportunities for them to understand and confirm their own belief systems related to diversity.

Maggie described her experience as a professional staff member working for a medical university. Her picture showed a stick figure with a reflected stick figure in a mirror (see Figure 4.7). The figure in the mirror was stripped in multiple colors representing multiple skin tones and the figure looking into the mirror was still stripped, but in lighter shades of similar colors. She noted that at her university:

We view ourselves as our student body being very diverse. You know, we’ve got skin colors of all, all colors. And it seems, yeah, it just looks that way. But the reality is that they’re the advantaged races. They’re not underrepresented minorities. And that’s a problem, I guess, in this day and age, just looking at where our populations, where the growth really is, and where we need to serve those communities. And we need to get more underrepresented minorities into the medical field, and…[the] huge challenge that’s involved with that. But there’s kind of a naiveté, naïveté, I guess, with our… admissions and administration that there’s no proactive work towards trying to reach those populations.

She described that when she looked around her school, it seemed to be diverse. However, her perspective was that even though it looked diverse, the students there were from “advantaged races.” While it was unclear what she specifically meant by this, presumably it is influencing her perceptions. She noted, though, that the students she works with come from “underrepresented” populations. Maggie’s perspective is that while her school thinks they have a diverse student
population, she does not see it that way when she looks at those same students. Her experience at work has provided to her the opportunity to confirm her belief that having a diverse student population and being an inclusive institution involves more than having multiple racial and ethnic populations represented there. (See Figure 4.7.)

Lewis described an activity that he facilitated with another hall director in his role as a Graduate Assistant that provided him with an opportunity to use his privilege as a straight white male in a position of power to help his students learn about diversity. In the activity, participants stood in a circle and stepped forward if one of the statements read aloud applied to them. Statements included things like, “step in the circle if you identify as African American,” “Step into the circle if you identify as White,” “step into the circle if you are Catholic.” The prompts, according to Lewis, related “to all sorts of different types of social justice, diversity, identity, privilege, and people would step in to show that they identify with that statement. And then they would step back out.” The purpose of the activity was to see that there [are] commonalities amongst ourselves and then also see the differences and see when people stood in the circle alone … and that might have been an uncomfortable situation, but to show a different perspective of what they’re going through. And then, I facilitated this activity with my staff and it went really well … I made each person represented by a different color to show that they all come from different backgrounds and they all have different identities and stuff, and that was cool.

For Lewis, his experience working as a Graduate Assistant helped confirm his diversity-related learning that even though people have different identities and come from different backgrounds, people have more in common than they might think.
Figure 4.7. *Mirror reflection of gingerbread person with stripes* by Maggie.

[The image in the mirror is a gingerbread-shaped person drawn with colored crayons on white paper and includes brown, beige, and yellow stripes while the image looking towards the mirror is a gingerbread-shaped person that includes peach, yellow, and light brown stripes.]
Mary shared a picture she had drawn of a school where she said, “I experienced my first … full, in-depth diversity…it was also my first job, so it was more of a learning experience” (see Figure 4.8). Mary’s experience working with the Boys and Girls Club in a city with a population of about 60,000 people contrasted with the town she grew up in with a population of 3,000. She indicated that this difference in population size resulted in “a much more diverse population than [she] was used to from my home town.” She described her experience as coming from her personal passion for “helping people and understanding them, of how different backgrounds come together to be one.” She also discussed the experience of communicating with parents of the children she worked with and being challenged by not always speaking the same language as the parents. She said that she sometimes had to rely on the children to communicate the messages from the staff to the parents and being unsure that the parents got the messages she intended for them. Despite the challenges, she still described the experience as “really fun” and “a great experience.”

When prompted to say more about how Mary’s experience was significant for her and how it affected her, she shared:

I think it’s really, just, it opened up my eyes to bigger things … really seeing…I knew that there were differences, but actually seeing the differences. … and just seeing how different children grew up and how they have different experiences. Like when I first walked in it was just like, “Oh cool they have a breakfast,” and not really thinking of why they need to have breakfast. And because … I’m just used to my parents … there was always stuff at the house that I like to eat. But coming to this school, where … every person has a breakfast. They have to have it at school because otherwise some students, some children might not get that. It was really of putting all, like, the pieces…like, you knew about it a little bit, but, like, it all coming together in the reality.
Figure 4.8. *Washington Elementary School Boys and Girls Club* by Mary.

[Image depicts colored crayon and colored marker on white paper drawing of a brick building. The building has a Washington Elementary School sign on it along with a Boys and Girls Club sign. It is in brown and white colors drawn in alternating colors of bricks, includes several windows and two double doors at the floor level of the building.]
For Mary, her first job provided an opportunity for her to expand her views and learn more about people who grew up in a different way than she did.

The experiences noted by participants confirm that the work environment provides numerous opportunities to learn more about others, to expand one’s views, and to practice applying various elements of diversity-related learning. Whether it be in the classroom through out-of-classroom experiences, or through work, participants provided examples to confirm the finding that diversity-related learning occurs both formally and informally. The next finding that will be addressed is that participants shared experiences that confirmed that they are becoming inclusive and socially just professionals.

Becoming an Inclusive and Socially Just Professional

Participants described experiences that reflected their becoming the type of professional that many of them valued, one who is inclusive in practice and is situated within a social justice framework. They were able to begin forming this identity in three general areas, (1) through developing an emerging professional identity, (2) through recognizing that they exhibit signs of developing an emerging expertise, and (3) through developing an emerging a framework for professional practice after reflecting on the dissonance they experienced between their views and those they perceived of undergraduate students, professional staff, or institutions. Each of these areas related to becoming an inclusive and socially just professional helped inform their emerging identities as the kind of people and professionals they aspired to be. This aspiration is predicated upon their commitment to live out their internal values and beliefs. Each of these general areas is described in more detail below.
Developing an Emerging Professional Identity

Participants noted that workplace applications and reflections helped them develop their identities as practitioners committed to DSJI. For example, Chris described a significant learning experience related to diversity during his undergraduate years. As a Resident Assistant working as a Community Advisor for the Ally House at his undergraduate university, he had multiple opportunities to work with students who were interested in and committed to learning more about LGBTQ and related identities. In fact, he was inspired by his residents and gained confidence by working with them. He noted:

When I got the job I was out to … my circle of people that I work with and friends but not to everyone and not to my family and everything, so, it was …learning more about, talking more about…and I took from that kind of, talking to other people I experienced my own confidence …and through people that lived in the house, a lot of them had come from families where they rejected them … and that kind of inspired me to be, I guess, to be more open about my own experiences and really sharing that with more people.

For Chris, his experience as a Community Advisor when he was an undergraduate helped him learn more about himself, understand his own identity as a gay man more fully, and start to develop his identity as the type of student affairs professional he aspired to be.

Rena recalled a time at another institution where she felt like she was “still that token student.” Directly after receiving her undergraduate degree, when she worked at the same institution, Rena expressed that she believed that her identity was being used by professionals to represent the perspectives of everyone in a specific identity group. She was expected to represent not just the underrepresented population to which she belonged, but to represent every underrepresented population. Her experience was that she thought staff should know better and there was “no excuse” for a professional in the field to be putting that burden on someone to be
the sole voice of a group. Throughout that year, she came to understand her experience differently and believed that staff were asking her to:

“Tell me what to do because I don't want to do the wrong thing.” It wasn't of, “I want to learn,” it was a “The other person of color can't be telling you that you're doing it wrong, so I'm just going to go straight to you instead of going to him and getting the wrong response.”

The experience stood out for Rena, she said, because it was her moment, the moment she knew that she did not want to be the kind of professional who put that kind of pressure on others to be the sole voice for a group of people and who had what she seemed to believe were unreasonable expectations to be willing and able to speak for other people.

Matt discussed his commitment to be inclusive in his practice during his Graduate Assistantship. He identified that even small things could be done to help students feel welcomed at programs. He recalled a time when another Graduate Assistant (GA) in his department ordered macaroni with bacon in it, not recognizing that some students may not eat pork. During the event, Matt observed a student, who was Muslim, who did not end up eating anything at that program. Matt assumed it was because there was not anything that was allowable for the student to eat given the student’s beliefs. Matt noted that when he plans programs, he makes sure to have multiple food options, so there is something for everyone. Matt’s demonstration of this inclusive practice is part of his commitment to being a professional that practices inclusion.

Chris, Rena, and Matt provided three specific examples of times that participants were able to realize and confirm that they were developing emerging identities as practitioners committed to DSJI. Their individual stories provided specific examples of how learning through work, as a Community Advisor, or as a Graduate Assistant helped inform their emerging professional identities. Besides these emerging professional identities, participants also noted
experiences of developing an emerging expertise of learning related to diversity that has informed their journeys towards becoming practitioners who exhibit social justice practices. This will be discussed next.

Developing an Emerging Expertise

As participants shared stories of their emerging identities as professionals committed to DSJI, they recognized they exhibit some level of expertise. They identified having some knowledge about various diversity-related topics that perhaps not everyone has.

One of the things that participants exhibited that was indicative of developing an emerging expertise in diversity-related topics was when they were interacting with family members. Nicole talked about her experiences engaging with topics related to DSJI as she reflected on how her family had responded to what she had been learning in graduate school. She noted:

My family … [doesn’t] understand where I’m coming from because I’m first generation; they didn’t have a college education, so they don’t have all this background, they don’t have a liberal arts education, they don’t have this diversity in their lives like I’ve experienced. It was so hard at first coming back home and saying, “…look at all these things I’ve learned!” And they’re like, “That’s crap” basically. They’re saying, “Why are you being brainwashed?” and things like that they don’t understand. And I was so passionate about it. It’s kind of like hitting me down, you know, so then I met some mentors in faculty members who really helped me and I could go and talk to them about these instances and they’ve experienced these things themselves … in their own lives.

Nicole experienced some family conflict when she shared her experiences learning about diversity-related topics with her family. It took her some time to understand the perspectives of her family members who had not had the same educational opportunities she had. This realization helped her understand herself and her family members better so she could look for
new ways to share her perspectives with them. Further, this experience with her family affirms Nicole’s developing of expertise in diversity-related learning.

When Isabelle talked about bringing her graduate school diversity-related learning home, she talked about how she was able to have some good conversations with her family members about topics such as white privilege. She noted that some of her family members are “not as open to some of these conversations and don’t necessarily recognize privilege.” She further described:

I come from a not so great area, but it’s mostly white people and so kind of recognizing where even though you might not have the most money, you’re still a white male and that’s still gives you some privileges….conversation with my father and brother-in-law, just my family in general. Sometimes what I say seems to go over their heads, but we’ve had some really good conversations about …that privilege and recognizing what it means to be white in America … it’s been something that’s been a reoccurring theme when I go home.

Even though some of her family members seem less able to understand the concept of white privilege, Isabelle was still able to continue the dialogue and share with them what she has learned. She is developing expertise not only in specific diversity-related content but also in dialoguing with others, particularly family members, about topics such as white privilege.

Besides exhibiting that they are developing an emerging expertise through interactions with family members, participants also developed this emerging expertise through work. Anahí described her role at her workplace in helping other professionals to become more informed about the experiences of undocumented high school students going to college. For example, she worked to translate into Spanish some of the presentation materials about securing financial aid to help support college attendance. It took a while for them to be used, though, because there were not staff on hand to readily review and edit the content. Anahí noted:
They eventually did get put to use, but I think a lot of my own experiences influenced me in the way that ... I try to think back about the mistakes that I made or the mistakes that my parents made, or the things that we didn't know to try to figure out ways that we can get that information to people out early, because it's hard.

Anahí described her opportunities to exhibit her knowledge in her professional life related to effectively working with undocumented students. She was committed to sharing her expertise, and that of her parents, about how to support students who are undocumented in their pursuit of higher education.

Participants’ descriptions of experiences during which they exhibited developing an emerging expertise in topics related to DSJI highlighted that the workplace and family interactions both serve as important locations for exhibiting expertise in diversity-related learning applications. This expression of their developing an emerging expertise is part of participants becoming inclusive and socially just practitioners. The next section focuses on participants’ dissonance and disappointment with students, staff, and universities that helped them in developing an emerging framework for their practice.

Developing an Emerging Framework of Professional Practice to Support DSJI

Participants who were developing into professionals who valued DSJI experienced dissonance between what they believe and what they perceive that students, staff and institutions seem to believe and practice. This dissonance caused them to reflect on how they would like to operate as professionals committed to DSJI and what framework of professional practice might help guide that work.

Dissonance in work with undergraduate students. The type of dissonance that participants experienced when working with undergraduate students was highlighted in two examples of graduate staff working with undergraduate residential life student staff.
was conducting a training for his undergraduate student staff who served as Community Advisors, he recalled being surprised that some students were not able to adequately identify privilege. He shared his experience interacting with one specific student, noting:

When I said, "Stand by one that gives you privilege"... when it came her turn to talk about it she stood by religion because she's religious but it wasn't privilege in the same sense that I meant it; it was like, "Oh, I'm very privileged to have God in my life" ... and I was like, "Okay" ... and this is a third year CA not understanding what I meant by when I said “privilege” so I was like, "Okay." They're uncomfortable with this, they don't know they have privilege and they don't know what privilege is, so somewhere along the line we've missed that.

Chris seemed surprised that she did not understand the concept of privilege even though this was her third year being a Community Advisor (CA). He reflected, “We've missed educating them. We've had these activities and we've had these opportunities to show how diverse we are and to share our experiences but we've never really gone over the logistics of it.” For Chris, this awareness of the knowledge level of the student leaders with whom he works helps inform his own development as a professional who is committed to DSJI. He wants to make sure that he takes into account the current knowledge level of staff so he can help move them forward.

Nate also talked about his experiences as a Graduate Assistant conducting diversity trainings with undergraduate students who are CAs. The dissonance and awareness he experienced also related to the knowledge level of his students. He has an expectation about what students should know at a certain point. His own expertise sometimes seems to lead to expectations that others should be just as informed. He commented:

For me, something that I have to keep in mind when I’m doing diversity trainings and things is [that] the level of prior knowledge varies greatly. I currently generally do these activities for a group of about 40 students, some who have been CAs or RAs for, this is their third year. For some of them, it’s their second semester and sometimes I just want to jump right into some of the deepest social issues that we can, with, like, trans students and people of not just the L, G, or B section of that spectrum, but you constantly have to
backtrack because students aren’t even aware of some of the issues going on with some of the more populated areas of that spectrum.

Nate further noted some frustration and disappointment when undergraduate student staff members “try to work themselves into a diversity conversation when it’s not about them.” He observed that it is challenging to maintain a balance between responding to undergraduate students’ individual experiences that come up at a diversity training and maintaining a training focus on systemic and institutional issues impacting diversity and inclusion. He said:

I’d love to talk about this issue personally, but right now, it’s getting sidetracked, and then, that causing animosity towards those who are actually participating in the entire group conversation … I was not used to people being offended when we were discussing things regarding a certain racial group or maybe someone of a particular spectrum.

Nate’s experiences during diversity trainings with his staff highlight some of the frustrations he experienced with undergraduate students who have more to learn about topics associated with DSJI. His recognition of the importance of knowing the existing level of knowledge of staff will help inform him as he develops into a professional who is committed to DSJI.

Both Chris and Nate described their experiences working with undergraduate students in diversity training environments that are part of their work as Graduate Assistants. The dissonance and awareness they experienced in what some of the students that they work with know about diversity-related topics has further strengthened Chris and Nate’s commitments to be socially just and inclusive professionals by helping those they work with learn more about topics related to DSJI.

Dissonance in work with professional staff. Another area of dissonance participants identified was expecting professional staff to know as much about DSJI topics as participants knew themselves as graduate students. Participants similarly expected professional staff to act in a specific manner that aligned with that knowledge, according to the participants’ perceptions.
and expectations. For example, Nate seemed to believe that professional staff should know more than he perceived that they know about issues such as how to approach pronouns. Nate noted:

Instead of being able to compound information that I’ve gathered and what I want to do, sometimes I have to take a step back and I get kind of taken aback and shocked when I have to go over pronouns with someone who’s a staff member. … if you’re going to do that, you should already have that.

Nate’s expectations of what staff members should know already led to his dissonance between what he perceived they knew and what he expected them to know, as professional staff members. Nate asserted that people who work in student affairs should know about using appropriate pronouns identified by individuals based on their own identities. He seemed frustrated at having to “take a step back” to go over pronouns with staff members who should know better. He seemed unable to understand that those staff members might not have had, or sought out, training or professional development related to that topic. It is also possible that particular staff members did not study that topic in their own undergraduate programs or graduate preparation programs. Regardless, for Nate, the dissonance he experienced caused him to reflect and consider what he thinks is important for student affairs staff members to know in order to be good professionals.

Chris shared that when professionals are addressing topics related to DSJI, they should be better about not lumping everything together or just focusing exclusively on one tenet of diversity. When he reflected on a discussion of diversity as part of his Graduate Assistant training, he experienced dissonance between what the training included and what he thought it should include. He noted:

I feel like when we get talking about diversity in a meeting, it typically goes one direction and it kind of just stays in that direction. Those are important conversations that should be had but I wish that ... If this was our hour blocked off for diversity training during our GA and staff training time but we end up talking about race for the entire hour, that was okay, that was our training on racial discussions and then we had a different one for
sexuality and a different one for social class. It’s all lumped together and I feel like that’s kind of the view of a lot of things.

Chris contended that diversity education should be more inclusive of multiple identities, just not at the same time. He seemed to assert that when too many tenets of diversity are addressed at the same time, then people do not have the opportunity to learn as much as they could about the range of individual tenets of diversity.

Similar to their experiences with undergraduate student staff, Nate and Chris also experienced dissonance between their beliefs and those they perceived of the professional staff with whom they worked. Their experiences of dissonance and disappointment with both these groups further confirmed their beliefs about what it means to be a professional committed to DSJI and their own commitments to fill this need.

Dissonance with an institution. A final area of dissonance experienced by participants related to their experiences with institutions. In particular, Sheldon described a graduate course discussion related to the use of the concept of “non-performatives.” He described “non-performatives” as related to the wording choices that administrators frequently use in campus communications or core documents. He noted:

We were learning about non-performatives and how ... an example would be a mission statement and how they try to incorporate diversity into that language, but often it’s so vague that if you were someone who was dissecting it, it would be like, “Okay, how do you do that? What are you doing?”
Figure 4.9. *Non-performative administrator messages do not equal social justice* by Sheldon.

[Image depicts a computer monitor and keyboard with a red circle around it and diagonal red line through it. To the right of that graphic is a not equal sign and to the right of that is a graphic representing a scale of justice. Below the scale is a red plus mark with a variety of colored stick figures drawn below it.]
The statements that Sheldon’s class discussed did not include any action steps for students, so were not as powerful for those students who saw the message as they might have been if they had included a call to action. He noted, “My reflective piece was that these statements do not equal social justice and harmony and inclusion” (see Figure 4.9). The lack of connection between these administrator statements and students’ experiences created dissonance for Sheldon such that he is committed to not issuing those statements when he is in a position in his career to communicate similar statements to students. The dissonance Sheldon experienced between the words he thought universities should use in major documents and statements and what they actually used confirmed his commitment to being a professional who values topics related to DSJI, particularly related to the need for action statements and not just lofty words in institutional statements.

For Fiona, her undergraduate institution provided a conflicting experience where she felt a dissonance between what the school said they believed and how she experienced the school. She described her institution as espousing social justice as a value. In her experience, though, that value was not demonstrated through the coursework she took for her degree. She noted, “I remember this conceptual framework that's founded on social justice. That was fine, but now thinking back, nothing was implemented. We never had an actual class on how to deal with inclusion and social justice issues.” As she reflected on her experience, she wondered if her career path would have gone in a different direction if she had “been introduced to more elements of what [she was] now getting in graduate school.” She said she felt lucky that she was as open-minded as she was, given her experiences in her undergraduate program. This experience for Fiona confirmed for her the importance of both espousing a commitment to social justice and also acting on those commitments.
In each circumstance of dissonance noted above, Chris, Nate, Sheldon, and Fiona described their experiences in a way that highlighted the dissonance between their experiences and their expectations and needs. These experiences of dissonance seemed to be connecting for them what they know and have learned and how they want to apply that learning. The frameworks of professional practice that support DSJI that they are establishing in response to these experiences and others included: (1) a belief and a practice that they need to build on prior learning during diversity-related trainings, (2) a need to be inclusive of multiple aspects of diversity in trainings, (3) a need to be able and willing to dialogue about issues pertaining to DSJI, and (4) a need to not only say they support concepts related to DSJI but also to incorporate them into their professional practice. Overall, as aspiring student affairs professionals, they seemed to value and aspire to be committed to DSJI and working in a higher education environment.

Besides experiencing dissonance between what they believe and what they perceive that undergraduate students, professional staff, and institutions believe and practice, participants also noted how these diversity-related learning experiences impacted their lives. These findings will be discussed next.

Diversity-Related Learning Changed My Life

Participants described numerous examples of how what they had learned about topics related to DSJI had changed their lives. Those changes were organized around three general areas including helping them confirm what they know, understand who they are, and negotiate relationships.
Confirming What I Know

Participants shared experiences of gaining confidence and expanding their perspectives when they talked about what they knew related to DSJI. In her reflections on her experiences in the graduate preparation program, Marissa discussed her interest in studying feminism and the experience of women as members of an underrepresented group in some cases. She described encounters talking with other students in class or people in other environments trying to describe the experiences of women. In some cases, she experienced that her perspectives were not believed or were diminished. The experience of formal education and research on these topics gave her the evidence she needed to make her case. She noted that having “other research to back up those incidents that I may have experienced or seen other women experience helped me to be more confident in just making arguments or representing my own beliefs.” Marissa’s diversity-related learning strengthened her beliefs and gave her the justification that she needed to defend those beliefs.

Fiona described her interactions with some of her professors as having made an impact on her diversity learning. Those faculty facilitated classroom discussions that helped her reflect on her beliefs and come to understand differently the experiences that helped form her current views. She noted,

I think that in this program at NIU, I think, . . . a lot of it has to do with a couple different professors who have been able to really articulate things much better than others, and are a little bit more real, and not concerned about exposing the lack of inclusion and the issues, both equality and equity, within the entire educational system, including higher education. I think, formally, I think it’s just been these really robust class discussions that are facilitated by the instructor, but they also call you out on narrow-minded things you say. I think that that’s where I learned a lot, was being challenged and questioned by the things I was saying, because I think to myself that I see all sides of it, but I don’t. As much as I analyze and overthink, it was always really neat to have an instructor or a classmate say something that you’re like, “Oh, I never thought of that,”
and then think to yourself, “How did I never think of that?” I think, formally, it’s just those discussions being real and feeling safe to be open about things has been very beneficial . . . in this particular program.

These in-class discussions helped Fiona expand her thinking and develop a broader view of what it means to be culturally competent. As a result of participating in robust class discussions, she was able to articulate her beliefs.

Ilana noted that it is important to her to “not just say that we celebrate diversity” but that “it’s important to actually take action and do things.” She works hard to put into practice what she knows, especially because she lives and works in the residence halls where she is part of the community and can model her beliefs with the students with whom she lives and works. She noted that her experiences have:

Guided the way I want to be as a practitioner inside of student affairs. Because I have an interest, in general, for minority women inside of higher education, but I think just being able to not just say that you know we celebrate diversity, I think it’s important to actually take action and do things. Especially in where I am, like going inside of housing, where we live, where we work and I think that being that model is really important to students because you come so close to them.

Illana has confirmed what she believes through her experiences living and working in the residence halls. These ongoing experiences give her multiple opportunities to apply her diversity-related learning and demonstrate her commitment to the life-changing outcomes of diversity-related learning, thereby confirming what she knows to be true about topics related to DSJI.

Understanding Who I Am

Participants shared examples of how their diversity-related learning helped them understand themselves and their own identities better. For example, as part of her own journey through infertility, Fiona discovered a way to be open with herself and her own identity.
Through her personal journey, and being open to her emerging identity, she also was able to be open to others with identities different from her own.

I think that it’s interesting because one of our graduate school projects was to create a digital story about what has shaped your identity and your experiences which have been informal. One of the big things, for me, in terms of shaping my identity has to do with dealing with infertility and questioning through that journey, “Who am I as this female in her 30s who is not having children?” As an adult, I feel like I always thought I knew who I was and I was shaped early on and I was never going to change. Then I think that when life happens, you realize you start questioning, “Who am I?” because you’re faced with big decisions and things like that.

I think, and then interestingly enough, it was dealing with that infertility and starting to question, “Okay, well, I’m not having kids. What am I doing with my life?” That’s why I went to grad school. Then it really opened up for me just this notion of, “Okay, you can do whatever you want.”

Fiona expanded her view of her own identity through the graduate course project to create a digital story of part of her identity. Upon reflecting on her new identity, she admitted that she was still in the process of what her identity meant for her, particularly as it related to future career path options. As her new identity emerged, she was free to explore other options for her future.

Nicole described her diversity-related learning as being more comprehensive and not just related to one particular course project. In her commitment to live her life authentically, Nicole talked about how her various types of learning about topics related to DSJI inclusion—both informal and formal—all have begun to come together. As she learned more about these issues, she found that it is important to her to bring all of her identities into her experiences at once. She noted that learning about DSJI has:

Really changed my life, like the way I navigate my life. I really like to see my work and my school and my personal life just kind of all meld together, because I want to be authentic throughout all of the different realms, and I think that was really big, learning about things like self-authorship and what that means, and feeling comfortable in who I am no matter what space I’m in, being there no matter what space I’m in even if it’s an overly male space. I still need to be there, I still need to be who I am and not let that
affect me like it has in the past, and it definitely has in the past being a woman, being in a room with all males, not speaking up or saying sorry too much, [laughter] things like that. It has affected me in my everyday life, my personal life, the relationships that I make I want to make sure that they're with people who also share the same values, and it’s affected the way I talk to students and think about students, which is my main concern since I, in the roles that I'll be working with, will be mostly working with students.

As Nicole learned more about topics related to diversity, she increased her confidence and belief that it is important to her to live out her beliefs and what she has learned.

Sheldon also experienced a more comprehensive view of his diversity-related learning impacting his life and his identity. The combination of what he learned in the classroom, ally training, and his work environment coalesced for Sheldon in such a way that it became increasingly important for him to apply what he was learning through these various formal and informal experiences into his daily life and practice. He indicated working harder now to check his privilege and identify how it might be affecting what he sees or says or experiences. He noted that his learning experiences about diversity have:

Increased my self-awareness or just awareness in general, realizing that it’s not okay to stay silent when something happens. Like I said, how if my friends say a microaggression towards a population that I don’t identify with, it’s like challenging that, so not staying silent.

Part of his applying what he has learned to his life is to not stay silent, to say something if one of his friends applies a microaggression towards another person or group based on that person’s or group’s status. He has also personally experienced microaggressions—related to one part of his identity—directed towards him from his friends. Even though he acknowledges the privileges he has as a heterosexual male who is often perceived as white, there are times when his friends attempt to diminish part of his identity by making disparaging comments or jokes focused on that aspect of Sheldon’s identity as someone who has a parent who is a person of color from another
country. He noted that because he knows what it feels like to be on the receiving end of a disparaging comment, he does not want to “make anyone feel that way.”

Marissa also described how learning about diversity-related topics impacted how she views herself. With her expanded views, she said she was happier now identifying herself as a feminist and embracing a “more liberal attitude about the world.” She noted that this type of learning that broadens her views is ongoing, stating:

I think I’m happier being able to identify how I do and owning that more liberal attitude about the world, but I also understand it’s not a finished thing. We’re always learning more and we’re always learning more about other people’s experiences. It’s more of a continuum. I might have started here and I’m moving along. I think it has to do with age too and just getting older and having more education and experiencing different relationships and things like that with people. I’m happy with how I choose to conduct myself and how I view people and things like that, but I know it’s not done.

Marissa continues to work at expanding her views through owning her broader perspective on the world, while also expanding her views. She expressed confidence and contentment in her commitment to keep learning about diversity-related topics.

Rena was someone who wants to learn more about her own identities. As part of this process of learning more about herself, Rena shared that she learned more about the identities of other people. She wanted to make sure she continues to learn so that she does not put others in the situation that she feels she has been placed in where she is called on to be the spokesperson for a whole group of people. She noted:

I used to get mad at, well, and I still kind of do get mad at this scenario of, “Oh, well I’m the token person.” I’ve always wondered, “Do I do the same thing to other people that I don’t relate to their identities, or I don't identify with those identities?” I’ve challenged myself with, “Yes, I do want to be more knowledgeable of my own identities, but I also want to be knowledgeable in others, so I don’t do the same mistake to others’ identities as well.
As Rena becomes the professional she aspires to be, it was important to her to keep challenging herself to learn more about multiple identities. This was part of how she understands herself and who she is, someone who wants to keep learning and to understand that she represents herself and not an entire group of people who happen to share her race or ethnic group.

The examples provided above show that participants shared a variety of experiences that shaped their identities. Whether it be discovering who they wanted to be, identifying a broader and more comprehensive view of the world, or exploring more intentionally their own identities and those of other people, in each case there is an element of more fully knowing who they are as individuals. This journey of coming to know who they are was facilitated, in part, through the diversity-related learning they experienced as part of their graduate program. Further facilitated by their graduate studies and their other experiences, participants also described their development related to how they interact with others and negotiate those relationships. Those explorations will be discussed next.

**Interacting with Others and Negotiating Relationships Differently**

Participants noted that their diversity-related learning has impacted how they interact with others and negotiate their relationships. Participants discussed understanding more about others and being more open to others. At multiple points during participant interviews and the class discussions, as participants described their diversity-related learning journey, they noted that learning in class helped them gain confidence in their ability to be an advocate, particularly for individuals with marginalized identities.

Sheldon stated that he learned that it is important to let other people be themselves. He shared:
Just being open. Just realizing that … people are people, humans are humans. Just doing your part so that you’re you in the sense that you’re not stepping on Frank. You’re not stepping on John. You’re not stepping on Sarah. You’re not stepping on Rodrigo. You’re letting all those people do them and you’re being you so that you’re all functioning together. I truly do believe we live in a world that should run through compromise. What are we going to do that causes the least amount of stress for both of us. Maybe that means that I’m giving a little bit more right now and you’re taking a little bit more, but you’re giving back next week where you’re giving a little bit more. Just realizing that we truly are all in this together.

When working with students, Sheldon applied this perspective of recognizing others’ identities by being intentional about recognizing them as individuals. He asserted:

Being intentional with students, realizing that each student carries with them their own set of baggage, whether they are of the very, very, very vast majority of whatever that population is or of the minute minority, everybody’s got their own set of baggage. Realizing that through diversity, I have realized I shouldn’t be the one to unpack that baggage, but if they’re walking in my office with a suitcase, I need to acknowledge that suitcase is in the room. If they want to open it up and I’m willing to hear it, which I now very much always am, it’s like, “Let’s talk about this.” It’s being intentional to the point where they can view me as a resource.

This perspective allowed Sheldon to identify as someone who is open to others and affirming of their own identities. This stance when interacting with others helped him to just let them be themselves.

When Chris went away to college, he said he was challenged to learn and to grow and expand his perspective. Through his experiences as a student leader, his interactions with professionals in Student Affairs, and various trainings he attended as a Resident Assistant during his undergraduate years, Chris learned about his own identities and those from other marginalized groups. With the combination of these opportunities and privileges, Chris asserted,

People who come from different backgrounds from me, like different races and things that I didn’t really interact with a whole lot back [home], different religions. I feel like I’m more comfortable now having those conversations and I think there’s more work to be done, of course, but being able to acknowledge, yeah, I am privileged in this but I am willing to listen and see how I can help and not getting on the defensive like I used to.
These experiences have formed his assertion that there is always more to learn. He said, “You can always think you’re a real expert on diversity and you are just the biggest advocate for social justice and things like that but every year I look back at the year before and I’m like, ‘Wow, I was really ignorant about this, this, and this.’” One of the things that Chris shared is, “I'm working toward being able to articulate basically my thought[s] and having a genuine dialogue because most of my dialogue is with people who feel the same way as me ….” Chris wanted to learn more about how to have authentic conversations with those who have different views than his own. He noted, “You can think you're some real big social justice warrior but take a step back, learn from other people because you still have a lot of privilege.” He recognized that he still has more to learn and seemed committed to continuing to learn more so he can more consistently be the “social justice warrior” he seemed to aspire to be. He further noted:

> Even since these conversations have happened and I didn’t pick up on it back home the things that were said, but even my dad doesn’t think that racism exists at all, he said, and just like I have a hard time now because I’m so passionate about it and I wasn’t really, I was “whatever” before, so because I’m so passionate about it now, when I hear these biases and these [sic] prejudiced thinking … I really struggle to look past it.
> I think that that is a flaw of mine, actually, because I would love to be able to have really positive conversation[s] with people about it and I feel like sometimes I get really defensive and I get really worked up. I think that’s a lot of people these days.
> That’s something that I’m working toward is being able to articulate basically my thought and having a genuine dialogue because most of my dialogue is with people who feel the same way as me, having conversations .... When I go home I don’t bring it up because it wouldn’t end well.

Chris wanted to be better at articulating his views and engaging in genuine dialogue. While he did share that it was harder for him “to form relationships with people who view things differently now,” he also noted that he is more comfortable having conversations with people who are different from he is and he is willing to learn, which he viewed as a positive outcome of what he has learned about DSJI.
Chris understands himself as someone who is committed to continually learning about diversity-related topics. He challenged himself by being intentional about reflecting on his own commitment to social justice issues. When he thought about his work with undergraduate students, he reflected on his perceptions of the students’ beliefs when he shared, “Things like privilege and oppression and things like that, all these students don't actually know what that means and they've never had to challenge their own privileges.” Chris showed a sense of understanding and empathy with the undergraduate students with whom he worked and seemed to use that to help him understand how to help them learn more about diversity-related topics.

As Nicole had learned to put her diversity-related learning into practice by being coached, she also learned through application in her day-to-day life. With her family, in particular, Nicole demonstrated how her diversity-related learning influenced her interactions with others in that she changed the way she interacted with her family. She stated:

Well, I would say at first with family, because they were family, I know them, I would be really ... Not mean, but more just blunt, like, “You're wrong and this is why you’re wrong,” and [use] a little bit more harsh language and things like that, but definitely the evolution of that is me actually talking to them more like I would to someone that I might not know as well. I feel like that’s the way humans interact, and if they’re able to listen to your side is by only reasoning with them and the validation. Validating where they're coming from is big ... I was not nice at first, because I was learning all these new things and I’m like, “I know what I’m talking about! I’ve done all the research!”

... Now I’m realizing, one, I need to be more aware, so I’m telling them they need to be more aware of people’s individual lives and their identities. However, I wasn’t thinking of their identities and where they’re coming from. None of them have high school diplomas, so that was my realization of I’m expecting so much out of them when I’m not even realizing their reality. That definitely changed the dynamics there with them. I can’t expect .... I had the privilege of coming to college and of getting an education and experiencing different things. My family didn’t, so I can’t expect them to just understand a complex topic like why healthcare in America, things like that. I guess I was expecting them to just know, because they’re my family and I wanted them to. That was the big ....

While I was growing and learning, they were still there where I started, so that was a big eye-opening thing. I’m much more careful with the way I talk to them now about these situations, but I still bring it up because they are my family and I want them
to know what’s happening and what I believe. I definitely would say it’s made changes within my family. Not huge changes, it’s going to take a while, but the way they even communicate with each other about topics now is more like ... They used to just say random facts, like you’d come up with a statistic like, “Well, 90% of that group was—” and I’m like, “How do you know 90% of that group? You don't. You just made that up.” Now I see them talking, they’ll ask each other, “Where did you hear that from?” I love that, because it’s like … now they’re understanding it matters where the information comes from, which is big in terms of critical thinking and all that. Critical thinking is so important with social justice and inclusion, diversity.

These strategies Nicole now applied to engage in a positive dialogue with her family members demonstrated her commitment to helping others know and learn the things she’s had the privilege of learning.

Much less able to let things go when someone says something she does not agree with, Marissa is practicing her diversity-related learning and becoming a professional by engaging in dialogue with people who have different views from her own. Marissa noted that what she has learned impacts how she interacts with others. She shared:

It’s hard for me to stay quiet about issues that if somebody says something that I think is offensive or that might be just not very sensitive about a certain group of people. It’s really hard for me to not say something about that, even if it’s ... Well, if it’s someone who is close to me, I feel more comfortable doing it because I know that they know who I am and they understand my intentions. They probably won’t get mad about it, but even coworkers will say things. In a professional setting, it’s hard to know how to respond to something like that. Do you just let it go? Do you say something politely? I think it affects how I interact with people more than forming relationships.

Marissa seemed not to have quite figured out how to respond when another person says something she deems as inappropriate. She was working on not staying silent, but she was still navigating that and figuring out how she wants to behave in those circumstances.

When his friends seemed to be treating or speaking about others poorly, Sheldon challenged them to treat others as people. He stated:

These people are these people because they are these people. That’s it. That’s the core of it. I wish that people would just realize that. I feel like there’s so many of my peers ... I
try so hard nowadays with my friends that aren’t in higher education or don’t do social work and stuff like that, it’s like, “Can you just treat them like they’re a person? What if they did it to you? What if you were the minority; would you want that done to you?” Love they neighbor as if they were thyself. It’s true. That’s a universal truth.

Sheldon worked to challenge “their assumptions in a non-aggressive way.” He noted, “You have to be passive aggressive. There was a term that I just uncovered recently: tempered radicalism. It’s being calm but realizing that you can be an agent of change through calmness.”

As an example, Sheldon noted a specific technique he uses to challenge others about what they say, sharing:

Nowadays, if there’s a microaggression that’s done not towards me but towards someone that’s not present in the room, I could just say to a friend, “That’s really interesting that you say that.” If my friend says, “Why is that interesting?” I’d be like, “That’s just not the way that I think. Here’s my view on it,” and then be like, “Why do you think that way? What makes you feel that way?” It starts to promote that metacognition so that they’re pulling their own curtain back in their mind, so it’s like, “Why do I feel this way?” It’s like, “I guess society taught me to be this way.” Okay, “How about you just don’t?”

Using this strategy, Sheldon demonstrated how his diversity-related learning has impacted how he interacts with others. Through this example, he demonstrated what he thinks it means to be a professional committed to social justice while also modeling what he believes is central to interacting with others with identities that are different from his own.

Similar to how Rena challenged herself—which demonstrated how she understands who she is—she also challenged classmates and colleagues, which demonstrated how she has changed how she interacts with others.

Well, more now than I did before, but I try and challenge my colleagues, and even classmates, because I think that I’m very aware of, I'm one of [a] few in classes or in our department as well, who is a person of color. I try and challenge my colleagues or classmates of thinking outside of the box, essentially. For example, and sometimes I’m like, “Is this me thinking or imagining that this is happening, or is it really happening?” of when I get looked over or like, “Tell me how to do this,” I respond with, “What would you do?” rather than me giving the answer of, “Okay, let's talk through it.”
... I try and at least challenge colleagues with, if I get asked or kind of looked at ... like, “Well, what would you do?” like asking the question back to the person. I definitely changed, whereas ... before it was like, “Okay, I'll tell you,” but it always felt wrong to me, of like, “No, like why should I be your token person? My experience in itself is very different. Not everyone is going to want to respond the same way.” It definitely informed my practice essentially in that way.

As Rena was becoming a professional and challenging herself and others, she was mindful that each person has their own unique voice and perspective. She did not want to be in the position to speak for others when she could help them figure out how to speak for themselves. She also seemed to want to help others listen better to the perspectives of underrepresented persons.

When asked how her selected diversity-learning experiences affected her, Rena noted,

I have more confidence, one, because I know I have data to back it up, or like, you know, readings and stuff like that, which I think in itself is a confidence booster, but I try and at least stick up for myself, my own identities, or other identities as well.

The picture that Rena drew represents a meeting of university staff in the aftermath of the racial unrest in Ferguson, Missouri after the death of Michael Brown in August 2014 (see Figure 4.10).

Rena's experience of that meeting of staff was that those in the room looked to the staff of the Multicultural Affairs department to tell them how to support students of color in light of the events in Ferguson. She seemed frustrated that everyone was looking to them for the answers. As she reflected on that experience, she committed to learning more about her personal identities and those of others so that she would not make the same assumptions about what staff should know and do in similar situations, as she thought had happened in her earlier professional
Figure 4.10. “How to Support our Students” Staff Meeting by Rena.

[Image using colored marker and crayon on white paper showing tables set up in a u-shape with a head table. The top of the page includes the words “How to Support our Students Staff Meeting” written on a board at the front of the room. Individuals, drawn in gray are sitting around the table. One of the tables has “multicultural affairs” written on it showing the staff of that office. Those individuals noted behind that table are drawn in multiple colors.]
experience. This personal learning produced confidence in knowing how to “stick up for herself” and her own identities and “other identities as well.” She noted, “If you don't have the confidence to speak up, then it's hard to make a difference, and that's why I'm in this program.” Rena’s example highlighted her experiences interacting with others around diversity-related topics and the growth she has experienced in her thinking.

Participants’ diversity-related learning changed their life and was demonstrated through what they know, what they learned about themselves, and how they interacted with others. These various diversity-related learning experiences helped them confirm what they know, have confidence in their identities, and strengthen their resolve to interact with others within a framework that values diversity, social justice, and inclusion.

The diversity-related learning that participants discussed related to DSJI emerged through their arts-facilitated reflections. The impact of these reflections in uncovering additional analyses of the data is discussed next.

Arts-Facilitated Reflection

In addition to those findings noted above that explicitly address the overarching research question, “How do graduate students learn about and make meaning from their personal experiences and professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion?” findings also focused on participants’ perceptions of their experiences with the arts-facilitated reflective activity. A variety of themes arose from discussions related to those experiences, ranging from “art is not me” to the art activity prompted reflection, and the activity helped participants share their thoughts.
Some participants noted that art was not something they enjoyed nor were they comfortable doing. Fiona described her early experiences with art, noting that, although she grew up in an area that had art in school, she did not think she was very good at it. When she learned that an arts-facilitated reflective activity was going to be part of this project, she showed some frustration and concern that she would be able articulate her experiences without using words, stating:

Again, being from a nicer suburb, we had art class always. I just remember never really liking it. I’ve always been more of a writer and a reader. I’ve always felt like I don’t have a creative side to me. I guess when I was really young, I liked to color with crayons and things like that. I remember art class, I never felt like I was very good at it. I remember thinking I would see what others—my peers—would produce. I remember being like, “Mine is not nearly as good.” I definitely felt early on like, “Okay. Art is not me.”

…When you have this activity, I was like, “Urgh,” because I feel like I struggle to express myself creatively. It makes me feel stressed out when asked to do something like that, which is interesting because I try to bring artistic components to class sometimes. For me, if I drew a picture, I just don’t think I can articulate it without words.

Fiona’s project used crayons on paper and she wrote a poem about her experiences in her undergraduate institution (see Figure 4.11). Despite her concerns about using traditional childhood art supplies, she still produced a creative expression in a way in which she seemed to feel comfortable.

Fiona created a poem about her experiences at her undergraduate institution. As was noted above, Fiona experienced disappointment in her undergraduate institution because they ascribed social justice as a value but, in her experience, they did not put that value into practice in her coursework. She indicated learning “buzzwords” regarding diversity, but did not graduate
Figure 4.11. Poem beginning “The significance / Is the lack of significance” by Fiona.

[Image represents a photo of a poem written with blue-colored crayon on white paper with the words, “The significance, is the lack of significance, In prior experiences, that should have, but barely did, scratch the surface, of these critical pieces, that demand equity and equality, buzz words, and be prepared, but no tools or strategies, and so, marginalization perpetuates, lucky to have an open mind, that this program opened wider.” A row of multicolored line-drawn flowers, each with a smiley face, lines the bottom of the page.]
with any “tools or strategies.” This activity prompted Fiona’s reflections on that experience, even though she noted that art was “not me.”

Matt also noted that art was not his favorite thing to do. His reflections on earlier experiences with art activities revealed that art was not his favorite class in school and did not stand out in his mind as being important. He did not see himself as creative and said that art or other creative ventures were just things he had to do, indicating:

I remember a clay project in, like, fourth grade … I remember I tried to make stuff, but I was never really a good clayer [sic] because with clay, I guess it’s good to create what you want from the mold and not break pieces off and put it together and let it harden that way. I was a horrible clayer [sic]. I don’t know really what comes to mind because I feel like it was just an art project we were doing in class. I don’t know too much because ironically, art was never my favorite subject in school. Although I had some times where I did well in art, there was some times I did bad[ly] in art. It just depended on what we were doing. Yeah, I don’t remember. I couldn’t even remember, I was trying to remember what we had to do when I was in seventh grade and I got a D in art … I just don’t remember because art wasn’t like a standout something.

These reflections demonstrate that Matt’s experiences in the activity were more about the topic of reflective prompt than the art media intended to uncover and describe those experiences. While he did include quite a bit of detail in his drawn art piece, he did not view his use of the art supplies as the necessary aspect of his reflections on the topic.

Both Fiona and Matt noted that they did not have fond recollections about using art materials. Still, they also both were clearly able to participate in the activity and reflect on a significant experience related to DSJI. This reflection was facilitated through the arts-based activity, which other participants noted explicitly as influencing their reflections. This focus on the art activity-prompted reflection is discussed next.
A number of participants explicitly stated that doing the arts-based reflective activity helped facilitate their reflection. While some participants, like Fiona and Matt, demonstrated that the activity prompted reflections, they didn’t describe the activity as having that impact. The examples noted below focus on participants who described the activity as prompting their reflections. In addition, participants described their early experiences using various art supplies and how they felt about those. Their reflections about the arts-based reflective activity described below are situated within the context of these earlier learning experiences with art supplies in some cases.

When Chris reflected back to when he was younger, he said that he “loved coloring when [he] was little” and described “getting really excited getting new school supplies and getting new markers and things.” He also recalled his favorite color was a yellow highlight marker and that he learned to draw rainbows and what order the colors should be in on a rainbow. Within the context of his experience when he was growing up, Chris further reflected on the in-class reflective activity, noting.

It was cool to do that again because I can’t think of the last time I got to do art in class, probably high school. I also was like, I feel like we were all really proud of what we made and I usually never considered myself an artist but I felt like my art looked decent enough on this … I don’t know if it was the erasers or what but … No, it was fun and I feel like sometimes I get in my head maybe we as adults just do but we’re not creative so we are afraid to explore that outlet. I found myself, I was just like, I don’t want to be done, so I just kept drawing more stuff until the time was up. Yeah, that was fun.

Chris was not the only one who saw the activity as an opportunity to reflect, but to have fun. He saw the activity as a good way to get out of his head. His drawing reflects numerous items included in his piece such as a depiction of where he lived as an undergraduate student, a
diversity training activity he conducted, a representation of his school, a church, a question mark, and several red hearts (see Figure 4.12). Each of these elements helped Chris discuss part of his diversity learning journey at his undergraduate institution.

As the only participant who selected clay as the medium for her arts-facilitated reflective activity, Anahí noted that the art activity helped her reflection, as she told part of her story through her clay piece. As a representation of a monarch butterfly (see Figure 4.13), Anahí's artifact helps her tell the story of migration, her own and others who have been or who are members of undocumented populations. She learned more about her own culture through a formal class. Her use of clay was a familiar and comfortable medium for her because she had taken art class and learned about clay in high school. That class came about for her when there were not enough advanced classes for her to take after moving from another part of the country. She noted:

When I moved from Texas to Chicago, my school had to struggle to see what classes they could place me in, because there weren’t a lot of .... Some classes I had taken in Texas were more advanced than the classes they had to offer at my school, so they ended up placing me in stuff like .... I didn't need art because I had already taken music two years in a row. They were like, “Well, we're going to place you in an art class.” I was like, “I don't like art.” I was very close-minded to the idea of being in an art class, because I was like, “I don’t know how to draw. I don’t know how to paint .... I actually really ended up enjoying that class.

That’s the first time I actually remember I enjoyed doing clay. I think maybe that’s what attracted me to the clay when we were here, because I hadn’t really used it in a while. I bought some of my own clay afterwards and tried to do some stuff at home just for fun, but it dried out really quickly, so I never really did much with it. I think a lot of that, I really enjoyed it. Now that I look back at it, I think maybe the teacher also just kind of used it as a way for ... Like an outlet for a lot of us to escape some of the stuff that was like ... The school was kind of crazy and there were a lot of students that were in gangs or their friends had gotten killed. Even a lot of the students in my class that were gang bangers, they were really good with their stuff [art?], or they just really enjoyed it.
Figure 4.12. *Ally House Community Advisor Experiences* by Chris.

[Image depicts a variety of drawings representing various components of experience as an Ally House Community Advisor including a simple house drawing with a rainbow drawn on it. The house also includes a red triangle image, an open door, and four symbols representing various genders. There is also a circle of smaller circles of various colors, two of which are inside of the circle and represent the “step into the circle if” activity. In the lower right-hand corner of the drawing is a depiction of a classroom setting representing another diversity training. The drawing also includes a larger green question mark and a larger red exclamation point, along with numerous colored-in red hearts.]
Figure 4.13. *Clay Monarch Butterfly* by Anahí.

[Image represents a photo of a clay Monarch butterfly that is orange and black in color, with a black main body portion and orange and black wings fashioned after the coloring of a traditional Monarch butterfly. The top of the wing of the butterfly also includes several yellow spots on each side.]
They’d sit there quietly. It was just a time where everybody was just focused on whatever they were doing. These prior learning experiences in art class highlighted Anahi’s comfort with expressing her experiences using clay, in particular, prompting her reflections on migration. Her efforts to create a representation of a butterfly, with colored markers on clay bringing the piece to life, helped her reflect on the place of the butterfly in her own personal story and in the stories of those with whom she worked and interacted as she assisted undocumented individuals.

Rena indicated that she had continued to reflect on the activity after the class, particularly her experience of sharing something that was deeply personal to her and perceptions that others did not share something as personal to them. She stated:

I thought a lot about it after, actually, like a lot. I really enjoyed it, I thought it was a big challenge in how do you portray .... To me, it was more feelings than it was of the actual moment, because as I was drawing it, … I remember I had a little bit of a difficult time at the beginning of, like, “What do I draw?” I remember looking over and the person that was next to me, I was like, “What are you drawing?” and then she made, it was like, “Yeah, it’s this and this” …. Then as I thought more about it, I’m like, “This was it, like, how did I even miss this big event that happened?” For me, it was really difficult, well, one, because I don’t draw, clearly … It was very challenging for me, like I said, of the emotions that I felt. Even like afterwards, this is what I thought about more afterwards, so when we had the discussion, to me it felt very personal, and like it was challenging in opening up, and like saying, “This was my example.” I remember as I was going to talk, like, I remember my voice shaking because I’m like, not that I don’t want to talk about it, but I’m like, “Uh, like I didn’t think I was going to have to bring this up again.” I mean, it was great, and then afterwards I remember being mad again, of like, I felt like I opened up and gave this piece of me.

The experience of participating in the arts-based reflective activity helped Rena uncover something that was significant to her interpersonal identity development. When she said, “This was it, like, how did I even miss this big event that happened?” she further confirmed the significance of both the prior experience and the act of reflecting on it during the arts-based
activity. As noted earlier, her “this was it” moment occurred when she realized, through the drawing of her experience in her first professional job, that she had been expected to speak for a whole group of people that might have been impacted by the events in Ferguson, Missouri. She now recognized this seminal event as significant to her current views and practices that she did not want to be a token representation of an underrepresented population, but rather she wanted to make sure those individuals have a chance to speak. She also wanted to make sure that other professionals have the opportunity to develop the skills to investigate the views of individuals who are members of underrepresented groups on their own.

Another experience that participants shared was that the arts-based activity not only helped facilitate reflection, but also helped them see reflection in a new way. Marissa expressed that she enjoyed the activity and it helped her think of reflection differently. She stated:

I just enjoyed that it was a creative way to express yourself. I was always good in school academically, but it was a nice break from strict academics....It was something that I did even as a hobby....I think for me, I didn’t really think of it as learning. It was just more fun, even though I was learning in the process. It was a fun activity for me.

I guess what stood out to me when we did it was the concept made me think of reflection in a different way. To be able to represent it graphically. I felt like once I came up with the idea, putting it down on paper didn’t really matter … just putting it on paper was more so other people could see it, but the process of thinking about it in a different way happened whether I would have written it down or not.

For me, I planned it out in my head before I wrote anything down. Maybe for someone else if it helps them to actually do it and think about it at the same time, the physical part might have worked more for them. For me, it was just like, “Okay, I have to think about this in a different way….The only thing was I didn’t want to make the word “feminism” a true pink because I thought that was a cliché.

The act of thinking about the topic of the prompt, and how Marissa would represent the idea using pictures, was what she described as the important part of the activity, even more so than the actual creation of the artifact itself.
Another perspective described by a participant is that they understood the role of the arts-based activity as intended to elicit reflection. This provided some freedom from creating a work of art. For example, the views expressed by Sheldon about an experience with art as a child outlined that he does not think he is good at art. However, as a graduate student, he did not seem worried about those earlier experiences and seemed to give himself some latitude in not creating a work of art because his stance was that the intent of the activity was reflection. He described his prior experiences as follows.

My pictures stunk. They were so bad. They were so bad that my mom got a phone call and had to go in and talk to my teacher. My teacher was like ... and they don’t give you real grades, letter grades. If it was worth five points, I got three points. My teacher took my paper and handed it to my mom and was like, “Sheldon got this on it.” My mom was like, “Why did he get that? This work looks fine to me.” It’s like, “While his other stuff is good, he’s drawing at the level of a kindergartner.” My mom was like, “I’m sorry, is this an art class? I thought your learning objective was to teach them about what a stalagmite-stalactite principle is. It looks to me like Sheldon has met that learning objective and understands what that concept is. Because he can’t draw it he’s being docked that many points?”

I love doing it. I just realize it’s not a strength of mine. Doesn’t mean that I don’t like it. If someone were to ask me to draw, just because I had that bad experience doesn’t mean that I’m not ... I’m going to enjoy doing it because it’s fun for me. I just know if I need artwork done, I’m not the guy to go to.

I was thinking a lot about everybody else’s experiences. It was more so provocative experiences where something happened to them that caused XYZ, whether that XYZ be positive or negative. That’s what a lot of my classmates had said. I was thinking back to mine. Mine was not like that. I thought, “Did I miss the mark?” Then I thought, “You can’t miss the mark in a reflective piece as long as you’re working towards whatever it was.”

Sheldon seemed to have understood that the activity was meant to facilitate reflection, so even if he recognized that the experience he shared might not have been as deep as those of other participants, he seemed confident that using the art activity did help him think through and share about his own experiences.
Besides simply facilitating reflection, the arts-based activity also provided an opportunity for participants to share their experiences with others. This will be discussed next.

**Art Helped Me Share My Thoughts with Others**

Another theme that emerged as participants reflected on their experiences with the arts-facilitated reflective activity is that having an artifact from the activity helped facilitate conversation with their classmates. Nicole noted that using her drawing helped her share her thoughts with the group. She also said, “My struggle [was] with just drawing pictures; I have words on here, because I couldn’t figure out a way to convey…the complex topics I was trying to talk about and to draw.” Nicole described her process of creating her reflective piece as needing to use words, as well as images, to convey her topic, which she described as complex. She also recalled that complex topics are difficult to draw even though they are better than words for sharing in a group. She further attested, “I like the artwork because it’s helpful to kind of visualize these things, and it just reminded me of classwork that we were doing.” Her experience with the activity helped her reflect on her coursework and share her ideas with others.

Lewis expressed that he is more logical in his thinking than creative, so putting something on paper helped him see his experience differently. He stated:

> It was nice to get a different perspective. I guess; my mind doesn’t think in creative ways in that sense. I’m more of, like, a logical administrator … put my mind on paper… it’s like, “I can’t draw ….” It was cool to get that experience. I think that other people might benefit from it. In my sense, I benefited a lot more from the conversation, too, so I like the conversation piece a lot better.

So, while Lewis seemed to enjoy the art portion of the activity, he enjoyed discussing his experiences with classmates even more. The activity helped facilitate the conversation amongst classmates about the topics related to DSJI.
Summary of Findings

Key findings that emerged from this study addressed four main areas, including (1) diversity-related learning may occur formally or informally, through coursework, co-curricular activities, or work experiences, (2) becoming an inclusive, socially just practitioner is a process, (3) diversity-related learning can be life changing, and (4) an arts-based reflective activity can help facilitate a discussion about diversity-related topics. Each of these helped address the overarching research question to identify how graduate students learned about and made meaning from their personal experiences and professional development activities related to DSJI.

In the next chapter, I will discuss these findings in the context of other research. In addition, I will address recommendations for student affairs and higher education administration program faculty and student affairs or higher education administrative professional educators. Future research needs and conclusions, including the significance of the findings in this study, will also be discussed.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

In this study, I investigated how student affairs and higher education administration program graduate students made meaning from their prior experiences related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. These prior experiences included graduate and undergraduate coursework; graduate and undergraduate student employment; co-curricular activities; workplace experiences; formal and informal professional development activities; and interactions with friends, family, and classmates. Participants shared numerous perspectives through their words and art pieces that helped uncover specific examples of how they made meaning from their diversity-related learning experiences and professional development activities. In this section, I discuss the findings from this study in relationship to existing research, including: (1) Graduate student diversity-related education, (2) Living in the middle between former rules and structures and new, emerging rules and structures, (3) Emerging identities as inclusive, socially just practitioners, and (4) Experiences with the arts-based reflective activity.

Following the discussion, I present the three main recommendations that emerged from this research: (1) Enhance opportunities for students to apply their learning related to concepts of DSJI, (2) Encourage meaning-making dialogue with students, and (3) Experiment with arts-based reflective activities as a strategy for uncovering student reflections on their experiences and promoting meaning-making discussions. Each of these will be discussed in more detail below. After a discussion of recommendations for future research, I offer a conclusion to the study, as well as a discussion of the study’s significance to the field of higher education.
Discussion

The first section discusses graduate student learning about topics related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion (DSJI). Next, I discuss participants’ experiences living in the middle between what they once believed about DSJI and what they now are becoming to believe regarding DSJI. Within that context of being between worlds, next I discuss participants’ emerging identities and commitments to becoming inclusive and socially just practitioners. Finally, I discuss connections between this study’s findings and existing research on arts-based reflective activities. While discussions of diversity-related learning described in the next section focus more broadly on all participants in the study, most other discussion sections below focus on experiences shared by participants who participated in both the in-class reflective activity and the follow-up interview.

Graduate Student Diversity-Related Education

Participants in the current study discussed numerous examples of where diversity-related learning experiences occurred, including through personal experience, coursework, and work. This finding aligns with earlier research that described learning about DSJI occurring in multiple spaces (Gayles & Kelly, 2007). While Gayles and Kelly (2007) specifically investigated graduate student experiences within the curriculum, they also found that students discussed learning opportunities that occurred outside of coursework. These learning opportunities included Graduate Assistantships and internships, where students had opportunities to learn about diverse populations and apply their classroom learning. The current study found that graduate students learned about DSJI through their curriculum, like Gayles and Kelly (2007), and through Graduate Assistantships, as well. However, participants in this study also discussed
learning to apply their DSJI knowledge through interactions outside the classroom, with family and friends and classmates, and not explicitly aligned with a course assignment.

The current study revealed that coursework experiences focused on participants’ understanding of their individual identities and the impact of their identities on their experiences. Based on participants’ reflections in this study, it seems that their coursework experiences impacted their understandings of their identities and their interactions with others within the context of those identities. For example, Marissa noted that she now identifies as a feminist and is happier now that she owns that identity and a more liberal view of the world. Now she has the knowledge and information she needs to make a case for her beliefs when others challenge her views. Sean also discussed learning about his own identity through a coursework assignment related to telling his personal diversity story. As part of that activity, as Sean shared his experiences and his classmates shared theirs, Sean understood more about his own identity by learning about those of his classmates. In addition, he now understands how his identity informed his perspectives.

Research by Linder et al. (2015) showed participant identities of students of color impacted their experiences in their graduate programs. Of note is that participant identities of predominantly white participants in the current study also seemed to influence their experiences. The experiences noted by Linder et al. (2015) included students experiencing significant racism in the classroom, and being asked to help their white peers learn about DSJI (Linder et al., 2015). The current study did not find such overarching negative experiences related to participant identities influencing their experiences in the classroom or elsewhere.

The literature provides examples of experiences in supervised practice through Graduate Assistantships or internships as being important for participants’ diversity-related learning
Participants in the current study also provided examples of significant experiences they had related to DSJI in their graduate assistantships, supervised practice, or other employment during graduate school. Lewis, in particular, described his experience as a Graduate Assistant as being positive in that he appreciated the opportunity to use his privilege as a straight white male in a position of power to help his students learn about diversity. For Lewis, this experience helped confirm for him that people have more in common than they might imagine. Nicole’s experiences in graduate school helped her move from being embarrassed that she was white to learning to use her voice and to support others who may not have a voice.

This study also revealed that some participants noted significant diversity-related learning experiences as coming through their previous and former employment opportunities and not through a Graduate Assistantship. Both Maggie and Mary reflected on their employment opportunities and how diverse student populations impacted those experiences. Maggie reflected on her employment in a higher education environment that ascribed to supporting a diverse student population. Her understanding of diversity, though, led her to understand that the students at the school she worked at might visibly appear to be diverse; however, socioeconomically, they were not diverse. Mary noted that her employment after undergraduate school and before graduate school exposed her to a more diverse student population, giving her a broader understanding of a range of student experiences related to race and socioeconomic status.

The participants noted above (Marissa, Sean, Lewis, Nicole, Maggie, and Mary) all provided examples of diversity-related learning in formal and informal ways, through coursework and through work experiences. Students in this study seemed to learn about DSJI in
multiple locations. While the purpose of this study was not explicitly to determine students’ beliefs about how their graduate school experiences prepared them for future positions, it was something they discussed. Similar to Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008), participants in this study identified their assistantships as helping them learn about and apply diversity-related learning. Unlike Renn and Jessup-Anger, though, participants in this study also stated that their coursework provided learning opportunities that have prepared them for future employment. Further, while Talbot (1996) discussed participants learning the most about diversity through assistantship experiences, this study highlighted multiple locations where students noted learning about concepts related to DSJI, including, but not limited to assistantships. The next section will address participants’ experiences of living in the middle and the relationship to self-authorship literature about being at the crossroads between earlier belief systems and emerging belief systems.

**Living in the Middle**

Living in the middle, between what participants believed about DSJI before and what they are coming to believe now, is similar to the crossroads phase of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001). During this time, participants’ new knowledge or experiences challenged their old ways of thinking or feeling such that they came to new understandings of their experiences. Several of the participants were experiencing a crossroads. Their previous ways of viewing the world related to DSJI did not seem adequate. Thus, they seem to be practicing new ways of interpreting and understanding their experiences now that they have learned new things about concepts related to DSJI. Participants seemed to appreciate the opportunity to “try on” what they were learning about DSJI through their coursework or personal experience and to practice that
learning in their professional positions (i.e., internships, assistantships, full-time positions). They were, perhaps, on their way towards developing their own internal commitments and understandings regarding DSJI (Baxter Magolda, 2008).

A number of participants discussed their practicing and “trying on” what they had learned related to DSJI in their professional practice. Matt, for example, discussed his commitment to be an inclusive practitioner when he described planning for training programs, where he was intentional about considering the needs and practices of student program participants who were members of various diverse populations. However, Matt did not consider that what he was learning about DSJI had any impact on the day-to-day aspects of his job as a GA. This perspective of what it means to be an inclusive practitioner seems somewhat underdeveloped and reflective of living in the middle. Matt is trying on some of what he understands is part of being inclusive in his practice, but has not yet considered how he might be more comprehensively inclusive in his assistantship.

Similarly, Chris discussed gaining confidence in his beliefs and identities as he experimented with his diversity-related learning. While he worked as a community advisor and learned from his housemates about their “coming out” experiences, Chris learned how to talk more authentically about who he is to his friends and family members. Growing up, the rules Chris learned did not allow for his identity to be expressed or accepted. As he learned to share his story and identity with others, he began to move through the crossroads and establish his own views on the range of gender and other identities that exist, and how he wanted to present himself to the world.

Sheldon described his perspective that it is important to let people just be themselves. As he learned more about his own identity and identities of individuals different from himself,
Sheldon strengthened his resolve to let people he interacts with “be the one[s] to unpack” whatever baggage they might walk with into the room. With his emerging commitment to let people be themselves, he is intentional about checking his privilege and he seems to be trying to be more intentional about learning about others and to listening to them before offering his perspective. In this way, he is working to apply his new way of thinking to just let people be themselves.

Matt sharing about his experience applying knowledge about diverse populations to training logistics, Chris sharing about his earlier diversity-related learning as an undergraduate student, and Sheldon talking about his intentions to learn about others and let them be themselves all provide examples of living in the middle. They were at the crossroads between following the ways they learned when they were younger and following new ways they have learned now that they are older, particularly through their educational experiences. While these experiences demonstrate that they were learning and growing, gaining confidence in their identities and how they interact in the world, they also provide evidence that they were not at the place yet where they were fully confident in their beliefs and interactions. Another way to view this might be similar to Pizzolato and Olson (2016), who found that “students were beginning to make meaning of information and see themselves as having a role in this process, but this did not mean they completely abandoned the use of external formulas” (p. 423).

It might be that participants in this study were finding new ways of adjusting old formulas to make them work and not that they were lacking confidence in applying a totally new way of seeing and doing things. The participants in Pizzolato and Olson’s (2016) study, however, were “welfare-to-work students in the community college CalWORKs program” (p. 411), so might come through a middle crossroads stage differently than the graduate students in
the current study. Baxter Magolda (2009b) described “moving away from the crossroads … as halting, as participants extracted themselves from external control only to be sucked back into it” (p. 322). Regardless, some of the DSJI experiences students shared in this study provide examples of how they are learning more about DSJI and are practicing new ways of framing their experiences based on their new knowledge. The next section will address participant experiences that demonstrate emerging identities as inclusive, socially just practitioners.

Emerging Identities as Inclusive, Socially Just Practitioners

Participants in this study seem to be forming emerging identities as inclusive, socially just practitioners. They wanted the new knowledge they were acquiring and identities they were forming to influence their practice. What they learned as graduate students taught them new rules and ways of operating as people and as practitioners. For example, they learned the importance of listening to people whose views differ from their own and the value of committing to learning more about their own identities and those of other people. In this way, their identities as inclusive and socially just practitioners were emerging.

Looking again at the definition of social justice described by Bell (2016), where “The goal of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (p. 3), a number of participants in this study were focused on helping ensure that students attending a program, for example, were able to fully participate, thus meeting this aspect of being socially just. Further, as Bell (2016) described the process of attaining social justice, Bell asserted that it should be “democratic and participatory, respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change” (p. 3).
This is a much more complex definition, so it is difficult to ascertain with the data obtained from the current study to definitively assert participants’ full identities as inclusive and socially just practitioners. Still, elements of their shared experiences do align well with this view of social justice.

Those participants who seemed to be entering into this phase, in at least some areas of their lives, shared a variety of reflections on their experiences aligned with achieving a strong internal foundation. Baxter Magolda (2008) described this as being part of “becoming the author of one’s life” (Baxter Magolds, 2001). Nicole discussed learning to find and trust her own voice as she described various diversity-related learning experiences in graduate school. Her graduate school experiences helped her understand and strengthen her own identity and learn to advocate for others. As she was learning about these topics in school and sharing with her family, she discovered that they did not understand or believe what she was sharing. As she learned more about herself, she was able to understand their perspectives better, particularly related to her family members’ lack of experience in a higher education environment. With that understanding, she found ways to share with her family what she was learning about concepts associated with DSJI in a way that has allowed them to begin to challenge their own assumptions with each other about individuals who are different from themselves. Nicole expressed satisfaction when she overheard them talking about current issues, presenting their opinions, and then challenging one another to identify the source of their opinions. In her interactions with her family members, Nicole is demonstrating her trust in her internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments, all elements Baxter Magolda (2008) described as part of achieving the strong internal foundation that is part of authoring one’s own life.
Even though Nicole’s family members initially pushed back on her perspectives on diversity-related learning topics, she persisted in continuing to share what she believed in and found a way to live out her commitment to be an ally for individuals and groups who do not have privilege. As Nicole learned more about the world and individuals with identities different from her own, the less able she was able to embrace what she believed when she was younger. Further, she is securing internal commitments by coming to understand her family and their beliefs, and by identifying strategies for how to interact with them and challenge them to keep learning more and expanding their views of the range of identities that individuals may hold. In this way, she is merging her “knowledge and [her] sense of self” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 281). She knows what she believes, she is sharing what she believes with her family members, and she is acting on what she believes by living out her identity as a person who persists in learning and in sharing what she knows.

Rena also seems to be forming an emerging identity as an inclusive and socially just practitioner and is on her way to becoming the social justice warrior she aspires to be. She is committed to continuing to learn more about her own identities and those of others. For her, one of the rules, or internal frameworks, that guides her life is to continue to learn more. Rena is also securing internal commitments by knowing what she believes—she does not expect individuals to represent groups—and living out her commitment by affirming her desire to learn more about identities others hold that she does not personally share.

Similar to Rena, Chris also has a desire to learn more as part of his internal framework. He is making intentional efforts to listen to individuals who have different views than he has about topics. As he reflected on his experiences talking with people with different views from his, he noted that even if you think you are a social justice warrior, there are still times to take a
step back and to listen. Chris is more comfortable now having conversations with people who are different from he is, and he is not getting defensive in those conversations like he used to get. He understands he still has more to learn and as he is interacting with others, he is also more likely now to recognize his privilege.

Nicole, Rena, and Chris each have begun to have confidence in their individual identities, so even though they may have experienced challenging interactions with others that tested them, they all seem to be able to trust their own voices. They have all begun to achieve a strong internal foundation and are confident in what they have learned and come to believe about concepts related to DSJI. As a distinct element of “moving toward self-authorship” (Baxter Magolda, 2009b), some participants in this study were beginning to listen to their internal voice. At the same time, they also had a working understanding of their own identities and what those beliefs mean for how they interact with others. They were beginning to demonstrate the other distinct element of cultivating their internal voice, as they made decisions about their lives based on their reflections on their internal voice (Baxter Magolda, 2009b). They are emerging as inclusive and socially just professionals by being committed to learning more about other people, including how those individuals identify, and to listening to the perspectives of others, while also finding ways to challenge themselves and others to broaden their thinking and their views. The next section will address participant experiences that demonstrate the benefits of the arts-based reflective activity.

**Arts-Based Reflective Activity**

Although some participants in this study noted that art was “not for them,” others claimed that participating in the arts-based reflective activity prompted reflection and helped them share
their thoughts with others. Confirming the work of Ryman et al. (2009), participants in this study explained that their reflections, as part of the arts-based activity, facilitated their recollections about a specific experience related to diversity, social justice, or inclusion. They noted that having to think about how they would depict their experiences using the various art media facilitated their reflections on various aspects of their experiences. For instance, Chris said that sometimes he gets “in his head,” so it was fun to use the art supplies. Besides being fun, it also helped him to reflect on his experiences as a Community Advisor during his undergraduate program. Because he was having so much fun playing with the art supplies, he was able to add quite a bit of detail to his drawing, demonstrating that using the supplies seemed to prompt his reflection.

The arts-facilitated reflective activity uncovered Rena’s “moment” when she first recognized the importance of not expecting other individuals to represent a whole group, as she had been expected to do at one point during her first professional position after obtaining her undergraduate degree. Similar to the work of Greenwood (2012), Rena’s experience in the arts-based activity allowed her to identify reflections that she had not previously discovered about that prior experience. She expressed, “How did I even miss this big event?” inferring that it was the first time she had put the pieces together and uncovered the meaning that the prior experience had in informing her current beliefs and practices.

For Isabelle, her explanation of the drawing she produced in the arts-facilitated reflective activity confirmed Ryman’s (2009) contention that creating symbols enhances the critical thinking process. In particular, Isabelle draw a picture of a lit-up light bulb over the top of a head which represented the light going on for her about the concept of privilege. She wrote the word “privilege” above her head, initially putting a period after the word. Upon further
reflection, though, she changed the period into a question mark. As she reflected more on her image, she realized that she is always learning more, so putting a period at the end, as if she were done learning, was not as representative as putting a question mark at the end to represent that she is always being challenged and changing her perspective based on new information. In addition to confirming Ryman’s (2009) work, this example also confirms work by Davis-Manigaulte et al. (2006), who implemented a facilitated reflection to help participants in their study think more critically about their internship experiences.

Chris, Rena, and, Isabelle each provided examples to confirm that participating in the arts-based reflective activity facilitated their reflections. The activity prompted recollections about prior experiences, allowed participants to put thoughts and feelings together in a new way, or enhanced critical thinking. Each of these outcomes of the reflective activity confirm the benefit of using this approach to facilitate reflection on the concepts of DSJI. The implications of the research and associated recommendations will be discussed next.

Recommendations

Findings from this study have implications for practice and associated recommendations. These include enhancing opportunities for applying diversity-related learning, encouraging meaning-making dialogue, and experimenting with arts-based reflective activities. Each of these is discussed below.

Enhance Opportunities for Applying Diversity-Related Learning

Providing additional opportunities for graduate students to apply in-class learning to out-of-class experiences may further reinforce the course content related to DSJI. As noted earlier, Gayles and Kelly (2007) propose that graduate student learning might be facilitated if faculty and
staff identify and create space to apply learning, thereby helping students experience the connection between theory and practice. Applications may be an explicit part of the curriculum, part of a Graduate Assistantship, or through interactions with family and friends.

**Coursework applications.** To facilitate applications of in-class learning outside the classroom as part of the curriculum, it may be possible to develop even more opportunities for graduate students to apply course content related to DSJI. Faculty could consider integrating assignments including an activity in which students are expected to apply some aspect of the course content related to DSJI, a follow-up reflection paper, and a class presentation with a facilitated discussion about the experiences. One activity might be for students to prepare professional development presentations focused on DSJI for existing staff working in higher education. This could provide information about current research, vocabulary, and recommended strategies for providing a learning environment for students that is supportive of students with a variety of identities. Possible locations for providing this training include through institutional human resources departments, through student affairs units, or through specific departments who may want to provide this development opportunity for their staff members.

Another related application activity might be for students to go to select university units to learn from them about what their needs are related to DSJI. In this way, students have the opportunity to develop their listening skills and to learn about current beliefs and practices of various units. Through a reflective activity after meeting with various units, students could be encouraged to consider how what they are learning through their coursework either aligns or varies with current practice or perspectives.
One final possible strategy for facilitating students’ out-of-classroom applications of in-class diversity learning might be to work with students to enhance their understanding of and skills related to facilitating dialogue with individuals who have varying opinions related to DSJI topics. Baxter Magolda (2008) asserted that “Diversity educators could use … reflective conversations to help students deconstruct racism, heterosexism, sexism, classism, and White privilege” (p. 283). In addition, as noted earlier, one of the competencies identified in *Professional competency areas for student affairs educators* (ACPA/NASPA, 2015) includes Social Justice and Inclusion, which discusses the need for student affairs educators at the intermediate level to be able to “effectively facilitate dialogue about issues of social justice, inclusion, power, privilege, and oppression in one’s practice” (p. 31). After students learn more about how to facilitate this type of dialogue, the activity might be for them to practice this facilitation in the areas noted above, through institutional human resources, through divisions of student affairs, or through select and interested departments. Their after-activity reflection might then focus on their experiences facilitating this type of dialogue. Individual student experiences, when shared as part of a class assignment, might help them reinforce those things that went well in their facilitated dialogues on diversity-related topics and learn new strategies to address those things that did not go as well as they might have hoped.

**Graduate Assistantship applications.** To facilitate applications of in-class learning as part of a Graduate Assistantship, it might be possible to work directly with graduate student supervisors to identify potential areas for applying learning related to DSJI. Some participants, such as Nate and Chris, expressed dissonance between what they were learning in class and what the professionals with whom they worked knew about topics related to DSJI. This knowledge divide might be addressed through greater interactions between GA supervisors and student
affairs and higher education program staff. These faculty could meet with GA supervisors to review course content, to discuss strategies for discussing content with GAs, and to learn about how supervisors might envision course-related content applications within the context of their specific work environments. This dialogue might produce a list of questions which GA supervisors could use to focus their discussions with their GA staff or even a more developed mini curriculum that might address strategies for engaging with GAs about course content and potential workplace applications as part of their assistantships. In addition, these more intentional conversations might assuage some of the dissonance that some participants noted when they experienced their work colleagues not seeming to know as much about DSJI as the graduate students knew themselves. This dialogue with GA staff might help students understand how to approach applying in-class learning to a work environment, giving them a potential advantage when they may apply for professional positions after graduation.

Intentional dialogue. To facilitate in-class learning in interactions with family and friends, it might be possible for either program faculty, GA supervisors, or GA department staff to engage in intentional dialogue with graduate students about their experiences integrating their in-class learning into the rest of their lives more broadly, including in interactions with family and friends. Informal discussions with students outside the classroom can provide additional time for students to dialogue about course content and come to understand what that content might mean for them individually. Faculty, GA supervisors, and other staff who work with graduate students can build relationships and show leadership by sharing with graduate students how they have personally come to understand their own experience. As they share parts of their own stories, faculty and staff provide leadership, coaching, and guidance for students still
struggling to make sense of their new learning in relationship to what they had once known and believed, and perhaps their friends and family members might still believe.

For example, when faculty members served as mentors, Nicole learned to navigate the conflict she experienced in her interactions with her family when she brought her diversity-related learning home. Through these interactions with her faculty mentors, Nicole understood that some of her faculty had had similar encounters. After these interactions with faculty, Nicole also learned how to approach her family differently regarding her coursework learning by learning more about the perspectives and experiences of her family members first. If students continued to receive this encouragement and coaching from their faculty members, or if those opportunities were to increase, it is possible that students would have even more confidence in their abilities to successfully navigate their journeys towards being increasingly culturally competent or becoming the inclusive, socially just practitioners that many of them seem to aspire to be.

**Encourage Meaning-Making Dialogue**

Facilitating dialogue with GA staff about their GA experiences could promote meaning-making and develop them as effective student affairs and higher education administrative professional educators. While classroom discussions related to various student development theories may naturally promote this type of dialogue, the GA work environment may be less likely to promote this type of discussion. However, Graduate Assistantships provide unique opportunities to discuss the meanings that GA staff are making of their experiences as GAs. As student affairs staff understand more about students’ diversity-related learning experiences, and how they are making meaning from those experiences, staff may be able to identify possible
professional development strategies for GAs to practice their DSJI learning in their GA work environment. This type of “trying on” of learning related to DSJI, as well as practicing making meaning of experiences, may strengthen overall GA learning. Shetty, Chunoo, and Cox (2016) contend:

The field of student affairs faces a developmental paradox: Expecting entry-level student affairs practitioners, many of whom are charged with promoting the holistic development of undergraduates while only a few years removed from the undergraduate experience themselves, to have developed their own self-authorship sufficiently to serve as effective guides for undergraduate students on their self-authorship journeys, might be unreasonable. (p. 132)

Perhaps, if student affairs and other higher education administrative educators devoted resources towards facilitating the development of meaning making with their graduate student staff members, entry-level professionals might be even better prepared to help promote the kind of holistic development referenced by Shetty et al. (2016). In fact, Shetty et al. (2016) found that “graduate assistants and young professionals report levels of self-authorship comparable to or higher than their more senior colleagues” (p. 144). Given their comparable or higher levels of self-authorship, when graduate students enter into their professional careers, it might be that they are able to advance even further in helping facilitate this kind of development in the students with whom they work.

Baxter Magolda and King (2008) provided a strategy to promote reflective conversations with undergraduate students within the context of an academic advising relationship. Some of the phases of the conversations they promote may have applications to the GA population as well, including (1) “getting acquainted and building rapport … [2]) Encouraging reflection about important experiences … [and 3]) Encouraging interpretation of these reflections” (pp. 9-10). In the process of getting to know new GA staff each year, supervisors or other departmental staff
could integrate some of these conversation strategies with their department GAs. In the getting-acquainted phase, for example, staff could ask GAs about their graduate student experiences and how those experiences align with what they expected before starting their programs.

After getting acquainted, staff may be able to ask more specific questions or provide more specific prompts to encourage reflection. For example, staff might ask about specific, significant experiences (perhaps related to DSJI) or even best and worst experiences so far in graduate school. Baxter Magolda and King advised that “to help students reflect meaningfully, encourage them to explore beyond what happened to them to why it was important and meaningful and how they interpreted the experience” (p. 10; italics in original).

In the final stage of the conversation strategy promoted by Baxter Magolda and King (2008), GA supervisors or department staff might engage in dialogue that could encourage students to interpret their understandings of their reflections. In this way, graduate students have the opportunity to take a step back and discover any new insights that might have emerged through the conversation that could help inform their future practice. The Graduate Assistantship environment may naturally promote this type of connection with GA supervisors or other department staff as part of ongoing, and intentional meetings with GA staff members. Being intentional about facilitating these discussions could promote further GA reflection on coursework content and work experiences that both help to inform what they believe, who they are, and how they interact with others as they make meaning of their experiences.

**Experiment with Arts-Based Reflective Activities**

This study confirmed that many individuals ascribed value in using an arts-facilitated reflective activity to either help them reflect on their own experiences or to talk with others about
those experiences. Given the experience of participants in the current study, it may be advisable to use an arts-facilitated reflective activity as part of graduate student staff training and development activities. For example, graduate student professional development activities sponsored by either the academic program or the various departments or divisions in which many graduate students have Graduate Assistantship experiences might use arts-facilitated reflective activities as part of departmental planning meetings or professional development offerings. In addition, integrating arts-based reflective activities as part of regular departmental meetings might promote reflection and group dialogue around issues of practice that require identifying the broadest range of approaches or solutions to identified problems. This type of activity might also be used to help staff uncover the range of items that staff members perceive are going well and those they perceive could be going better. This type of frank dialogue, encompassing the broadest range of perspectives, can help identify the strongest ideas to implement to address the issues.

Besides using arts-facilitated reflections for graduate student staff training and development, it may also be desirable to continue to use these strategies within the curriculum, which some participants noted they had already experienced (e.g., My Diversity Story), or to expand the use of these strategies through additional in-class activities. In particular, using an arts-based reflective activity as part of a course meant to help students synthesize elements of their graduate program may facilitate their overall reflections of the learning they achieved in the program. It may be beneficial to use an arts-facilitated reflection to help students identify elements of their program of study and their graduate school experiences that might be appropriate to include in a comprehensive, end-of-program portfolio. In this way, students might
be able to both uncover previously unrealized or forgotten reflections and describe to others their reflections and experiences.

Finally, using an arts-based reflective activity may have applications for program review needs. This type of activity might serve as an informal assessment strategy to identify the range of experiences students might share related to their program or their coursework, including interactions with faculty or staff with whom they work in Graduate Assistantships or internships. In addition, capturing students’ experiences through an arts-facilitated reflection might identify additional data about the student experiences that have not been identified through other, more traditional measures such as satisfaction surveys, coursework papers, or other program artifacts used for program assessment.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers could address a larger and potentially more diverse sample of students in the adult and higher education program and current higher education and student affairs administrative educators. Expanding the scope of the study population could result in identifying additional examples of alignment with the theory of self-authorship, or examples of experiences that do not align with this theory. Additionally, a larger and more diverse sample could confirm existing findings or identify additional findings not uncovered in the current study sample.

Additional research that includes both graduate students and their faculty members and GA supervisors may help identify strategies for facilitating meaning-making reflections for all involved. Although the exact research design may be complex, it would be worth the effort to identify specific strategies that might help facilitate this type of dialogue that promotes self-authorship.
In addition, further research into the specific research method and methodology of arts-facilitated reflection used in this study may help identify strategies for facilitating the type of reflection that can help individuals on their path towards self-authorship. It may also be valuable to use this method and methodology to investigate other topics of interest to researchers.

Conclusion

In this study, I investigated how student affairs graduate students made meaning from their prior significant experiences or professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. Five main findings emerged from the data. First, participants’ expressed various understandings on topics related to DSJI, with some of their experiences with the concepts being diverse and others similar, as with the case of working to be inclusive in their practice. Second, learning occurs both formally and informally, through coursework, through personal experiences with friends and family, and through workplace experiences. Third, becoming an inclusive and socially just professional includes developing an emerging professional identity, developing an emerging expertise, and developing an emerging framework for professional practice developed partly through experiencing dissonance in participants’ work with undergraduate students, professional staff, and with institutions. Fourth, diversity-related learning can be life changing for some people by helping them confirm what they know, understand who they are, and interact with others and negotiate relationships differently. Finally, participating in an arts-facilitated reflective activity can facilitate reflection and uncover new ways of thinking and highlight strategies for sharing experiences with others.

Three main recommendations emerged from this research, including: (1) Enhance opportunities for students to apply their learning related to concepts of DSJI, through coursework
and through GA positions, (2) Encourage meaning-making dialogue with students, not only as part of classroom discussions of student development theories, but also as part of assistantships in University departments, and (3) Experiment with arts-based reflective activities as a strategy for uncovering student reflections on their experiences and promoting meaning-making discussions.

The focus of this study on concepts related to DSJI is situated partly within the larger framework and focus on DSJI within the student affairs profession. With one of 10 competencies for student affairs educators (ACPA/NASPA, 2015) focused on Social Justice and Inclusion, these topics have clearly been identified by the larger professional associations as important to best practice in student affairs. Further, the theoretical framework of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001) for this study offered a structure within which to describe how students made meaning from their personal experiences and professional development activities related to DSJI. Participant reflections on these topics were facilitated through an arts-based reflective activity revealing participant experiences of being an effective strategy for reflection and for communication with others about participants’ experiences.

The findings from this study and the associated recommendations add to the literature about student meaning-making experiences and about arts-based research applications. By increasing the knowledge available about how student affairs and higher education program graduate students made meaning from their prior significant experiences or professional development activities related to DSJI, program faculty and student affairs and higher education staff members can enhance their practice. In particular, it may be possible for faculty and staff to identify strategies to enhance the experiences of students in these graduate preparation programs. The stronger these programs are and the more meaningful the student experiences in these
programs are, the more likely it is that students will be prepared to work in the dynamic and diverse higher education environment. Since future professionals working in higher education administration frequently pursue graduate education in student affairs and higher education preparation programs, strengthening their preparation can only improve their opportunities to be successful future higher education professionals. As these future professionals enter into work in a higher education environment, and continue to enhance their knowledge about and experience with individuals and groups from a variety of backgrounds, identities, and cultural practices, they have the opportunity to enhance the experiences of students studying at these institutions.

Faculty, staff, and administrators have an opportunity to review the findings of this study and implement the recommendations that might apply to their specific environments. They can pursue opportunities to enhance students’ abilities to apply diversity-related learning, promote intentional dialogue around meaning making related to DSJI, and employ practices such as arts-facilitated reflection that may help graduate students make meaning from their experiences and share those experiences with others. Graduate students who become student affairs and higher education professionals who are better able to apply their diversity-related learning, participate in dialogue about issues of difference, and reflect on their own meaning making structures may be more likely to become culturally engaged citizens who can participate in civil discourse about important current cultural issues and thus fulfill the mission of many institutes of higher education to lead the next generation forward.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM FOR IN-CLASS ACTIVITY

ADULT (18 or older)

I agree to participate in the Diversity Education Experiences study being conducted by Doctoral Candidate, Amy Franklin, in the Counseling, Adult, and Higher Education Department at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to investigate how student affairs graduate students make meaning of their prior significant experiences or professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to participate in an in-class activity and be offered the opportunity to participate in one additional one-on-one interview to discuss my experience in class, my prior significant experiences or professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion, and my perceptions of and experiences with the art facilitated reflective activity.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice. I understand that my participant or non-participation has no bearing on my course grade. If I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Ms. Amy Franklin (phone: at (815) 757-6333 or email: afranklin@niu.edu); or Dr. Carrie Kortegast (phone (815) 753-9200 or email: ckortegast@niu.edu). I understand that if I wish to receive additional information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588.

I understand that the class activity will be audio and video recorded, so that what is said can be transcribed for the purposes of data collection. I also understand that the product(s) created during the arts-based activity will be photographed (or maintained by the researcher) for the purposes of data collection.

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include learning more about this topic in order to identify possible approaches to working with graduate students and entry-level professionals to help them learn about issues related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. I have been informed that there are no foreseeable risks associated with this study. I understand that all identifiable information obtained through this study will remain confidential and will not be released with data reports.

I realize that Northern Illinois University policy does not provide for compensation for, nor does the University carry insurance to cover injury or illness incurred as a result of participation in University sponsored research projects.
I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

________________________________________________                  _________________
Signature of Subject                                               Date
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM FOR FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW
Adult (18 or older)

I agree to participate in the Diversity Education Experiences study being conducted by Doctoral Candidate, Amy Franklin, in the Counseling, Adult, and Higher Education Department at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to investigate how student affairs graduate students make meaning of their prior significant experiences or professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I have already participated in an in-class activity and been offered the opportunity to participate in this additional one-on-one interview to discuss my experience in class, my prior significant experiences or professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion, and my perceptions of and experiences with the art facilitated reflective activity. I understand that the follow-up interview should take no more than 90 minutes and will be audio recorded, so that what is said can be transcribed for the purposes of data collection, professional presentations, and publications.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice. I understand that my participation or non-participation has no bearing on my course grade. If I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Ms. Amy Franklin (phone: at (815) 757-6333 or email: afranklin@niu.edu); or Dr. Carrie Kortegast (phone (815) 753-9200 or email: ckortegast@niu.edu). I understand that if I wish to receive additional information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588.

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include learning more about this topic in order to identify possible approaches to working with graduate students and entry-level professionals to help them learn about issues related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion. I have been informed that there are no foreseeable risks associated with this study. I understand that all identifiable information obtained through this study will remain confidential and will not be released with data reports.

I realize that Northern Illinois University policy does not provide for compensation for, nor does the University carry insurance to cover injury or illness incurred as a result of participation in University sponsored research projects.
**Please complete the following:**

For publications, I prefer to be referred to by the following name: ______________________

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

__________________________________________________________________________  _________________
Signature of Participant                                                Date

I understand that by signing this consent form I am agreeing to participate in this study and allow the researcher to audio record my interview.

__________________________________________________________________________  _________________
Signature of Participant                                                Date
APPENDIX C

IN-CLASS REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY

Reflective Art-Making Activity Script

Description of the Activity

This activity will be a facilitated reflective individual art-making activity which will occur in a group setting and include a group sharing component. Art supplies available for the activity will include crayons and paper, or clay. The purpose of this activity will be to generate information about participant’s thoughts and feelings related to prior diversity-related professional development activities.

The participants were given the following reflective prompt: “Think about your prior experiences or professional development activities related to diversity, social justice, and inclusion.” They were asked to identify something they would describe as significant and told that it could be a personal experience, a class experience, or something related to either formal or informal professional development (formal professional development may include a workshop, training, or course, or some other formal program).

Use the materials provided to construct a visual representation about that experience. The intent of this activity is not to create a masterful art piece, but rather to provide you with an opportunity to think through how to communicate your professional development experiences by using these specific media.”

Participants were then be offered the opportunity to select specific media with which to complete the activity. The activity was timed to be no more than 30 minutes and audio and video recorded to capture participant discussions.

During the activity, I was nearby, but not watching the participants directly. After the participants had finished their assignment, I asked them to describe their project to the other students in the class. This discussion of their project was audio and recorded (along with the rest of the class discussion) and then transcribed and coded according to procedures noted in my research proposal.

Copies or photos of participant projects were secured so that those may be further analyzed as data related to the study. Participants were told that they will be allowed to keep their projects once I have had a chance to take a picture or make a copy of it so I can include it in my study data.
Introductory Remarks

Think about your experiences with diversity-related professional development. You may select a specific activity or reflect on your overall experiences with diversity-related content in either formal or informal professional development (formal professional development may include a workshop, training, or course, or some other formal program). Use the materials provided to construct a visual representation about that experience. The intent of this activity is not to create a masterful art piece, but rather to provide you with an opportunity to think through how to communicate your professional development experiences by using these specific media."

Use the materials provided to construct a visual representation about that experience. The intent of this activity is not to create a masterful art piece, but rather to provide to you an opportunity to think through how to communicate your professional development experiences by using these specific media."

Activity Time

[Allow for 30 minutes of activity]

Questions

1) Can you share a little bit about your project with the class? (Follow-up questions based on what they initially share with the group about their project.)
   a. Did you think of a specific activity while you were working on your piece?
   b. What aspect(s) of diversity did you explore through your reflection?
2) Have you had the opportunity to apply any of what you learned through that experience? If so, how?
   a. Did you apply it in a workplace setting? In class? Another setting?
   b. How did it go when you applied what you learned?
   c. What do you still wish you knew?
3) Tell us about the experience of using the art materials.
   a. What were some of your initial thoughts about being asked to do this?
   b. After you got into the activity, what were your thoughts about the process?
   c. Now that you are sharing with us, do you have any other thoughts about the experience of this arts-mediated reflective activity you can share?

Closing Remarks

Thank you for sharing your stories. Please take a few minutes to sign up for a time for a follow-up interview about this topic. Part of my research is to understand more about your diversity-related professional development experiences, so I need to hear directly from you as individuals, as well. Thank you, again, for your time!
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW

Interview Day/Date: _________________________
Participant: _________________________
Preferred Pseudonym: _________________________

Introduction: I am conducting a research project for my dissertation towards the fulfillment of my doctorate in education from NIU. I am interested in learning about the diversity-, social justice-, and inclusion-related experiences of graduate students in a student affairs graduate preparation program. Those experiences may be personal, academic, or professional development (formal and informal) related. The purpose of my research study is to investigate the experiences such as these of graduate students in programs like the one you are in. I will keep your responses confidential and no data will be reported on individual participants. I will use pseudonyms when describing the learning experiences that participants share with me.

Also, I will be audio recording our conversation so that I will be able to accurately transcribe it later and then analyze that information according to dissertation research expectations. I have Informed Consent documents for you to sign noting your agreement to participate. Is it OK with you that I record our conversation?

Do you have any questions before we start?

1. I want to start by talking more about the experience you shared during the class activity. Can you tell me a little more about how you identified that experience as significant for you?
2. How did that experience affect you?
3. What about how that experience affected what you have come to believe about diversity, social justice, and inclusion?
4. When you think about the formal diversity-, social justice-, and inclusion-related professional development activities you may have had a chance to participate in, what, if any activities come to mind? If so, can you please describe these? [Note: Formal experience related to diversity education could include coursework, workshops, conferences, or other trainings.]
   a. How did that experience influence the way you view yourself?
   b. How did it affect the way that you form relationships with others?
5. When you think about what you have learned informally about diversity, social justice, or inclusion, what comes to mind for you? [Note: Informal experiences related to diversity education could come through your personal experiences; conversations with family
members, friends, or colleagues; or, exposure to information through media or the arts (music, theatre, dance, etc.).

a. How did that experience influence the way you view yourself?

b. How did it affect the way that you form relationships with others?

6. In what specific ways, if any, have your experiences with diversity-, social justice-, or inclusion-related professional development influenced how you do your job?

7. Think back to an early learning experience that involved using materials such as clay, or markers, or paint, or crayons, or some other art media. Tell me about the experience.

8. What thoughts have you had since our last interview about the arts-based activity in which you participated? Did you think about that activity afterwards at all? And if so, what parts of the activity came to mind for you?

9. What ideas have you had since our last conversation about how you could incorporate any diversity-related learning you have had into your work practice?

10. What ideas do you have about strategies that might be helpful for other graduate students as they learn about diversity-related issues in the workplace? What techniques would be helpful? What content should be covered?

11. Is there anything else you would like to share with me (or that you think I should know) about your diversity-related professional development experiences?