CIVIC NARRATIVES: EXPLORING THE CIVIC IDENTITY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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By:
Christy Burke Walkuski

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A dissertation written by

Christy Burke Walkuski

B.A., Baldwin Wallace College, 2004

M.Ed., Loyola University Chicago, 2006

Ph.D., Kent State University, 2017

Approved by

______________________, Director, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Natasha Levinson

______________________, Member, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Susan Iverson

______________________, Member, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Tricia Niesz

Accepted by

______________________, Director, School of Foundations, Leadership and Administration
Kimberly S. Schimmel

______________________, Interim Dean, College of Education, Health and Human Services
Mark Kretovics
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Director of Dissertation: Natasha Levinson, Ph.D.

This narrative inquiry brings together a re-emerging interest in the civic mission of higher education and inquiry about individual civic identity development, with a lens focused on the currently underrepresented voices of community college students. The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of the meaning that community college students make of their own civic actions and beliefs, in order to inform the work of faculty, administrators, and researchers regarding the role that higher education can play in the development of community college students’ civic identity. Additionally, these narratives of currently underrepresented voices and civic perspectives inform efforts to address the growing civic empowerment gap within our campus and community environments. The narratives included in this study demonstrated an expressed interest in community engagement from participants and a wide-ranging feeling of responsibility towards their communities, paired with tremendous concern about issues present in their communities, such as violence, poverty and racism. Positive influences on civic identity and engagement included: finding a connection to the campus community, faculty and staff invitations to get involved or take on leadership positions, student organization involvement and strong civic influences from civically active family members and/or
religious organizations. Barriers to involvement included a lack of trust and connection within the greater community context, feeling excluded due to the political climate, and an expressed lack of understanding of how to get engaged, specifically related to working for social change efforts. While all participants actively voted in elections, the sense of effectiveness of political engagement was mixed. Charitable volunteerism was common amongst participants, although most did not see community service as an effective route towards social change. A focus on campus as a crucial community context for civic-skill building and a critical problem-posing pedagogy, based on the work of Paulo Freire, is highlighted as one potential opportunity for purposefully engaging community college students in the community issues relevant to them, while developing civic skills, knowledge and attitudes that can last far beyond their community college experience.
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This process, from proposal and IRB approval to data collection, analysis and final conclusions, served as a bridge between two critical points in my life. My father’s short battle with cancer and passing during the early stages of my dissertation process reminded me of life’s temporality and encouraged me to pursue my goals with even greater fervor. This, followed by the countdown until the arrival of our first child at the end of this process, provided added motivation for completion, as well as a reminder of why this work is so personally important to me. I firmly believe that Nelson Mandela’s words ring true, “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. A mentor advised me early on, “don’t try to change the world with your dissertation…you’ll never get done”, but I can’t help but hope that this work is just the beginning of my own continued efforts to work with students for justice and change in order to leave the world better for my own child and the next generation. This work is dedicated to all of my family who supported me through all of the ups and downs of this process, and all of the phenomenal students I’ve gotten to connect with along the way. Their vision for a better future gives me hope and motivation to continue this work.

“Although social change cannot occur over night, we must work for it as though it were a possibility in the future” – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“If today’s graduates are to be positive forces in this world, they need not only to possess knowledge and intellectual capacities, but also to see themselves as members of a community, as individuals with a responsibility to contribute to their communities. They must be willing to act for the common good and capable of doing so effectively. Education is not complete until students not only have acquired knowledge but can also act on that knowledge in the world.”

- Thomas Ehrlich, 2003, p. 7

Amidst rekindled interest in the civic mission of schools, both at the K-12 level (CIRCLE & Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003) and across institutions of higher education (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012), there is also an emerging call for the exploration of student civic development that looks beyond activity-based hours and testable knowledge (Hollander & Burack, 2008; Rubin, 2007). When faced with questions about why some students continue on as civicly active adults, while others retreat to disconnected, individualistic lives, civic identity has been suggested as a potential correlation (Rubin, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1999). Another significant concern about the fulfillment of this civic mission is the recognition of a growing civic empowerment gap. Current research demonstrates that low-income and minority student populations often have lower quality and quantity of civic opportunities during their K-12 years, resulting in lower civic engagement as adults, as demonstrated by traditional participation measures, such as voting and volunteering (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2009; Rubin, 2007).
This narrative inquiry brings together the re-emerging interest in the civic mission of higher education and inquiry about individual civic identity development, with a lens focused on the currently underrepresented voices of community college students. The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of the meaning that community college students make of their own civic actions and beliefs, in order to inform the work of faculty, administrators, and researchers regarding the role that higher education can play in the development of students’ civic identity. Additionally, these narratives of currently underrepresented voices and civic perspectives can inform efforts to address the growing civic empowerment gap within our campus and community environments.

**Civic Identity**

Numerous data sets, reports, and colorful infographics repeated across the literature justify growing concern about the civic health of our democratic society. Malin (2011) conveys a bleak picture stating, “community, civility, and democratic values are on the decline, while divisiveness, hostility, and extreme forms of individualism are on the rise. The fabric of democratic American society is coming undone before our eyes” (p. 111). Zaff, Malanchuk, and Eccles (2008) review trends that show sporadic volunteerism and community service on the rise, while sustained engagement, political involvement, and activism are low. However, Yates and Youniss (1999) are amongst a cohort of scholars that caution against generalizing and stereotyping an entire generation in light of these negative statistics, “negative images and over-generalized caricatures of the present generation are unsupported by empirical data and deflect attention away from student’s many assets and strengths” (Yates & Youniss, 1999, p. 4).
Much of the current research around higher education and civic engagement has focused on either civic knowledge (that can be evaluated and tested) or civic activities (generally measured as volunteering / community service hours or voting) (Hollander & Burak, 2008). However, a particular line of inquiry looks beyond civic knowledge that is tested and service hours that are counted, to begin exploring how individuals relate to their community, what responsibilities they feel towards others, the efficacy they convey in their own ability to enact change, and what compels some to act while others remain on the sidelines (Hart, 2003; Porter, 2013; Rubin, 2007; Rubin 2012; Youniss, McLellan and Yates, 1997; Yates & Youniss, 1999). These are the key considerations of civic identity explored in this study.

This study aims to move beyond the checkbox approach to understanding civic engagement. I argue that one’s civic identity cannot be fully assessed by the number of volunteer hours one contributes or the score received on a civics exam. In their comprehensive report detailing important new directions for civic engagement scholarship, Hollander and Burack (2008) challenged researchers to begin to look in this new direction, arguing, “we need to redirect our focus from studying instrumental activities like voting to researching individual civic transformation and the development of a sense of civic efficacy” (p. 7). This study allows educators to gain a deeper understanding of the diverse civic perspectives of community college students within a wider civic context that has been described as disempowering and unequal in terms of civic opportunities for many students (Hart & Atkins, 2002; Levinson, 2012; Rubin, 2007).
Civic Empowerment Gap and the Community College Context

Current research shows that low-income and minority student populations often have lower quality and quantity of civic opportunities during their K-12 years, which results in lower civic engagement as demonstrated by traditional participation measures such as voting and volunteering (Foster-Bey, 2008; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2009; Lopez & Kolaczkowski, 2003; Rubin, 2007). Beyond participation measures, these students often express a civic identity characterized by hopelessness, and lower self-efficacy around the potential impact and effect of their actions in their communities, when compared with their higher income peers (Butin, 2007; Hart & Atkins, 2002; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2009; Rubin, 2007). This civic empowerment gap prevents effective participation and engagement in the wider democratic community (Butin, 2007; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2012; Rubin, 2007). While some attention has been directed to this problem at the K-12 level, there is a lack of research exploring and addressing this gap at the post-secondary level.

In addition to a lack of research examining the role of higher education in addressing the civic empowerment gap, there is also a tremendous gap examining civic engagement and community college students. Newell (2011) found that “of the 290 reports or fact sheets on the CIRCLE (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) website between December 2002 and June 2010, only one fact sheet, derived from survey research, specifically addressed the civic engagement of community college students” (p. 21). The vast majority of research addressing civic engagement and higher education is focused on traditional-age, four-year degree seeking...
students (Hollander & Burack, 2008; Taggart & Crisp, 2011). However, despite this gap several recent reports point to community colleges as a key pathway for low-income and minority students to become civically engaged (Albert, 2004; Barnett, Jeandron & Patton, 2009; PACE 2010; Flanagen, et al., 2009; Fronco, 2002; Prentice, 2006; Prentice, 2011; Zaff, et al., 2009). Community colleges also have a long-standing civic mission, founded as “America’s democracy colleges” (Franco, 2002, p. 121). For this reason, I have focused my research for this study on community colleges as a site for civic identity development and engagement, and a potentially critical context for understanding and addressing the civic empowerment gap.

**Research Questions & Study Design**

Through narrative inquiry this study is designed to illuminate the meaning that community college students make of their own civic habits, actions, and beliefs. By collecting, analyzing, and amplifying these individual stories, I seek to give voice beyond the statistics and static theories of the civic empowerment gap in order to inform future educational practice and policies in the realm of higher education. More specifically, this study allows us to understand how individual community college students conceptualize civic engagement and how they perceive their role or potential influence in their community. Additionally, this study seeks to understand how students have come to know and believe what they do in these areas. I explore what community, workplace and K-12 experiences were influential, and how their community college experience has played a role in helping or hindering this civic identity development. These civic narratives will inform future recommendations for how our institutions of higher
education, most specifically community colleges, can better meet the diverse needs and civic interests of our students, in order to graduate educated, engaged, and empowered citizens, and work towards narrowing the civic empowerment gap.

My key research questions include: (1) How do community college students describe their role, responsibility, and influence in their community? (2) What experiences or opportunities have been positive forces in students’ civic identity development and what barriers or challenges have they faced? (3) Presently, how has their community college experience played a role in helping or hindering their civic identity development?

As defined in the research and for the purposes of this study, civic identity encompasses an individual’s sense of belonging, responsibility and connection to and efficacy of participation in the civic realm (Rubin, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 2006). The “civic realm” encompasses the interests and space beyond one’s own self-interest, most commonly conceptualized as within ones neighborhood, but as was found in this study may include national and international interests, as well. My interests are positioned in the space exploring the meaning that students have made of themselves and their actions (or inaction) within this civic realm.

Questions of this nature are best understood by undertaking an interpretive, qualitative inquiry, such as narrative inquiry. Hatch (2002) explains, “qualitative research seeks to understand the world from the perspective of those living in it” (p. 7). With an interpretive lens, my intent was not to discover a single explanation or universal rationale, instead I approached this study with the understanding that I could uncover
multiple meanings and conceptualizations from student participants. This is an important endeavor of qualitative research.

Finally, this study is influenced by a critical research paradigm. I suggest that civic identity is more complex than just the individual choice to be civically active or not, but that one’s view of self within a civic space and one’s action or inaction is influenced by a multitude of social and structural power dynamics that may encourage or discourage participation or foster a positive or negative civic identity, as the research on civic empowerment gap suggests (Flanagan, Gill, Pontificia, & Gallay, 2007; Hart & Atkins, 2002, Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Race and social class have been demonstrated as determinants for levels of community engagement in both the political and non-political. (Giroux & Grioux, 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Levinson, 2012; Rubin, 2007). Rubin (2007) engaged a similar perspective in the development of her civic identity rubric, sharing “the interpretive perspective highlights the socially constructed and locally negotiated nature of experience, while the critical research paradigm is rooted in a concern with how larger structures of inequality frame the possibilities of individuals and groups with the least power (p. 225).

**Intellectual Orientation and Reflexivity**

*“Having purpose without perspective is like setting out on a voyage without a means to orient your ship”* - Schram, 2003 (p.41)

An important factor in qualitative research, especially that which involves the co-creation of meaning through interpretation and analysis such as narrative inquiry, is the ability of the researcher to identify their own values, assumptions, and biases in order to
address how these could affect the research process of their particular topic. Hatch (2002) describes his perspectives on the importance of reflexivity, “the capacities to be reflexive, to keep track of one’s influence on a setting, to bracket one’s biases, and to monitor one’s emotional responses are the same capacities that allow researchers to get close enough to human action to understand what is going on” (p.10).

My identity as a white, female who attended a public K-12 school in a primarily working and middle-class community, and a private, liberal arts college as a traditionally-aged college student distinguishes my lived experience in numerous ways from those of my study participants. With this in mind, I was mindful of the need to be intentional during the data collection process with participants to acknowledge my personal perspectives, but remove these from the lived experiences shared by my participants. It was especially important for me to ask for clarification, confirmation, and validation as I moved along in the data collection and analysis process to ensure that I was hearing, understanding, and interpreting the emerging themes, questions, and interests correctly, as validated by each individual participant. I came to understand that my concept of something, such as a neighborhood, may conjure up a very different image for me when compared with others. For this reason, I worked to build in opportunities to clarify and harvest rich-description of these very subjective topics and concepts throughout the interview and data analysis process. Additionally, participants continually had the opportunity to provide feedback and revisions as I co-constructed their stories throughout this study. This is one very useful aspect of narrative inquiry, in that it seeks full, rich
description and hearing stories in context, as opposed to research data fractured from its original form.

I identify with the topic of the study in many ways, especially because the K-12 school that I attended did not have a strong civic education component or readily available civic learning or skill-building opportunities for students (little to no volunteer opportunities or opportunities in course-based or co-curricular civic projects). Additionally, I did not grow up in a family that discussed community issues or politics, and was never challenged to consider the role that I played in my own community. This resulted in a transformational experience when I attended college and was exposed to a diverse array of opportunities to volunteer in the community, examine community and social justice issues, develop my leadership capacity, and discover my own civic voice. However, I am also aware of my privilege within the civic space as an educated, white professional and acknowledge that the barriers I face in having my voice heard and in participating in various civic activities are bolstered by this in ways that are significantly different from that of my study participants.

My personal transformative undergraduate experience is what has driven my passion and professional commitment to the importance and value of civic education and engagement at the post-secondary level. I have worked for the last 10 years in a variety of arenas developing civic engagement programs and initiatives for college populations. Through these programs I have had the opportunity to build relationships with hundreds of students from a diverse array of backgrounds, which gave me confidence in my ability to connect with students around the topics I explored in this study.
Overall, based on my own personal and professional experiences, as well as from various calls to action in recent literature, the topic of this study is significant because it is providing an opportunity for voices of students that are frequently absent in conversations about civic engagement and higher education to be heard.

Summary

With recent calls to action to look beyond statistics and test scores for an understanding of students’ civic development, as well as the recognition that low-income and minority student voices are often missing from current research on civic engagement in higher education, this study seeks to address these gaps within the community college context. Rubin (2007) advocates for this new, beyond the numbers approach, stating:

> while valuable, such data [current research data] are based on investigators’ rather than students’ definitions of civic knowledge and engagement; thus, they fail to capture students’ understandings or modes of engagement beyond those pre-defined by researchers. Civic experiences may differ sharply depending upon how students are situated socially, historically, and culturally. (Rubin, 2007, p. 451)

By “gathering and interpreting the stories that people use to describe their lives” I intend to shed light on a currently deficient perspective in the literature on civic engagement and higher education (Hatch, 2002, p. 28).

The personal narratives of these community college students can help us to better understand the meaning that students have made of their own civic habits, actions, and beliefs, as well as how they view themselves in relation to their communities. As Hollander and Burack (2008) argue, “Civic learning is a life-long experience and studies
of the effect of higher education and student development need to be informed by the civic history of students prior to their college experience” (p. 5). This is particularly relevant for community college students, many of whom are adult students bringing a wealth of community and workplace perspectives to their college experience. Rather than combine these student narratives together as a single statistic or theory, this qualitative, narrative approach allows for individual stories to be amplified and their collective interests, needs, and experiences to be more deeply understood.

As Wallerstein and Bernstein (1988) suggest, “education should have as one of its main tasks to invite people to believe in themselves. It should invite people to believe they have the knowledge” (p.381). This study moves from researcher-driven definitions of civic engagement, to deliver a focus on the students’ personal knowledge and beliefs. These narratives can inform the work of educators, administrators, and researchers interested in the civic engagement of our community college student population. Understanding individual students’ meaning of civic engagement, as well as the critical incidents and factors that either positively or negatively influenced their civic identity will allow us to consider how our institutions, and specifically community colleges, are currently meeting students’ diverse civic needs and interests.
CHAPTER II  
CONTEXT OF STUDY: LITERATURE REVIEW  

Conceptualizing “Civic”

The term “civic” can allude to a number of different meanings, so for the purposes of this study examining individuals’ civic identity it is important to clarify what is meant by this concept. Merriam-Webster defines civic as: “of or relating to a city or town or the people who live there” and “relating to citizenship or being a citizen” (Merriam-Webster, 2015). In the case of civic identity, “civic” is meant to refer to one’s relation to that beyond self, not self-less, but greater than self-interest. Self-interest can often be a catalyst for civic engagement, for example if a child experiences a particular illness a parent may get involved with a health-advocacy organization or if a family experiences a loss due to violence in a community they may become active members in a neighborhood association or anti-violence campaign. However, even when motivated by self-interest the intention and impacts of these activities extend beyond that particular individual, the intention of civic moves from “me” to “we”. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I have investigated students’ perceptions of themselves in relation to their communities (local, national and international), and explored their sense (or lack thereof) of connection, commitment and responsibility within this civic realm.
Civic Mission of Schools

“America’s democratic challenge at the end of this century – widespread productive re-engagement of the citizenry in public life – calls institutions of higher education to return to Thomas Jefferson’s original formulation, with a twist.” (Boyte & Kari, 2000, p. 38)

This study stands on the foundation of a deep belief in the civic mission of our schools. While I acknowledge that this cannot be the role of schools alone, developing an informed and engaged citizenry has been an important endeavor from the very beginning of America’s system of education (CIRCLE & Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003; Levinson, 2012; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; Rubin, Hayes, & Benson, 2009). The concern about a possible decline in civic life and growing disengagement of an uninformed citizenry has re-emerged in both scholarly and public concern over the last two decades (Boggs, 1991, Campus Compact, 2012, Campus Compact, 2016, CIRCLE & Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003, National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; Putnam, 2000, U.S. Department of Education, 2012). There was a tremendous swell of interest and research on the topic following Robert Putnam’s work in the late 1990s, exposing what he saw as the decline of social capital in America, as an article in 1995, and book in 2000. In responses to Putnam’s work and that of other scholars concerned with the state of our civic life, there are calls to return to our democratic founding principles, rallying cries for major reforms and challenges to refocus on civic values within all aspects of the academy (Campus Compact, 2016; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens, 2003; Ehrlich, 2000; Sax, 2004). Sax (2004) shares from a 1985 Carnegie Foundation report, “If there is a crisis in education in the United States today, it
is less that test scores have declined than it is that we have failed to provide the education for citizenship that is still the most important responsibility of the nation’s schools and colleges” (p. 65). This call to action is met with numerous challenges and competing priorities presented as barriers to this renewed civic commitment within our institutions today, including the commercialization of higher education, the focus on job training and careerism, challenges of access and affordability, focus on research and productivity, and little incentive or reward for faculty engagement with the civic mission of higher education (Colby, et al., 2003; Guarasci, 2012a; Sullivan, 2000).

From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, John Dewey to George Counts, numerous scholars refer back to the historical roots and original stated intentions of the American system of education when discussing the intersection of democracy and education (Boyte & Kari, 2000; Colby, et al., 2003; Sax, 2000). They reference Jefferson’s vision for institutions with strong civic missions, aimed at producing public leaders (Boyte & Kari, 2000). Many scholars also acknowledge, though, that these goals of developing civic and democratic capacities were historically limited to the elites of society, predominantly (if not exclusively) white, and Christian (Colby et al., 2003; Giroux & Giroux, 2004).

In today’s context it can be startling to learn that the US ranked 139th in voter participation of 172 world democracies in 2007, and that only 24 percent of graduating high school seniors scored at the proficient or advanced level in civics in 2010, fewer than in 2006 or in 1998 (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). Additionally, half of U.S. states no longer require civics education for high school graduation (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic
Engagement, 2012). These statistics are included in a recently released national report submitted to the Department of Education on the state of civic learning and democratic engagement (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). This report, along with numerous others serve as a call to action for those of us in the Higher Education community to reinvest and recommit to bringing the civic mission of higher education back from the margins (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015; Campus Compact, 2016; CIRCLE & Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003; Colby, et al., 2003; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Some shifts that have occurred over time that some scholars argue began the move in the academy away from a civic-oriented mission include: the increase in attention to science and technology, domination of research culture, separation of academic departments and civic content of the general curriculum, and an abandoning of the humanities and classics (Colby, et al., 2003; Gamson, 2000; Schneider, 2000; Thomas, 2000). Schneider (2000) argues that many of these shifts have become detrimental to the civic mission of higher education,

In many fields, skills have become ends. Scholars are busy sorting, counting, and decoding. We are turning out technicians, but the crisis of our time is related not to technical competence, but to a loss of social and historical perspective, to the disastrous divorce of competence from conscience. (p. 104)

Dramatic as it might sound, this is a perspective echoed across much of the writing regarding the civic mission of institutions of higher education today.
When looking at today’s civic context and considering the role that institutions of higher education can play in the development of civic capacities and fostering civic engagement, many agree with Dey, Barnhardt, Antonaros, Ott, & Holsapple (2009) who state that “there is a troubling gap on campuses between aspiration and actuality” (p. vii). Even in reports about renewing civic life, several scholars point out the fact that institutions of higher education are often left out of the discussion, with many reports instead pointing to the role of foundations, voluntary associations, religious communities, media and K-12 schools (Ehrlich, 2000; Schneider, 2000). However, many ask, how is this civic agenda going to stand up against the long and complex list of challenges facing institutions today, including: access, affordability, accountability and learning outcomes, increased diversity of student body, student mental health crisis, global interdependence, focus on research and productivity, student retention, little incentive or reward for faculty engagement, and new forms such a private and online institutions, just to name a few (Colby, et al., 2003; Guarasci, 2012a; Sullivan, 2000).

While the fingers are pointed in many different directions, in terms of what or who is to blame for the movement away from institutions’ civic priorities, there seems to be an underlying agreement from many scholars, practitioners, and associations that moving the civic mission back from the margins is an important goal. More often than not, within the literature, there is a call to action to defend the historic civic mission. And many argue that the place to start is within the academy itself (Astin, 2000; Ehrlich, 2000; Colby, et al., 2003; Gamson, 2000). Thomas (2000) points out that in many cases today, higher education is viewed as part of the problem, not part of the solution. There
is a call for institutions to begin to serve as models of engagement. Astin (2000) argues, “we can’t expect our students to develop the personal qualities required for effective citizenship if we don’t model some of those same qualities in our own professional conduct” (p. 129). Sullivan (2000) points out a glaring disconnect between institutions of higher education and their concern for public responsibility, highlighting the fact that many of our top ranking universities sit “amid conditions of urban decay and social neglect” (p. 27).

In addition to serving as role models for engagement, and developing civic capacities of students, some scholars paint a more dire picture, arguing that if institutions are unable to do more than just job training they will see a decline in their value and role in society (Ehrlich, 2000). In his 2012 *Huffington Post* column titled “The Crisis in Higher Education: How Civic Engagement Can Save Higher Education” Guarasci (2012a) echoes this sentiment, claiming that “comprehensive and demanding civic engagement programs will help colleges and universities find new relevance” (para. 9). Beyond the inherent good of civic education and engagement to develop an informed citizenry, recent research has also lauded the positive impacts of civic engagement programs on college access and retention success, as well (Cress, C., Burack, C., Giles, D., Elkins, J., & Stevens, M., 2010).

Many scholars echo Guarasci’s (2012a) point and still see the potential and importance of higher education in shaping civic life (Astin, 2000; Boyte & Kari, 2000; Colby, et al., 2003; Ehrlich, 2000; Schneider, 2000; Sullivan 2000). They discuss the fact that college is one of the last stages of formal education, which presents a tremendous
opportunity and responsibility to impact student’s civic development (Colby, et al, 2003; Schneider, 2000; Sullivan, 2000). Colby, et al. (2003) portray the college years as pivotal for preparing students for an “expedition”, providing them the tools, knowledge and resources needed to succeed in the civic world.

It is important to balance these perspectives though, with the honest reflection that schools alone cannot be the sole providers of civic education. As Boggs (1991) conveys, “whatever civic education is provided in the formal educational system, it is insufficient to sustain a person for life-long engagement in democracy” (p.ix). He continues, “neither newly emerging nor well-established democracies can entrust to schools the sole responsibility for education in the lifelong and evolving phenomenon of citizenship” (Boggs, 1991, p. x). While the focus of this study is on the role of Higher Education, and community colleges specifically, it will also provide a space to introduce the plethora of additional influences on civic identity including family, neighborhood organizations, religious influences and work related experiences.

With this in mind, many scholars are still hopeful about the future role that higher education will play in shaping the civic life of America. They point to the booming expansion of national organizations like Campus Compact, Americorps, and Learn and Serve America, and the increase in problem-based pedagogies such as service-learning and experiential learning over the past two decades (Campus Compact, 2016; Colby, et al., 2003; Dey, et al., 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

It is important to note that much of the literature which calls attention to the decline in civic commitment on the part of institutions of higher education, was written in
the late 1990’s and early 2000s, including the landmark “Wingspread Declaration for Renewing the Civic Mission of American Research Universities” written by Harry Boyte and Elizabeth Hollander in 1999. In the early 2000s and more currently today, much that is being written is about the work of organizations and associations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Civic Learning initiatives and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching’s Elective Community Engagement Classification, and assessing the positive impact that initiatives like this are having. It appears that some of these earlier calls to action have resulted in some tangible movement of the civic mission becoming more central to some institutions. More recent work focuses more on intentionality and sustainability of these efforts, more collaboration, and on assessing outcomes (Campus Compact, 2016; Dey, et al., 2009; Guarasci, 2012b).

Overall, questions about the role of higher education in fostering civic engagement seems to be less about its inherent value, and more about how we achieve this mission, whose role it is to carry out, how we foster more dialogue about the multiple aims of college, and addressing the many, many challenges and barriers that prevent it from coming into focus. Colby, et al. (2003) are not alone as they ask these questions, and declare that “these are the issues at the heart of democracy’s future in America” (p.ix). Astin (2000) and Boyte and Kari (2000) point out that restoring colleges and universities as agents of civic renewal will require significant changes across practices, leadership, systems, and beliefs.
Civic Empowerment Gap

“As youth move amid distinct community and school contexts they have a variety of experiences that shape them as citizens, some positive, some more complicated” (Rubin, 2012, p. 5)

As demonstrated previously, while it is recognized that it is not the only channel for engagement, the role of schools to develop student’s civic capacity, knowledge, and efficacy is generally agreed upon in the literature. To clarify what is expected of civic education within schools, I utilize the definition put forth by CIRCLE and Carnegie Corporation (2003) in their report The Civic Mission of Schools, where they define quality civic education, as that which “should help young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives” (p.43). However, the effectiveness of this mission within our schools, particularly for marginalized communities, is of serious concern. Even more deplorable than the bleak civic snapshot explored in the previous section are the statistics that expose this tremendous civic gap that persists within our communities, highlighting the inexcusable division of engagement between individuals of different income levels and race. While I believe that our commitment to civic education and engagement is generally weak in our schools across the board, the focus for this study is on those most impacted by this civic empowerment gap – primarily urban, low income, minority students (Hart & Atkins, 2003; Levinson, 2012; Rubin, 2007).

Current research shows that low-income and minority student populations often have lower quality and quantity of civic opportunities during their K-12 years, which results in lower civic engagement as demonstrated by traditional participation measures,
such as voting and volunteering (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2009; Rubin, 2007). Study after study has demonstrated that efficacy, knowledge, participation, and civic opportunity is lower for minority and lower socioeconomic students across the country (Astin, 2000; Butin, 2007; Colby, et al., 2003; Flanagan, et al., 2009; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2009; Lopez & Kolaczkowski, 2003; PACE, 2010; Syversten, et al., 2011; Zaff, et al., 2009). Studies have found that disparities in testing scores of civic knowledge and skills emerge as early as fourth grade (Levinson, 2012).

Outside the classroom, in the 2008 election, voting rates for individuals with income levels under $20,000 were 52%, compared with those of individuals with income levels over $150,000 which were at 82% (Levinson, 2012). Beyond participation measures, low-income students also express a civic identity characterized by hopelessness and lower self-efficacy around the impact and effect of their actions in their communities when compared with their higher income peers (Butin, 2007; Hart & Atkins, 2002; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2009; Rubin, 2007). Levinson (2012) calls our attention to this,

profound civic empowerment gap – as large and disturbing as the reading and math achievement gaps that have received significant national attention – between ethnoracial minority, naturalized, and especially poor citizens, on one hand, and White, native born, and especially middle class and wealthy citizens on the other. (p. 32)

This civic empowerment gap prevents effective participation and engagement in the wider democratic community (Butin, 2007; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2012;
Rubin, 2007). Levinson (2012) also highlights the fact that this gap has not always existed, explaining how the role of unions, fraternal organizations, and political parties used to be some accessible vehicles to mobilization around community and national issues for low income and minority communities (p. 48).

There are numerous additional factors explored in the literature related to this civic engagement or civic empowerment gap, including a lack of adult mentors and civic role models, neighborhoods that vary in positive civic resources, the changing nature of mediating institutions such as community organizations, and access to public space and facilities (Boyte & Kari, 2000; Hart & Atkins, 2002; Zaff, Youniss & Gibson, 2009). However the most urgent message is related to the lack of access and meaningful opportunity for developing important civic knowledge, skills, personal efficacy, and motivation (Astin, 2000; Butin, 2007; Colby, et al., 2003; Flanagan, et al., 2009; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2009; Lopez & Kolaczkowski, 2003; PACE, 2010; Syversten, et al., 2011; Zaff, et al., 2009). Numerous studies have demonstrated that civic experiences as youth, such as volunteering and project-based learning in a community context, are the foundation for positive civic identity development (Rubin 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1999; Youniss, McLellen, & Yates, 1997). Zaff, et al. (2009) discuss the role that unions, churches, social movements, and other voluntary associations used to provide for low-income and non-college bound youth to attend meetings, work on community projects, and meet elected officials. This civic empowerment gap involves the lack of voice and participation of a large segment of our communities in political and social decision-making.
Schools Helping or Hindering Civic Development?

The role of schools in addressing, or perpetuating this civic engagement gap, is continually referenced throughout literature. Kahne and Middaugh (2008) declare,

Schools, rather than helping to equalize the capacity and commitments needed for democratic participation, appear to be exacerbating this inequality by providing more preparation for those who are already likely to attain a disproportionate amount of civic and political voice. (p. 18)

They found that that students who are more academically successful, white, or of higher socioeconomic status have more classroom-based civic learning opportunities. Just as Bourdieu (1973) worked to demonstrate that educational achievement is reflective of economic status, more recent research has shown that educational attainment is the single most highly correlated variable with civic knowledge, skills, democratic civic attitudes, and active civic engagement (Hyman & Levine, 2008; Levinson, 2012).

Syversten, et al. (2011) found indications of this differentiation of opportunity, as well as quality of civic programs, particularly when comparing high poverty school districts with that of low poverty school districts. The work of Flanagan, et al. (2009) is in-line with these findings, highlighting the fact that those who attain higher levels of education are more likely to be in environments where they accrue civic resources and knowledge, are recruited to join an organization or participate, and feel more peer pressure to become engaged because others around them are participating. Sax (2004) discusses empowerment and finds the socioeconomic status of peer groups to be influential, “attending a college that enrolls students from wealthier and more highly
educated families tends to promote students’ post-college belief that individuals have the ability to change society” (p. 76).

What is the risk of this civic empowerment gap? Flanagan, et al. (2009) argue that “when young people are not engaged in these ways, society misses their contributions: their ideas, energy, and social networks” (p. 10). Kahne and Middaugh (2008) cite the American Political Science Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy (2004) which reported,

The privileged participate more than others and are increasingly well organized to press their demands on government... Citizens with low or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government, while the advantaged roar with the clarity and consistency that policymakers readily head. (p.3)

Finally, Levinson (2012) challenges us to consider the impact that this gap has on our democracy as a whole, stating “the civic empowerment gap harms all Americans because it weakens the quality and integrity of our democracy” (p. 48).

Numerous scholars are focusing their efforts on recommendations for policy, practice, and future research related to addressing this civic engagement gap (Flanagan, et al., 2009; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Kiesa, et al., 2012; PACE, 2010). While much of the research in this area referenced elementary and K-12 initiatives, policies, and programs, I also see important connections between the role of higher education in developing civic capacities and civic engagement amongst students, and the role that
higher education (especially community colleges) can play in bridging this civic empowerment gap.

**Community College Context**

“When students engage in a curriculum that focuses simultaneously on developing professional skills and civic responsibility, more often than not, they learn more deeply, what they learn lasts longer, and what they do with what they learn is more meaningful. The dual focus is a win-win situation—for students and for the communities served by their colleges.” (Albert, 2004, p. 44)

As the introduction highlighted, there is a noted lack of research examining the civic development and engagement of community college students (Hollander & Burack, 2008; Newell, 2011; Taggart & Crisp, 2011). In Hollander and Burack’s 2008 report, Lori Vogelgesang notes a disproportionate number of studies focused on traditional-age (18-24 year olds) college students and highlights this as an important limitation in the field, as this work does not consider the diversity and complexity of today’s college populations. Additionally, research related to the role of K-12 institutions and community organizations in addressing the civic empowerment gap for youth is becoming readily available, however there is a very limited scope of work examining the role that institutions of Higher Education can play in addressing and narrowing this gap for low income and minority students.

Community colleges can be a vital context for understanding civic identity development, as well as addressing the civic empowerment gap. Community colleges enroll about 45 percent of all U.S. undergraduates (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). According to the American Association for Community Colleges
(2016) enrollment data, there are over 4.5 million students enrolled at community colleges part-time, and 2.8 million enrolled on a full-time basis. Based on its historic mission of educational access, community colleges continue to enroll higher percentages of first-generation college students than four-year institutions, as well as higher percentages of low socioeconomic status students, minority and adult students (Council of Graduate Students, 2012). In 2016, 36% of community college students identified as first in their family to attend college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016).

**Competing Priorities**

Based on this information, the reach and potential impact that Community Colleges could have on the civic empowerment and civic identity development of students is clear, however with continued changes in technology, the economy, and diminishing resource allocations, the civic role of community colleges appears to be eroding. In the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2012) “21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges” report, there is little to no mention of this historic civic mission, instead focusing more heavily on student completion and job preparation (still both extremely valid and vital areas to focus, of course). This AACC (2012) report does highlight a commitment to one of the fundamental aspects of the community college system, which is access to education.

The Commission believes that the unique and powerful contribution of community colleges lies in preserving access while also emphasizing student success, enhancing quality, and closing attainment gaps associated
with income, race and ethnicity, and gender. To abandon the open door
would be to betray the historic mission of these institutions. (p. 20)

While access is still a top priority for community colleges, a renewed focus on
careerism has some worried about the implications of this on the realization of a civic
mission. In their book *Community Colleges As Cultural Texts*, Shaw, Valadez and
Rhoads (1999) reflect on the work of Paulo Freire and argue,

> The goal of education should not only be to prepare people for jobs, but just as importantly, students ought to be encouraged to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to participate in shaping reality and transforming society. They need to understand their potential as democratic citizens to contribute to the social and political concerns of society. (p.113).

While preparation for careers is vitally important, they criticized what they sees as the lack of “a critical discourse about education and its role in the development of citizens who have lives beyond the world of work” (p. 118).

Albert (2004) suggests that it is possible for community colleges to balance the focus on job preparation and occupational training with a commitment to citizenship education. He argues,

> When college students find ways to combine education for productive work with education for responsible citizenship, the balance between workplace productivity and civic engagement provides both financial rewards and a deep sense of satisfaction associated with contributing to the vitality of the communities where they work and live. (p. 43)
Albert (2004) argues that “doing well and doing good” are not mutually exclusive ideas within the community college context, and portrays the deep commitments that many community college students feel for their local neighborhoods (p. 44). The work of Taggart and Crisp (2011) and Barnett (1996) echo the importance of local community engagement as a way for community colleges to fulfill their mission. Barnett (1996) highlights the ripple effect that can occur when engaging community college students in their local communities, “students are local, with strong personal ties to community businesses, organizations, and other residents. They bring what they learn home and to work. The influence of what they learn affects their behavior in their communities” (p. 9).

**Revealing the Civic Potential of Community Colleges**

In 2010, Pathways to Academic and Career Excellence (PACE) issued a report entitled “Civic Pathways Out of Poverty and into Opportunity” that highlights how community colleges can serve as a vital pathway to civic engagement. Sullivan (2000), too, touts the civic role of community colleges stating, “community colleges are showing new vitality by reclaiming their role as innovators in expanding educational opportunity and as a site for civic development” (p. 20). These reports are situated only among a small, but growing body of research addressing civic engagement and civic education at community colleges.

As a clearinghouse and developer of research and training in this area, the Community College National Center for Community Engagement (CCNCCE) existed from 1990 until 2015 and sought to increase community college student engagement through community service and service-learning. CCNCCE shared the stories of
community college community engagement initiatives through journals, publications, and trainings, but focused its efforts primarily on the development and support of service-learning initiatives (Community College National Center for Community Engagement, 2015). Additionally, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) recently released its report about the Broadening Horizons through Service Learning Project, which began in 2009 and was designed to “integrate service-learning into the institutional climate of community colleges and to increase the number, quality, and sustainability of service learning programs in higher education (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013). This report highlights the challenges and successes of the eight mentor schools selected to participate. However, even these valuable efforts represent only a small segment of the literature related to civic development and higher education. Additionally, the majority of work is focused on service-learning, which, while effective, is just one strategy for fostering civic engagement and civic identity development in college students.

Albert (2004) expresses disappointment at this lack of awareness around community college’s larger civic impact,

Despite the high enrollment numbers and growing indicators of community college participation in the national civic engagement movement, public understanding of the community colleges' role in this arena appears to be quite limited. The contributions community college students are making to the vitality of their communities are, too often, well-kept secrets. (p. 46)
Similarly, Prentice’s (2007) work focuses on the gap in research related to community colleges, service-learning, and social justice work. She argues,

Lack of research does not mean lack of interest: It is possible that social justice work, defined here as focusing on both the social forces that create inequities as well as the individuals experiencing the inequities, is prominent in community colleges instruction but not made known through published articles, as few community college faculty members take time from teaching to document the work they do. (p. 267)

In addition to the lack of general attention to community colleges within the literature on civic engagement, an additional critique of previous research in this area is the overwhelming focus on program evaluation, as opposed to student development and learning. As Taggart and Crisp (2011) convey this trend has, “influenced the outcomes of interest toward program satisfaction or merit and worth rather than measuring the influence of programs on student success and/or civic involvement” (p. 33).

**Expanding Perspectives on Adult Civic Education**

Another opportunity presented by situating this study within the Community College context is the opportunity to include the voices and perspectives of adult (non-traditional age) students, which are also often under-represented in the literature on civic engagement (Hollander & Burrack, 2008). There are a diversity of perspectives and interests in the literature related to adult development, civic engagement and adult civic education. Some scholars advocate for the potential of formal schooling to empower adults through education and experience, often times specifically referencing the
potential of service-learning pedagogy (Hollander & Robinson, 2008; Smith, 2008). Other scholars in this space refer to the historic movements of non-formal adult civic education, which empowered people to mobilize and take action for change, such as the Highlander Folk School and League of Women’s Voters (Boggs, 1991; Imel, 2012). In addition to historic perspectives, some literature has started illuminating the ways that new technology, such as blogs and social media, influence adult civic engagement (Black, 2012). Another “trendy” form of adult civic engagement that has been explored is that of the “critical shopper”, whereby consumers “attempt to connect personal shopping and consumption to aspects of contemporary globalization that they find troubling” (Jubas, 2012, p. 61). From the marketplace to the local community, there is a large literature base focused on the ways that experience with community and grassroots organizations can influence adult civic education and engagement (Jones & Gasiorksi, 2008; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008; Gouthro, 2012). Gouthro (2012) explains that “grassroots orgs provide many important democratic learning opportunities for adults, including learning for social change, learning around governance, and learning for active citizenship” (p. 51). Finally, religious involvement has been identified as a key influence for many adult’s civic involvement (McBride, Sherraden & Pritzker, 2006).

With such a range of considerations available it can be overwhelming to consider all the influences that are at play when exploring perspectives on adult civic engagement. However, it is interesting to note that there is one underlying factor that resonates throughout much of the literature on this topic, and it is similar to that found in literature
on youth civic engagement. Boggs (1991) calls this the “civic educational imperative” and argues that,

Adult education agencies should facilitate understanding of community problems and choices, equip citizens to participate intelligently and skillfully in the democratic process, and augment the learning that accrues from such participation with opportunities to reflect and dialogue about the experience. (p. 7)

Similar to literature on youth civic engagement much of the literature on adult civic education focuses on the importance of access to and knowledge of opportunities for involvement, appropriate knowledge and civic capacity building, and providing the opportunity for reflection and dialogue about ones experience.

Boggs (1991) also contends that civic education in adulthood may actually be a more appropriate time than during the turmoil of adolescence,

These later intellectual stages, perhaps more pronounced during adult years, are by definition more conceptually inclusive and discriminating. A fundamental premise of this research is that the adult years are a fruitful, and probably more appropriate time than adolescence for civic education to produce citizenship in full bloom. (p.65)

As I will explore later, there is strong support in the literature for early civic experiences in youth as a key predictor of later sustained engagement in adults, however this perspective on the potential of intentional civic education for adults adds additional incentive to community colleges to consider their role in this civic realm. While I interviewed participants from ages 20 – 48, it is valuable to recognize the contribution
that this study can make for understanding the perspectives of adult (non-traditional age) students related to their own civic beliefs and actions.

**Positioning This Study**

In addition to the lack of presence of community colleges in the literature on civic engagement, the vast majority of research in the community college context is focused very specifically on service-learning or is quantitative in nature (Barnett, 1996; Prentice, 2006; Prentice, 2011; Robinder, 2012; Taggart & Crisp, 2011). Therefore, instead of jumping right in to evaluate programs or determine community college best practices related to civic engagement initiatives, I have utilized this study to access an under-represented perspective in the literature – that of the *community college student*. As Rubin (2007) conveys, “little is known about how students themselves define and understand civic life, apart from researcher-devised definitions” (p. 453). Additionally, the majority of research related to civic engagement and civic identity development is framed by traditional measures of civic engagement and fails to account for the influence of pre-college experiences (Hollander & Burack, 2008). Students bring with them personal experiences that have (either positively or negatively) shaped their civic identities. Rubin (2012) shares,

Decades of quantitative study of youth civic knowledge and beliefs gives us a lot of information about what students do and do not know as measured by researcher-determined measures of significant civic knowledge. Such studies, however, give us little insight into what is actually meaningful and relevant to students as they enter into civic learning. (p. 5)
It is with this framework in mind that I approached the study of civic identity within a community college context.
CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EXPLORING CIVIC IDENTITY

“Students aren’t empty vessels waiting to be filled with appropriate civic attitudes and knowledge, rather they come into the classroom already having at least partially constructed their own understanding of civic identity, of their membership in or exclusion from the polity, and even of history’s significance and meaning for their own lives.”

(Levinson, 2012)

When faced with questions about why some students continue on as civically active community members, while others retreat to disconnected, individualistic lives, civic identity has been suggested as a potential correlation (Rubin, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1999). This chapter provides an overview of the development and various strands of research related to the concept of civic identity. It also provides conceptual clarification for the framework upon which this study is based (APPENDIX E). This study seeks to explore students’ perceptions of their own civic identity development as it encompasses an individual’s sense of belonging, civic beliefs, and efficacy of participation in the civic community (Rubin, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 2006).

Understanding Civic Identity: Recent Developments

Late 1980s and early 1990s perspectives within educational literature on civic identity were situated around the exposure of students to perspectives beyond their own self-interests, fostering community pride, developing a sense of civic responsibility, and discovering one’s unique civic voice (Carwin, 1990; Kiernan, 1990). There was great
interest in “civic writing” and the role of other disciplines, beyond social studies, to
tackle these civic issues in the classroom (Stotsky, 1987). At the Fall 1987 conference of
the New England Association of Teachers of English, Sandra Stotsky, conveyed,

Without a civic identity, political participation may be little more than self-
serving, manipulative, or cynical. Without a civic identity, there can be no
self-interest or group interest "rightfully understood." Without a civic
identity, there is no way to transcend self-interest for the sake of a common
good. (Kiernan, 1990, p. 44)

Miranda Yates and James Youniss laid the groundwork for more recent
developments and inquiry around the concept of civic identity, although primarily
focused on youth. Youniss, McLellan and Yates (1997) established a developmental
paradigm for civic identity and conveyed the importance of early civic experiences for
later, sustained engagement in adulthood. The key aspects of their initial definition
focused on the establishment of individual and collective senses of social agency,
responsibility for society, and political-moral awareness (Youniss, et al., 1997).
Furthermore, they established the importance of civic identity as a way to understand,
“continuity in civic orientation in the face of distinctly different behaviors over time” (p.
629).

They elaborated on this perspective further in their book *Roots of Civic Identity*
(Yates & Youniss, 1999), which broadened the conversation to an international
perspective, providing a global sampling of research on youth civic identity amidst
distinct governmental systems and social institutions. Their perspective on civic identity
is captured in this statement, “a sense of who one is in relation to society, and desire to be an active member in that society’s present and future” (p. 273). However, it is interesting to note that even within this framework many of the works included in their book revert to traditional notions of civic engagement, from exploring a “volunteer identity” to “adolescent altruism” which are examples focused primarily on community service hours.

Many scholars have added to and refined this conceptualization, including Atkins and Hart (2003) who discuss civic identity as a sense of connection to a community and aspects of entitlement and responsibilities (p. 156). Nasir and Kirshner (2003) also focus on this sense of connection and participation. Knefelkamp (2008) wraps a wide variety of considerations into her explanation of the concept, including notions such as idealism, realism, discernment, justice-seeking and courage to act. She argues that civic identity is "an identity status in its own right," and should be "one of the outcomes of a liberal education” (p. 2).

Others who have built on the foundation of civic identity and considered new branches include Flanagan, Martinez and Cusille (2010) who examine the collective nature of citizenship and civic identity. The work of Martinez, Penaloza and Valenzuela (2012) also elaborates on this collective aspect, stating, “the civic components of identity comprise processes by which adolescents transcend self-interest and aim to contribute to a larger cause, group, or interest” (p. 475). Kirshner (2009) would agree that civic identity involves a connection to a larger whole, but within the context of youth organizing, on which he focuses, he argues that there is an element of self-interest
involved. He states,

whereas civic identity has sometimes been operationalized in terms of altruistic behavior, it has a different meaning in the context of youth organizing, which emphasizes identifying and advocating for shared interests. Such an approach is generative—it seeks to change public systems for the better—but it is not selfless. (p. 434).

Kirshner’s work connects to a much larger theme that is frequently paralleled or overlaid with civic identity, which is moral identity development (Colby, Ehrlic, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003). Porter (2013) highlights the role of civic values in the development of civic identity, and shares “identity is linked to civic action by the assumption that individuals are motivated to act in ways consistent with their core self” (p240).

Finally, the term “civic identity” is used in conjunction with or in alternating place of many other terms, including “citizens identity” (Torney-Purta, 2002), “citizenship development” (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002), “positive citizenship” (Zaff, Malanchuk & Eccles, 2008) and “civic minded” (Steinberg, Hatcher & Bringle, 2011). Additionally, the term has started to become institutionalized at campuses focusing on civic outcomes for their students. Through the work of initiatives like the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) *Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) Rubric* for civic engagement, attention to this wider lens of civic development is growing (2013). The VALUE rubric defines civic identity as, “when one sees her or himself as an active participant in society with a strong
commitment and responsibility to work with others towards public purposes” (2013). This definition resonates with much of the work previously described.

Overall, while there is far less focus within the literature specifically on the concept of civic identity, when compared with many other facets of civic engagement inquiry, I find it to be a very promising and valuable paradigm through which to approach our work with students. As with many terms such as civic engagement, democracy, leadership, there are different perspectives on the topic, as will be explored next, but the underlying attention to broadening student’s civic lenses to focus on community issues and fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility within one’s community provides a great starting place.

**Connecting the Civic to Self: Theory, Typology, and Current Frameworks**

While underlying assumptions about civic identity in the literature are complimentary, there are a variety of approaches taken to operationalize it within the realm of education and in schools. These various frameworks and typologies highlight different influences and important considerations that are relevant for anyone concerned with the civic future of our students and society. Key themes that I will highlight include, the habitual nature of civic identity and importance of civic practice and experience, the significance of civic contexts in the development of civic identity, and the connection to moral development and other developmental theories.

**Learn by Doing: Opportunity to Practice in the Civic Realm**

Civic identity is frequently explored as a developmental process, whereby practice and experience are essential and influential (Rubin, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1999;
Youniss, et al., 1997). Youniss, et al. (1997) developed a perspective that they call “a new approach to socialization” aimed at challenging previously proposed models that viewed youth “as passive in receiving wisdom from adults” (p. 8). They advocate for the role of cognitive activity and engagement in the process, as opposed to passive internalization of a civic self. Yates and Youniss (1999) describe this paradigm as one that,

gives priority to the acquisition of practices that may be habitual insofar as they are long lasting and become integral to one’s identity. Rather than viewing practices as discrete behaviors, they are more appropriately construed as habitual ways of acting that are a part of a person’s self-concepts, or essential components of a person’s identity. (p. 8)

Hence the focus of their work emphasizes the importance of early experience in the civic realm, as opposed to solely looking outward to blame societal culprits for youth and adult disengagement. They advocate for training in civic practice through organizational involvement and service (Youniss, et al., 1997). They highlight the desired outcomes of these early civic experiences, which include, developing important civic skills, such as communication and collaboration, as well as the development of civic values often espoused by community organizations. The ultimate outcome of these early opportunities to wade into the civic realm is to develop a sense of self as a “civic actor” and to begin understanding the larger scope of how individuals and groups can and should influence society (Youniss, et al, 1997, p. 625). The combination of these skills, knowledge, and values, according to Yates and Youniss (1999), “can effectively result in
identity-forming political habits that become part of the individual’s self-definition and shape the individuals relationship to society” (p. 7).

While not the primary focus of her civic identity typology, Rubin (2007) also addresses the importance of civic experiences in the developmental process. She specifically highlights the influence of extra-curricular activities and community service, which she discovered in her research. She shares, “service work contributed to students’ altered perceptions of themselves from politically impotent teenagers to involved citizens who now and in the future could use their talent and power to correct social problems” (p. 454).

Overall, this framework emphasizes the developmental nature of civic identity, particularly for youth, and empowers us to consider the role that adults, schools, and community organizations can play in providing and encouraging these meaningful and impactful early civic opportunities. It is interesting to consider the actions of some of our great civic leaders as simply habits that have developed from previous experiences and practice, but the habitual nature of acting based on a sense of self in community is prevalent in research on civic identity. Knefelkamp (2008) highlights this as an essential characteristic of civic identity, describing a framework that “requires the development of skills, knowledge, dispositions, and habits” integrated into “a holistic practice that becomes a deliberately chosen and repeatedly enacted aspect of the self” (p. 3).

This study, which involves community college students from diverse life-experiences and representing a spectrum of ages, allowed me to learn about the early civic experiences of my participants as children and teenagers, which has certainly been
influential in their civic identity development (both positively and negatively), while also extending this perspective to examine if these same civic habits seem to evolve as adults, as well. As these theories highlight the role of early civic experiences and influential civic actors for youth development, this study allows a space to explore how and if these same assumptions are relevant in adult civic identity formation, and what additional factors become relevant in this process as adults.

**What They Do Matters: Service, Social Justice, and Activism**

Thus, we come to the conclusion that in terms of civic identity development *experience* matters, but there is prevalent research calling attention to *what* students do as an equal matter of importance. Simply *doing* may result in some short-term civic gains, however we are continually learning more about the impact that various approaches to civic engagement have on long-term, sustained engagement, as well as civic identity development. Youniss et al. (1997) were aware of this and called attention to the longitudinal studies that demonstrate the influence that youth and adolescent experiences such as participating with the civil-rights and anti-war movements had on adult civic identity. They referenced the work of Dimartini (1983), who found that activist youth became less radical over time, but maintained some non-mainstream political beliefs, and demonstrated some differences from non-activist youth as adults in political civic-activism (p. 627). Those who participated as youth activists were found to be active in groups, demonstrations, and political activities decades later (Youniss et al, 1997). Additionally, they discuss the work of McAdam (1988) and his study of Freedom Summer participants during the Civil Rights Movement who were found to also be
distinct from non-participants in sustained civic involvement as adults (Youniss et al., 1997).

Yates and Youniss (1999) point to key aspects of these early civic experiences that seemed to have had the greatest influence on individual’s civic identity. They cite the opportunity that youth activists had to develop increased awareness of social problems and to establish connections with community organizations and other social movement leaders who were committed to social activism as two key influences. Additionally, the opportunity to work to alleviate real community problems was also identified as a key influence in long-term civic identity (Yates & Youniss, 1999). Yates and Youniss (1999) also reiterate a message that is a staple in literature on service and service-learning, which is that students who had the opportunity to discuss, write, and actively reflect about their civic experiences with others were more likely to connect these larger social issues and challenges to their own emerging identities.

My study entered this space by exploring whether participants identified any experiences from their youth, such as those highlighted by the literature, that were influential on their own civic thinking and actions. Equally as important, this study provides an opportunity to examine whether these same civic experiences, suggested in youth literature as influential (working to alleviate real community problems, gaining a heightened awareness of social problems, and establishing connections with community organizations and community leaders) are influential in civic identity development as adults. This also opened a space to explore additional civic experiences, perhaps not reflected in the literature on youth, that adult students identify as important.
Understanding this in the context of the current literature provides some important insights for community colleges looking to address the civic identity development of their diverse student populations.

Many studies, most often with a focus on service-learning, demonstrate the range of differing outcomes that result based on the approach and underlying assumptions of the course or project (Iverson & James, 2013; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996; Morton, 1995). Iverson and James (2013) examined the role that change-oriented service-learning had on the civic identity and civic-political development of students. Change-oriented service-learning, as described in this work, challenges students to examine social issues at a deeper level with a focus on developing the skills to work for social change. Through the lens of Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship they determined that “change-oriented service-learning was well suited to the aims of self-authorship for civic-political identity because it attends explicitly to students’ cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal growth” (p. 91). Furthermore, Kahne and Westheimer (1996) asked, “what values do service-learning models seek to promote? What kinds of relationships develop between students and those they serve? What kind of society does service-learning ask students to work towards?” (p. 2). They convey the importance of clarifying these ideological values that underlie service-learning programs. Even within the literature on adult civic education, concerns arise about the watered-down or a-political nature of many civic experiences, “Adult education agencies have avoided engagement with the turbulent political world of choices and dilemmas associated with citizenship, preferring instead the placid environment of academic subject matter, certificates and diplomas (Boggs,
Overall, each of these examples point to the importance of purposeful and intentionally designed civic opportunities for students, as youth or adults, that not only give them the opportunity to participate and learn, but that challenge them to dig deeper and examine root causes and connections between the complex landscape of social and global issues and their own beliefs and actions. This work also reiterates the importance of critical reflection, exposure to civic role models, and the opportunity for students to work in contexts that can affect real, tangible change.

**Civic Context and Civic Identity**

Just as what students do matters, there is growing attention to the diverse civic contexts and environments in which students live and learn about their civic worlds. Civic identity does not develop in a vacuum. From changing forms of government and exposure to war, community violence and civil strife, to vastly different neighborhood and school contexts, many scholars position their civic identity concerns within this space. Rubin (2007) conveys, “civic experiences may differ sharply depending upon how students are situated socially, historically, and culturally” (p. 451). This examination in the literature takes place from many different perspectives.

Yates and Youniss (1999) agree that, “we need to take into account the contexts in which students are living, the structural conditions that shape their horizons, and the institutions that guide their development” (p. 12). In their work, from an international perspective, they demonstrate how key events, eras of war, mass immigration, changes in government and overall exposure to societal conflict influences the identity development.
of youth in both the civic and moral realms. While the scope of this study does not allow for a thorough review of this specific work, it is important to note that they identify the inequalities of the United States as the largest gap in income and civic participation. They share that the “inequalities in participation are more pronounced in US than in other democratic countries” (p. 140).

The work of Atkins and Hart (2003) and Rubin (2007) pick up right at this gap. Atkins and Hart (2003) demonstrate that, “paradoxically, factors in high-poverty, urban neighborhoods, where the need for civically engaged individuals is greatest, inhibit the development of civic identity, which is crucial for sustained civic engagement” (p.156). Issues of social distrust, lower community levels of civic participation, and fewer adults overall, all contribute to the challenge of developing a civic identity (Atkins & Hart, 2003). Their work concurs with Youniss and Yates (1997) and the demonstration that opportunities to participate and contribute to one’s community are vital to the development of a positive civic identity. Additionally, they suggest that the acquisition of civic knowledge and values are key in order to feel connected to one’s community. Atkins and Hart (2003) attend to the importance of adult role models and acknowledge that youth in high-poverty, urban neighborhoods often have less of an opportunity to connect with civically engaged adults when compared with affluent peers who have more privileged civic positions within the current civic structure. This is a powerful finding, and they convey, “as children mature into adolescents, the adults that live in their neighborhoods, coach their teams, and work in their schools may exert more influence on their development than the adults in their homes” (p. 158).
We see the impact of this civic context in traditional measurements of civic engagement and knowledge as students in high-poverty neighborhoods were 50% less likely to participate in community service and scored significantly lower on tests of civic knowledge (Atkins & Hart, 2003). As Atkins and Hart (2003) suggest, the impacts are far greater than these traditional measures and have sustained impact in the stunted development of civic identity.

Rubin’s (2007) socio-cultural approach to civic identity development stresses that “civic identity is both locally constructed and situated amid larger structural inequalities” (p. 473). Specifically, Rubin’s (2007) work focuses on the civic identity development of low income and racially diverse youth. Her work highlights the fact that the daily experiences of youth from diverse backgrounds result in a wide variety of civic experiences and perspectives brought to the classroom. As Rubin (2007) suggests, “schools can either hinder or encourage development of engaged, action-oriented civic identities among students from various context” (p.449). Rubin, Hayes, and Benson (2009) suggest, “urban youth have daily school and community experiences with poverty, violence, and injustice that complicate their relationship with civic life” (p. 213).

Rubin (2007) has developed a typology of civic identity that challenges the view of urban, minority youth as disengaged and disinterested. The four categories of her typology include: aware, empowered, complacent and discouraged (Rubin, 2007, p. 458). These four categories are placed within two axes. These two axes reflect the earlier components of the conceptualization of civic identity – including (1) the connection felt towards ones community, as well as (2) the responsibility felt towards action. The first
axis reflects congruence or disjuncture, which pinpoints how closely a students’ lived experience reflects the professed ideals of the society. The second axis examines students’ active or passive attitude towards civic participation. Through this typology Rubin (2007) concludes, “what has previously been described as “disengagement” in the civic education literature may actually, for marginalized students, be a rational response to the disjunctures they experience in a society that purports equality but delivers injustice” (p. 473). She moves forward from this typology to demonstrate that “the recognition and exploration of problems or disjunctures appeared to stimulate a more active understanding of civic engagement” (p. 474). Students that have previously been labeled as disengaged and disinterested in the civic process, may be more likely to engage when their lived experiences are relevant and the environment welcomes their perspectives of community to the table.

Zaff, Malanchuk and Eccles (2008) build on Youniss and Yate’s (1999) work, as well as Rubin’s (2007), to develop their framework examining civic context and civic identity development. Their framework situates the individual within a social context as well as taking into account their individual civic experiences when considering civic identity development. Zaff, et al. (2008) state, “we posit that factors that exist both within the youth, such as values, and external to the youth, such as socializing agents, work in concert to encourage or deter civic identity development” (p.38). For Zaff, et al (2008) civic experiences are situated amongst a variety of social influences, including family, peer groups, school, culture, religion and involvement in groups or extracurricular activities. One key development from this work is the idea that consistency matters.
Earlier civic experiences must be persistent in later environments, for example moving from high school to college, in order to promote a sustained civic identity into adulthood. Zaff, et al. (2008) suggest, “age appropriate civic context should be in place throughout childhood in order to encourage the summative development of civic knowledge, skills, engagement, and eventual identity” (p. 38).

Flanagan, Martinez, and Cusille (2010) expand the perspective of civic context to explore the role of “civil society” and its influence in the development of civic identity formation. Civil society, according to Flanagan, et al. (2010) is “a sector that is neither the market nor the government, but that, in its practices, stabilizes and challenges those sectors” including families, schools, faith-based and community based organizations (p. 113). Though their study examines the marginalization and social exclusion of youth in Chile, the connections that they make between the civic environment and opportunity for participation and eventual civic identity development easily translates to the United States. As they stress, “in their policies and practices, mediating institutions configure the behavioral and imaginative options children can consider and inform their normative beliefs” (Flanagan, et al., 2010, p. 119). Flanagan, et al. (2010) reinforce the impact and potential of schools and community organizations to foster civic values and skills, as well as the importance of a pro-social peer group and civic role models. Additionally, they suggest that a lack of exposure to other political perspectives and beliefs can lead to a “my way is the right way” perspective (p. 123). As they share, “to contest the status quo, people need an alternative vision of the way things could be” (Flanagan, et al., 2010, p. 123). Overall, they hit home a clear message to educators, administrators, and policy
makers, as they convey, “institutions can empower some youth while marginalizing or even oppressing others. All youth may not get the message from teachers, police or government that ‘they belong’ or that ‘their view counts’” (p. 130).

While much of this literature focuses on youth civic development, there are connections within research on adult civic engagement and civic education. In one study, Perkins, Brown, and Taylor (1996) explored the “ecology of empowerment” examining how community characteristics influenced adult residents civic engagement. They found that individual community behaviors, such as the presence of neighboring or volunteering through church communities, were more influential than physical characteristics of the neighborhood. Their results suggest that perceived and actual problems, or deficiencies, in the physical environment may serve as catalysts for participation, but that community social cohesion may be an even more effective enabler, or barrier, of participation. Blocks with more neighboring, satisfaction, and perceived block association efficacy had significantly greater participation.

Finally, as the concept of civic identity becomes more accepted and institutionalized within the realm of higher education we see work such as that of Steinberg, Hatcher and Bringle (2011) becoming of interest. Steinberg, et al. (2011) advance the notion of the “civic minded graduate”, developed by the Center for Service and Learning at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). The Civic Minded Graduate framework demonstrates the influence that college students experience from peers, family, university personnel, and community members (Steinberg, et al., 2011). The definition that IUPUI has developed for a civic minded graduate is, “a person
who has completed a course of study (e.g., bachelor’s degree), and has the capacity and desire to work with others to achieve the common good” (p. 20). Steinberg, et al. (2011) incorporate civic identity as one aspect of the civic-minded graduate, which all-together encompasses identity, educational experiences, and civic experiences. As they explain,

At the intersection of identity and civic experiences is civic identity. The formation of civic identity is a developmental process viewing oneself as an active participant in society with a strong commitment to work with others toward the public good.” (p.21)

**Collective Nature of Civic Identity**

In addition to the types of civic experiences and the influence of civic environments, the role of others is consistently stressed as an important factor in the process of civic identity development. As Flanagan et al. (2010) highlight, “to develop identity, younger citizens need opportunities to bond with others, to work collaboratively toward common ends, to appreciate how their interests are shared with others, and to understand that civic goals are achieved through collective action” (p. 126). This collective nature is the cornerstone of the work of Kirshner (2009) and Martínez, Peñaloza, and Valenzuela (2012).

Kirshner (2009) focused his attention on the potential influence of youth organizing experiences on civic identity development. His framework explored a shift from atomism, which he describes as “a view of society in which persons were isolated actors motivated primarily by their own interests” (p. 425), to collective agency, which emphasized “the virtues of group solidarity and action” (p. 425). It recognized that
community issues, “although experienced at an individual level, were linked to a broader political context, such as state-funding laws or school district policies” (p. 425). Kirshner (2009) highlights the skepticism and cynicism expressed by the atomism perspective, often a “this is just the way things are” attitude (p. 425). On the other hand, students who had been engaged with youth organizing initiatives, such as the Youth Rising movement highlighted in his work, begin to demonstrate a belief in working together and involving others. He states, “youth organizing represents a shift in focus from individual to group—from ‘what I can do’ to ‘what we can do together’” (p. 416). His work highlights the process and transformation that can occur in youth’s civic perspectives, values, and beliefs about work in the civic realm. It not only demonstrates their outward shifts in attitude, but also the internal development of themselves in relation to others and to their community.

Similarly, Martinez, et al. (2012) focus on “civic commitment” which they describe as sustained “membership in organizations or youth-organized groups that work toward pro-social and political goals” (p. 475). Their work demonstrates how youth who are involved with organizations often demonstrate an integration of the values, goals, and beliefs of these organizations into their own identities (p. 474). They also re-iterate the “collective sense of we” that is developed by working with others (p. 474). It is this collective identity that Martinez, et al. (2012) suggest fosters a stronger individual commitment to continue to be engaged. Their work also repeats the critical aspects of this process, including critical reflection and opportunities to learn from others who are different from themselves. As they summarize,
To develop their identities, youth need opportunities to bond with others, to work collaboratively toward common goals, to understand that their interests are shared with others, and that civic goals are achieved through collective action.” (p.482)

This study focuses on students of varied ages, therefore it is important to note that these themes of collaboration and collective action are also reflected in literature on adult civic education. In their study of civic learning among adult volunteers, Mündel and Schugurensky (2008) found that building new relationships and learning to work with others was also identified as one of the most influential aspects of civic learning for adults involved with community organizations. Jubas (2012) also highlights the importance of the collective nature of many of the new social movements, which “offer opportunities for people to learn and act together, based on a broad range of shared identities and interests” (p. 62).

**Civic Identity in Light of Developmental and Learning Theories**

Finally, an area for further exploration within the literature on civic identity is the parallels and distinctions between these frameworks and those of other student development theories. Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development is frequently referenced, particularly in terms of adolescence as a key time for identity formation. Youniss, et al. (1997), Porter (2013), and Yates and Youniss (1999) reference Erikson’s theory of ideological clarification, where youth “struggle with questions of how they fit into a social world extending beyond the immediacy of friends and family” (Yates and Youniss, 1999, p. 19). Hollander and Burack (2008) also highlight the broad spectrum of additional theories that can contribute in meaningful ways to our understanding of civic
identity, these include: transformative learning theories, experiential education (ex. Kolb and others), moral development (ex. Kohlberg, Gilligan), as well as cognitive development, psychosocial development, identity development, and career development (p.4).

To expand on one area, theories of moral development are frequently cited in tandem with theories of civic identity development. Nasir and Kirshner (2003) explore these connections, explaining “moral identity is defined as the convergence of moral ideals and one’s personal identity or as the extent to which commitment to moral values is infused into one’s sense of self” (p. 138). However, they highlight that just as with civic identity, moral thought does not always equate to moral action. They discuss a parallel between moral identity and civic identity help to resolve this incongruity. Porter (2013) highlights the overlap between moral and political identity as it relates to civic involvement and identity (although he primarily discusses this in terms of volunteering and political action). He references Erikson’s work on identity development to emphasize the importance of discerning one’s core values and beliefs (p. 239). He also demonstrates how some connect their civic actions with personal moral commitments (p.240).

Finally, Knefelkamp (2008) also connects moral identity and development with civic identity. She discusses adolescent development as developing “a sense of a moral compass” (p. 3). The connection between identity and sustained action is reiterated here, “this richer understanding should lead to an adulthood in which the individual comes to see moral action as an integral part of who he or she is, and understands that to not act
morally is to betray the self” (p. 4). She is clear, though, that civic and moral development are similar, but distinct, stating, “civic identity is not the same as, but is deeply connected to, complex intellectual and ethical development” (p. 2).

My research allows an examination of where community college students, and specifically adult learners, fit into these developmental paradigms as it relates to the intersections of moral and civic identity development. Additional study, in future research, into the theories of adult moral development could provide an additional lens for exploring the community college student experience in the civic context.

**The Branches of Civic Identity**

There are numerous other unique facets and perspectives on civic identity that have started to appear in the literature. Some include, McTighe-Musil’s (2003) expressions of citizenship, Sanchez-Jankowski’s (2002) civic subcultures, and Strachan and Owens’ (2011) concept of inclusive citizenship. Lichterman (2008) is one of several scholars who explores connections between religion and civic identity. Finally, Malin (2011) makes interesting connections between American identity and civic identity. As she states, “identity takes shape through the narratives that young people internalize, so it is critical that more attention is paid to the national narratives we share and discuss with young people” (p. 114). Each of these lines of inquiry deepen understanding of civic identity and provide insights into the influences and barriers at play in our communities.

Through the stories amplified by this study, I hope to provide insights into the potential intersections of civic identity with issues of culture, national identity, and religious identity. Each of these areas provides opportunities to foster civic learning and
development, while also creating potential barriers and challenges. Community college student narratives allow a deeper examination into the influence and meaning within each of these spaces.

**Conceptual Clarification**

At the start of this process I anticipated encountering a wide variety of different perspectives within this line of inquiry related to civic identity development. Instead, what emerged was a complimentary framework that exemplifies the complexity of this process of identity development, while pointing to the diverse environmental and experiential factors that appear to have an influence on civic identity development. For educators, researchers, and policy makers what this review demonstrates is that there is no magic bullet, and that each student will present a unique background and perspective in these civic spheres. However, even with such diverse inputs, we have more and more understanding of the experiences and structures of support and challenge that appear to move individuals forward in this development. Most importantly, evidence suggests that work in this area over the last decade is beginning to have impact as reports such as *Crucible Moment* (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. 2012) amplify a call to action related to the civic mission of higher education, and specifically looking more intentionally beyond just community service hours and textbook knowledge.

The focus of this study involves examining civic identity development within populations currently under-represented in the research, specifically community college students. While the theories and typologies explored here serve as an important lens for
my narrative inquiry, and were used in the development of interview questions and through the data analysis process (APPENDIX E), my goal was not to fit student’s stories within a prescriptive framework, instead I explored what connections and divergences appeared between the stories included in this study and the previous research advanced on this topic, especially in light of the diverse life-experiences and ages that my community college student participants represent.

The definition of civic identity that has shaped my specific research questions and starting place for this inquiry is informed by the work of Rubin (2007) and Yates and Youniss (1999). This study explores student’s perceptions of their own civic identity development as it encompasses an individual’s sense of belonging, responsibility, civic beliefs, and efficacy of participation in the civic community (Rubin, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1999). Their civic stories, detailing current and previous educational and community experiences, perceptions of civic ideals, and feelings of efficacy, provide personal testimonies to add to the current theories of civic identity development.
CHAPTER IV

NARRATIVE INQUIRY: A WINDOW INTO CIVIC IDENTITY

“The story, precisely because it is a primary form of discourse used in everyday interaction, is a natural, obvious, and authentic window into how people structure experience and construct meaning in their lives” - Schram, 2003 (p.105)

As I have discussed, too often in current research civic life is reduced to simple statistics, charts, and graphs. While these can certainly bring attention to some of the alarming civic challenges we currently face, they are not able to fully explain or help us to deeply understand why things are the way they are or the meaning that individuals make of these civic experiences. Personal stories, on the other hand, allow us to gain insight into the meaning of experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs (Grant & Simmons, 2008). As Schram (2003) describes, “The aim is to understand how people structure the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives” (p. 104). Narrative inquiry allows for participant’s stories to remain whole while the researcher makes connections between the specific topic (in this case - civic identity) and the larger context of the subject’s life-story. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) articulate the connection between narrative inquiry and educational studies, “the educational importance of this line of work is that it brings theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experiences as lived” (p. 3).
A critique of current research on civic engagement and education is that the quantitative measurements used are often detached from individual and community contexts, and often are not inclusive of the civic subcultures of diverse populations (Rubin, 2009; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). Yates and Youniss (1999) believe that this narrow perspective influences the stories being told about civic disengagement, arguing “unless we expand our perspective, our theories are likely to offer narrow accounts of American middle class youth, and miss the larger target of youth in general, with all the complexity and diversity that the concept entails” (p. 4). Levine and Youniss (2006) advocate for research that explores the “ordinary, daily experiences, assumptions, and expectations” of individuals as it relates to their civic identity (p. 3). Furthermore, they highlight the work of Joseph Kahne who discusses the fact that students are approaching social issues in new and creative ways, what he calls “new student politics” and they advocate “we should listen to how young people define and defend their behavior” (p. 5).

As was highlighted in the previous chapter, an individual comes to understand his or her civic self through a complex series of relationships, experiences, and influences. I found that capturing, analyzing and sharing these individual stories provides a deeper understanding of the many points of influence along the journey of meaning-making that has taken place for each of my participants. Narrative inquiry allows for a deeper understanding of the civic identity of community college students without fracturing their stories from the civic context. As defined in the research and for the purposes of this study, civic identity encompasses an individual’s sense of belonging, responsibility and
connection to and efficacy of participation in the civic community (Rubin, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1999).

My key research questions included: (1) How do community college students describe their role, responsibility, and influence in their community? (2) What experiences or opportunities have been positive forces in students’ civic identity development and what barriers or challenges have they faced? (3) Presently, how has their community college experience played a role in helping or hindering their civic identity development?

**Methodological & Theoretical Alignment**

Clandinin (2007) suggests that the increase in interest in narrative approaches to research, deemed the “narrative revolution” or “narrative turn”, came about as a result of the decline of an exclusively positivist paradigm for research (p. 36). Narrative inquiry involves the “use of stories as data, first person accounts of experience told in story form” (Merriam, 2002, p. 9). Narrative inquiry allows researchers to look at a research problem in terms of “continuity and wholeness of an individuals life experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). As Connelly and Clandinin (2006) convey, “Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (p. 477).

When exploring a topic such as civic identity, narrative inquiry allows for participants’ stories to be analyzed within the complex social and historical context from which it emerged, and will continue to develop. Biesta (2011) conveys the importance of efforts to understand students’ “actual conditions of citizenship” stating, “It is only by
following young people as they move in and out of different contexts, practices and institutions and by trying to understand what they learn from their participation, or non-participation, in these contexts, that we can actually begin to understand what is going in the lives of young citizens (p. 15). Furthermore, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” which accounts for the interaction of experience within social and personal context, the continuity of stories from past to present to future, and the consideration of place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This three dimensional space provides a useful framework from which to collect, analyze and interpret stories in narrative research.

It is important to note that the predominant perspectives on narrative inquiry are rooted in Dewey’s theory of experience. Clandinin (2007) highlights three facets of this Deweyian ontology of experience including the temporality of knowledge generation, a recognition of continuity, and an emphasis on the social dimension of stories. Clandinin (2007) summarizes how narrative inquiry fits within this framework of understanding of experience,

Beginning with a respect for ordinary lived experience, the focus of narrative inquiry is not only a valorizing of individuals’ experience but also an exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted – but in a way that begins and ends that inquiry in the storied lives of the people involved. (p.42)
Additionally, I approached this narrative study from a constructivist perspective, whereby “knowledge is co-constructed in specific social interactions” (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007, p. 151).

By undertaking narrative research it was not my intent to generate a new theory or create conclusions that could be generalized to all community college students. As Webster and Metrova (2007) propose, “narrative research does not strive to produce any conclusions of certainty, but aims for its findings to be well grounded and supportable, retaining an emphasis on the linguistic reality of human experience” (p. 4). Instead, the focus is on individual truths and my intent is to amplify individual stories of students, underrepresented in current research, to illuminate the meaning that these students have made of their own civic identity development, including influences, barriers, and the impact of the community college experiences. The goal was to capture the “multiplicity of voices”, experiences and perspectives related to civic identity (Webster & Metrova, 2007).

A narrative approach to data analysis suited my larger research purposes and questions. Fraser’s (2004) explanation of the use of narrative inquiry resonates with my study, “we use them not only because we wish to delve beneath statistically driven generalizations that are made but also because they have the potential to validate the knowledge of ‘ordinary’ people” (p. 184). While themes emerged across these stories, the critical exploration of each story within its unique social, cultural, and political context, guided my analysis. Fraser (2004) conveys, “rather than hoping to produce ‘the right’ knowledge, or indeed, ‘the truth’, narrative researchers realize that there are
multiple possibilities for representing stories” (p. 196).

Research Context

For this study I interviewed six community college students from a local institution. My rationale for selecting my participants and study site is detailed below.

Site Selection

As explored previously, the community college context was selected for this study for two primary reasons. First, due to the lack of research exploring the role community colleges can play in fostering civic engagement amongst students, generally, and addressing the civic empowerment gap, specifically. As Hollander and Burack’s (2008) report points out, the majority of work addressing the civic mission of higher education is focused on traditional age, four-year degree seeking students. And secondly, because of the potential identified by researchers for community colleges to play a critical role in the civic development of students, especially for low-income and minority students (Flanagen, et al., 2009; PACE 2010; Zaff, 2009).

The institution selected for this study, which will be known as Civic Community College for purposes of this study, is the state’s oldest and largest community college, serving over 55,000 credit and non-credit students each year across 12 diverse campus locations. The main campus, the primary site for this study’s data collection, is located in a major Midwestern city, in an urban community with concentrated poverty rates of 28.2%, making it one of the top ten highest poverty rates for a metro areas in the United States (Brookings Institution, 2016). Additionally, the city records 4.8% unemployment, and low educational attainment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). A recent report notes
that 66 percent of students in the local Metropolitan School District graduated from high school in the 2015 school year, up from 56 percent in 2011.

The Civic Community College main campus student demographics represent a diverse student body in age, race, and socioeconomic status, which are often under-represented in civic engagement research. According to their Fall 2015 “Enrollment Trends and Student Characteristics Report”, the main campus enrolls 5,516 students, with the average student age being 29. 53% of the study body identifies as Black or African American, 31% White, and 5% Hispanic. 64% of students enroll on a part-time basis.

In addition to being a well-established institution with a diverse student body, Civic Community College has recently demonstrated an interest in evaluating its institutional commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement. In April 2012, campus administrators submitted its final report for the “Democracy Commitment: Civic Inventory”. According to the organizers website, “The Democracy Commitment (TDC) is a national initiative providing a platform for the development and expansion of community college programs, projects and curricula aiming at engaging students in civic learning and democratic practice across the country.” (The Democracy Commitment, 2013). The report from Civic Community College highlights current civic initiatives (both academic and co-curricular) and indicates that they are in the process of developing a strategy for evaluating civic engagement as a part of the General Education Outcomes Assessment plan for the college. While the report does not suggest that there is an overwhelming amount of investment in civic initiatives at the moment, there are some promising practices within the college’s Honors College, as well as a newly developed
sustained dialogue initiative. Additionally, this institution was selected as one of the host campuses for the Campus Compact *Connect2Complete* program, designed to connect peer mentors and service-learning projects to courses in order to foster civic engagement and increase college retention (Campus Compact, 2013). This new interest in exploring civic initiatives on campus provided a welcoming environment for researchers (such as myself) exploring topics that could contribute to their campus body of knowledge.

It is important to note that prior to this research I did not have any professional or personal experience as a student or faculty/staff member at community colleges. Additionally, while I have known a few students that have attended this institution, I did not have any direct affiliation or relationships with the campus student community. According to Hatch (2002) this can be a good scenario for a researcher as “familiarity breeds inattention” (p. 47). He discourages researchers from selecting a site that they are too familiar with.

**Negotiating Access to Site and Participant Recruitment**

Prior to this study I did not have any affiliation or experience working with students at any campus of Civic Community College. I did have a few informal professional connections to faculty and administrators that I have worked with through service-learning networks and events. It was through these professional networks that I initially made a connection to access the site for participant recruitment, as well as context-setting interviews with faculty, staff and administrators.

For participant recruitment I sent an initial email to a network of faculty and staff contacts at the main campus, describing my study and requesting access to classes and
student groups through which to share the opportunity to participate. From this initial request I was able to visit four classes, and send e-invitations to two additional, to share about my study with students and provide information about how students could participate. I also received recommendations for participants from several faculty and administrators. Half of my participants that completed interviews came from in-class recruitment efforts and half came from faculty and staff recommendations.

In addition to outreach for student participants, I also reached out to faculty, staff and administrators who work in areas related to service, community relations, leadership development, service-learning, experiential learning and student life in order to conduct context-setting interviews. These interviews allowed me to begin to understand the civic culture of the campus, the goals and vision for civic learning and community engagement set forth by the institution, and to hear different perspectives from these various constituents about the mission and priorities of the institution as it relates to community engagement and the civic identity development of Civic Community College students.

**Understanding Campus Context: Faculty and Staff Perspectives**

I conducted a total of four informal, informational interviews with faculty, staff and administrators in order to gain some understanding of the culture, aspirational goals and mission of the institution generally, and as it relates specifically to civic learning and engagement. The individuals that I interviewed included: a Dean whose responsibilities encompass oversight of experiential learning programs, including service-learning, study abroad, and internship programs; a staff member in the Student Life office who manages student organizations, a leadership certificate program and the Student Ambassador
program; the Director of Community Relations; and a faculty member from the Peace Studies program who oversees a college-wide Sustained Dialogue program focused on social justice issues. Each of these individuals helped me to gain insight into the student culture, the successes as well as challenges and barriers of civic initiatives at the college, and the priorities of the institution.

From these interviews I got a sense that there is a strong foundation for campus programs and initiatives related to civic learning and action, but a deep desire from many to see more focus and attention paid to this area of the mission. As far as current efforts, I learned about the Sustained Dialogue program, the director, a faculty member in the Peace Studies program, described as “action-oriented, we don’t just talk about things, at the end you create an action plan and get stakeholders to buy-in to implement change” (personal communication, February 19, 2016). Additionally, everyone that I spoke with seemed very proud of the political engagement initiatives that happen across campuses, including voter registration drives and hosting of political candidate forums, including a visit from Hillary Clinton. The Student Life staff member that I spoke with shared about the successes of the Leadership Certificate program, which included a community service requirement. She also stressed that, “faculty are the front line here for promoting these opportunities and encouraging students to get involved” (personal communication, February 17, 2016). Finally, the Community Relations director shared about a tremendously impressive list of initiatives that she spearheads to connect the campus to the local community, such as school partnerships, listening meetings with local housing authority sites, neighborhood collaboratives and participation in neighborhood resident
meetings. However, she acknowledged that she is only one person and her time and resources are limited. In terms of engaging students in this work, she clarified, “it begins with how we build community on campus,” she continued,

Students describe campus as a home or family. We are student-centered. Our goal is to help students achieve goals, to enhance or acquire skills that they didn’t even know they needed or wanted and then to help them see how this enhances their home, work and broader community (April 7, 2016).

However, each of these successes were balanced by a clear desire from those I spoke with to see more attention, focus and especially resources dedicated to these areas. The Peace Studies Faculty Member shared,

I wish we had the capacity that when things came up in the community we could turn around and host a public forum. I’ve heard students bring up topics that they say we need to bring up. A lot more faculty and staff bring it up and express a desire to see it happen, but no one wants to take the lead on it (personal communication, February 19, 2016).

The Dean I spoke with felt very strongly that engagement with the local community is a major part of the mission of the campus, but acknowledged, “there are always competing priorities. It’s a matter of making sure that engagement with the community remains a high priority. The will is there, the follow-up I’m sure we could do a better job, but the will is there” (personal communication, March 11, 2016).
Finally, many of these interviews reiterated the potential of community colleges, as it relates to empowering students to connect and take action in the local community. The Peace Studies faculty member shared,

A lot of students have families and they don’t necessarily volunteer but they are very aware of the politics in communities, things like elections and levies for schools. They are aware because they are impacted directly by them. They have an authentic care about the communities that they are from (personal interview, February 19, 2016).

The Student Life staff member shared about numerous initiatives that she had witnessed or been a part of connecting campus to community, including summer camps, campus exploration days for local schools, and health fairs in partnership with local health organizations. The sense of connection and commitment to civic learning and engagement was clear through each of these conversations. The Student Life staff member reflected, “it is definitely a part of the president’s strategic plan. The leadership here role models engagement, even the president is very engaged in the local community,” she continued, “without the local community we wouldn’t exist”.

Relevant Current Events

In addition to the campus context for this study, it is also important to briefly note the current events happening in the civic context as these interviews were taking place. Over the course of the six months of data collection, headlines were filled with cases of police brutality against unarmed, black men and youth (both locally and nationally), instances of terror attacks and mass shootings (in the United States and abroad), the rise
in presence of the Black Lives Matter and counter movements, and a notably unusual and divisive political contest heating up for the 2016 Presidential election. Each of these current events weighed on participant’s minds, as was evidenced in their discussion of the topics as we explored their own civic perspectives.

Selecting Participants

Purposeful sampling is key to high quality qualitative research. This involves “selecting a sample from which the most can be learned” and including “information rich samples” (Merriam, 2002, p. 12). Qualitative research involves small, purposefully selected samples that are studied in great depth (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Some narrative studies focus on one individual story, while others spend years collecting and interpreting narratives from larger groups or communities. Within this spectrum, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that a sample of five to eight participants is sufficient to complete a rigorous qualitative inquiry. My intended sample size was six participants, with a minimum of five, allowing for some attrition, with each participant selected to bring their own unique civic perspective and personal experiences to the study. I successfully recruited and retained 6 active participants throughout the course of this study.

As discussed previously, I had the opportunity to visit several classes at the main campus to share about my study and the opportunity to participate. Additionally, several faculty and staff made recommendations to me of individual students who may be interested in participating. Through both in-class and email introductions (Appendix A) I shared an initial participant interest form (Appendix B), which was completed by
students interested in participating in my study. This interest form asked for basic
information, including: age, gender, high school affiliation, year in school, and college
major. I also included two questions related to traditional measures of civic engagement,
“did you vote in the last election” and “have you volunteered with a community
organization this year?” It was initially my goal to include some participants who
indicated some level of engagement by answering “yes” to at least one of these measures,
as well as others who did not report participating in these two traditionally measured
forms of engagement. However, as interest forms were submitted there were very few
that did not answer “yes” to at least one of the engagement questions, in fact all of my
final participants had either voted, volunteered or both in the past year.

In addition to diverse levels of civic engagement my goal was to have a diversity of
participants in terms of gender, age, and racial / ethnic identities included, that was both
closely representative of the diverse student body of my selected site, as well as of under-
represented voices in civic engagement research. As can be seen in the table at the
conclusion of this section, my final selected participants were closely representative of
the age, gender and racial identifiers of the main campus student body. One limitation
was a lack of student’s who identified as white expressing an interest in participating in
the study (potentially due to unintentionally smaller representation in the classes that I
visited). I also had to eliminate several students who had expressed interest in
participating due to the fact that they were post-secondary students who were under the
age of 18.

In order to qualify for my study, participants were required to align with the criteria
most relevant to my study, including: representing previously under-studied populations in civic engagement literature based on: age (non-traditionally aged students), racial or ethnic identity (minority identity), and socioeconomic status (low socioeconomic status), as well as status as a current community college student. While collecting information regarding age and racial identification was not difficult to obtain from interested participants, socioeconomic status was a more challenging criteria to get an accurate self-report. The research related to the civic empowerment gap highlights that students who attend schools with low-income student populations generally have less quality and quantity of civic opportunities, so for the purposes of this study the socioeconomic demographics of a participant’s high school served as an alternative to soliciting specific personal socioeconomic information. Finally, I only selected students who had at least one semester, ideally two or three, of coursework completed at the community college site. While this did eliminate some additional candidates that had submitted interest forms, this allowed me to gain a clearer understanding of their experience at the community college and if this has played any role in their civic identity development, as opposed to a student who was brand new to campus. To summarize, below are the selection criteria that guided the identification of study participants:

- Current community college student
- Representative of an under-studied population of students (either age, race or ethnicity or socioeconomic status)
- Civic Activity – although all participants ended up demonstrating some form of traditional forms of engagement (voting or volunteering) the depth of this
involvement, and involvement on campus varied tremendously.

Table 1

Selected Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Racial Identity</th>
<th>Voting</th>
<th>Volunteer</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Black / African American</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Occupational Therapy Assisting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariel</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Bi-racial: Black &amp; Caucasian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Black / African American</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Associate of Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Black / African American</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Human Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Multiracial: Pacific Islander &amp; Black</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>OB/GYN Sonography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Hispanic / Latino</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Respiratory Care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

A key characteristic of all qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002). The primary method utilized for this study was a series of semi-structured participant interviews.

Data collection took place over the span of one academic semester, including the process of participant recruitment and selection. I did not want to expand the process longer than this, as many community college programs are short-term in nature and I ran the risk of losing access to students during their community college experience or over the summer break. However, this concern was balanced with the need for adequate engagement in data collection. As Merriam (2002) conveys, “it is recommended that the researcher be submerged or engaged in the data collection phase over a long enough period to ensure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon” (p. 26). Hatch (2003)
concurs, “extended engagement continues to be one of the hallmarks of high-quality qualitative work” (p. 8).

Field texts, or the collection of stories within a narrative study, are the key component of narrative data collection. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) convey, “field texts need to be routinely and rigorously kept, richly detailed, allow for growth and change” (p. 95). Additionally, they stress the importance of researcher awareness and attention to context of stories, “temporally, spatially and in terms of the personal and social” (p. 95). Placing stories within a physical, social, and historical context was vitally important to a study such as this, where as mentioned previously, things such as current events and neighborhood context can be so influential, as noted by numerous studies (Hart & Atkins, 2002; Rubin, Hayes & Benson, 2009; Yates & Youniss, 1999). In order for me to get the richest data possible, I also employed an openness to “the imaginative possibilities for composing field texts” in which I attempted to include use of photographs or other media in the process of participant storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 116). While, photographs and other materials can facilitate greater detail and description within stories, I did not find success with this aspect of my data collection and the traditional semi-structured interview conversations were the primary source.

**Interview Protocol**

Once I identified my sample pool of participants, based on study requirements, invitations to participate were extended via phone calls and emails. Those who responded were asked to complete a consent form which informed them about the study, including
risks and benefits, as well as the possible time commitment involved (Appendix C). Upon completion of the informed consent form an initial interview was scheduled.

Protocol and questions for the first interview were field tested with a current Civic Community College student, who was not included in the final data for this study. Feedback from this initial field test influenced revision, addition, and re-ordering of some questions (Appendix D).

I conducted 2 to 3 semi-structured interviews with each participant based on their availability over the course of the semester. Each interview lasted a minimum of 45 minutes with some extending over 90 minutes. The purpose of interviews, according to Hatch (2002) was “to uncover the meaning structures that participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds” (p. 91).

Member-checking was an on-going and vitally important part of this interview process. After each interview participants had the opportunity to review the interview transcript to account for any errors or misrepresentations.

My approach to these participant interviews was informed by the laddered question approach for qualitative research (Price, 2002). According to Price (2002), “qualitative data obtained through open interviews need not be an ad hoc affair, where ethical and procedural issues are left to the intuition of researchers and the tolerance of respondents” (p.280). Instead this laddered questions approach, “can help select questions and responses designed to promote the flow of interesting data, whilst respecting the needs of respondents” (p.280). Especially in a narrative study, where in-
depth, detailed stories are the focus of data-collection, sensitivity to participant’s comfort and openness to interview topics were of utmost importance for my attention.

The laddered question approach describes three levels of probing that are possible during an interview, including questions that elicit a descriptive response, knowledge–based questions, and finally, questions of personal philosophy. Price (2002) describes, “qualitative data collection requires a degree of probing into the private thoughts, if not the lives of the respondent. The question arises of how the researcher can probe in an ethical manner” (p. 275). I utilized this approach by discussing more general descriptive and knowledge-based topics with participants during the first interview, in order to get to know a bit about each participant and to begin to establish a rapport with them. Topics during this first interview included: learning about their academic interests, current commitments in addition to school, their high school and post-high school experiences, family life and beginning to gain insights into the stories they tell about their neighborhood or community. Once a general understanding was developed, more personal questions related to their civic experiences, attitudes, beliefs and values followed during the second and subsequent interviews. Participants were notified during the informed consent process that if any questions caused them discomfort or concern they did not need to answer and we would move on to another question.

In addition to the purposeful facilitation of the interview, the interview questions themselves were carefully constructed (Appendix D). The reflective nature of a narrative study is another reason that this research strategy aligned so nicely with the topic of civic identity, because so much of the work in the field of civic education and
service-learning is rooted in reflective practices. Webster and Mertova (2007) stress the importance that “questions should be structured in such a way that they encourage reflection and recall of critical events” (p. 86).

As Hatch (2002) suggests, I planned my interviews with a flexible structure, coming prepared with a specific list of questions, but being open to new ideas, new paths of discussion and directions based on participant’s responses. Moving into the second interviews I worked to dig a bit deeper into specifics of participant’s civic beliefs and experiences, what Price (2002) would describe as personal philosophy questions. As Fraser (2004) suggests in a narrative approach, “taking the time to ‘really listen’ researchers may refer to a topic-based interview schedule but are not governed by it. More responsive to the idiosyncrasies of each conversation, we try to create interviews that are ‘interviewee-oriented’ rather than ‘instrument-oriented’” (p. 185). When asking about things like political behavior and attitudes it was vitally important that I set-up the conversation by stressing to participants that there was no right or wrong answer and that my intent was simply to hear their story and ideas, “inviting participants to talk from their own perspectives and experiences” (Hatch, 2002, p. 102). Overall, this laddered questions approach to interviewing was a very useful approach in my attempts to gain a deeper understanding of participant’s private, civic perspectives, and the ways that values, beliefs and action are connected.

In addition to coming prepared with prompts and specific questions I also incorporated requests for artifacts that I hoped would elicit more detailed, narrative responses from participants. For example, during the second interview I requested that
participants bring a photo or photos with them that represent their community. I planned to have them use these photos to share stories with me that might have shed light into their feelings and relationship to their community. However, only one of my six participants remembered to bring a photo, therefore I had to eliminate this artifact analysis from my data collection.

I arranged each interview to be at a time and location that was convenient for each participant, while still considering the appropriateness of each location for an interview. All interviews were conducted at the main-campus of Civic Community College. During this data collection process I employed several strategies for observation, reflection and organization. During the interviews I used a voice recorder, with participant’s permission, in addition to taking notes during the interview. These notes not only documented the stories and responses shared by participants, but also made notes of participant’s non-verbal cues and other physical observations (crossed arms, pounding fists..etc). I transcribed each interview within seven days of the actual interview date in order to allow me to start analyzing the data as close to collection as possible. This analysis will be discussed in further detail.

Ethics

“Participants are the ultimate gatekeepers. They determine whether and to what extent the researcher will have access to the information desired” - Hatch, 2002 (p.51)

Through coursework and participating in the CITI training I gained a strong understanding of the ethical concerns that I needed to be conscientious of throughout the research process, as well as my responsibility to be proactive in ensuring the safety and
well-being of my participants during the study. Developing effective and ethical personal relationships with participants is incredibly important for a qualitative study. Prior to beginning interviews, I took time to consider both the ethical decisions I could face while conducting this study, as well as how I planned to develop rapport and trust with participants. As Hatch (2002) notes, “we ask a lot when we ask individuals to participate in our qualitative studies. We usually ask for a considerable amount of time, but more important, we ask participants to reveal what goes on behind the scenes in their everyday lives” (p. 65).

As I mentioned previously, I had all participants complete an informed consent form, which informed participants of important study details, as highlighted by both Merriam (2002) and Hatch (2002). These include, expectations of time commitment, privacy and protection from harm, purpose of the study, methods and participant expectations, as well as the fact that participation is on a voluntary basis. In terms of establishing relationships with my participants, the interviews were conducted in a professional manner, while working to establish trust between myself as the researcher and student participants. I did not select participants who were minors under the age of 18.

While my intended participant population (community college students) is not a particularly high-risk population for study, and my general topic (civic identity) does not pose any immediate stress or harm, it is a very personal subject which could have potentially evoked strong emotions, especially through the storytelling process. My role as researcher was to ensure participant well-being and confidentiality throughout the
interview process. Additionally, using the laddered interview approach helped minimize the risk of causing emotional distress during interviews, and participants had the option to withdraw participation from the process at any point, although none did.

Finally, confidentiality was of utmost importance in this study. Participants names are not used and no identifiers are associated with the data. Participants selected their own pseudonyms used in the biographies below. All data (sound recordings and transcriptions) were stored on my personal laptop, with all files and my computer being password protected.

**Data Analysis**

“*Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning*” - Hatch, 2002 (p.128)

According to Merriam (2002) data analysis should occur simultaneously with data collection. This inductive strategy is a means for “organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critique, or generate theories” (Hatch, 2002, p 148). It was important that analysis and collection continued to happen in parallel during my study, so that emerging themes could be tested and more deeply explored throughout interviews, rather than waiting until the conclusion of data collection to begin interpreting the narratives.

This narrative inquiry presented unique challenges and opportunities with data analysis, as participants played an active role throughout the process in identifying, confirming or rejecting themes within the data. As Hardy, Gregory and Ramjeet (2009) convey, narrative research “becomes less concerned with maintaining a divide between
the research and research participant and more concerned with the collaborative development of narrative and meaning” (p. 14). Often this means analysis can be done on an on-going basis, jointly with participants “ensuring their interpretation and understanding of their stories remains foremost in the final analysis” (Hardy, Gregory & Ramjeet, 2009, p 14). This narrative form of member-checking “allows participants to correct, alter or extend issues arising from their narratives” (Hardy, Gregory & Ramjeet, 2009, p 14). During my data collection process participants had the opportunity to review interview transcripts, as well as the developing biographical memos that I was generating after each interview in order to provide clarification or identify any forms of misrepresentation. Additionally, in each interview I included questions about emerging themes I was exploring, in order to gauge each participant’s perspective on the various topics. I found participants to be very receptive to this process and many expressed that they enjoyed seeing their stories in writing.

Within this framework of participant engagement, I utilized aspects of Denzin’s biographical narrative approach, described by Merriam (2002) whereby “the story is analyzed in terms of the importance and influence of gender and race, family of origin, life events and turning point experiences, and other persons in the participant’s life” (Merriam, 2002, p 287). Given my intent to focus deeply on the meaning and influence of various experiences on student’s civic identity, this form of analysis allowed me to tune into these key concepts. As would be expected, some participants were more willing to share and be open about these various areas of influence and identities, whereas others were more guarded in their responses to some of these topics.
Finally, at the conclusion of transcribing each interview, line by line analysis of each interview transcript also allowed me the opportunity to “get up close to the interview material” (Fraser, 2004) throughout the interview and analysis process. While time consuming, I read and re-read each interview transcript a minimum of three times while developing participant bios, connecting participant stories to research questions, and identifying emerging themes.

**Trustworthiness & Credibility**

Because in a narrative approach to inquiry “the story is always coauthored” between the accounts of the participant and the interpretation of the researcher, strategies to ensure validity are of utmost importance (Merriam, 2002, p. 287). However, as explained previously, narrative inquiry does not intend to develop theory or generalizable conclusions, therefore Webster and Mertova (2007) stress, “validity is more concerned with the research being well-grounded and supportable by the data that has been collected” (p.90). Borland (1991) conveys the responsibility of the researcher, specifically with oral narrative research, to find an appropriate balance of interpreting and analyzing while still telling the original story of the participants.

Below I’ve detailed some traditional strategies I employed during my study to ensure trustworthiness and credibility, including member checks and keeping a detailed audit trail.

First, as Merriam (2002) recommends, narrative inquiry is designed to get constant and on-going participant feedback and comments on the emerging interpretations of the narrative data. Particularly in an inquiry where participant stories
are being analyzed, it was vital to confirm that the aspects I had honed in on were responsive to the data and the individual participants’ experiences. Again, it was important to note that the individual participant stories will remain the primary focus of this study, with emergent information from other outside interviews being utilized to provide additional perspectives and context.

Additionally, Merriam (2002) describes Guba and Lincoln’s concept of an audit trail, which she says, “describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout he inquiry” (p. 27). Hatch (2002) also advocates for the use of a detailed research log, accounting for important details of the process including when and where interviews were held. In addition to this log, Schram (2003) emphasizes the role of memos throughout the research process, stating “memos do for ideas what field-notes and transcripts do for perception; they convert thought into a form that allows examination and further manipulation” (p 33).

In an effort to assure on-going trustworthiness and credibility, I utilized a research journal in which I noted important details of the research process, including interview sessions, interview dates, and any major events in the political, community, or campus context that may influence participant’s perspectives. Additionally, after each initial interview I added to on-going researcher memos to document the analysis process, as well as my developing observations, questions, potential themes, and new concerns. This journal and my participant memos generated an audit trail of how the research process was conducted, as well as documenting the journey of data analysis and interpretation to demonstrate that final conclusions are tightly bound with initial narrative data.
Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that a credible study is one where the “constructed realities of the participants match the realities as represented by the researcher” (p. 286). As was detailed previously, my participants had the opportunity to review all interview transcripts, biographical memos, as well as to discuss emerging themes and points of interest with me throughout the interview process. This member-checking allowed me to ensure I was accurately hearing and portraying my participants as I turned our conversations into written narratives. These narratives are presented in the subsequent chapter.
CHAPTER V

CIVIC NARRATIVES

Narrative inquiry allows us to “look at our research problem in terms of continuity and wholeness of an individual’s life experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). My key research questions for this study included (1) How do community college students describe their role, responsibility, and influence in their community? (2) What experiences or opportunities have been positive forces in students’ civic identity development and what barriers or challenges have they faced? (3) Presently, how has their community college experience played a role in helping or hindering their civic identity development?

What follows in this chapter is an introduction to each of the study participants. This chapter is purposefully organized to allow each student’s voice and unique civic story to stand alone in the context of their individual life experience, while connecting themes and resonant findings are presented in a subsequent chapter. These narratives provide a focused look into participant’s perspectives and life experiences, and the influences that these have had on their own civic identity development. Insights into each of my research questions are addressed within the context of each individual story and biography presented here.
Will: No Place Like Home…at School

“Overall I felt welcomed, more than I have anywhere in life, or in any job or even at home.”

Will fills the room with his presence, both with his physical stature and his outgoing personality. At one of our first meetings together he shared, “some people think I’m mean, but that’s just the way I look” (interview 1, March 27, 2016). As a 39 year old, full-time student, he explained that he has finally gotten into a career track that he feels passionately about, now studying in the Respiratory Tech program. In his previous five years at Civic Community College, he had dipped his toes into the culinary arts program and sports management program, but was influenced to pursue the medical field after experiencing the difficult deaths of his father and grandmother within a one-year period.

Will’s journey to community college has not been an easy one. His journey took him from Puerto Rico, where he was born and lived until the age of five, until his parents divorced and he floated around staying with various family members in New York, Florida and eventually, Ohio. His parents both struggled with drug addictions and he spent much of his teen years living with his grandparents. He said that his grandfather, “was like a second father to me, when I had nobody” (interview 1, March 27, 2016).

Will’s immediate family consists of three sisters, and one brother. He currently lives with his mother in a house on the west side of the city. Will is the first in his family to pursue higher education. He recalled, “my mom didn’t work and my dad worked in lots of different areas, but he couldn’t read or write, he learned just by doing it himself. He always did stuff his way, his way or no way” (interview 1, March 27, 2016).
Following high school, Will moved out of his grandparents’ home in Florida and began working various jobs to make ends meet. It was during this time he hit his lowest point and was motivated to make a change in his life:

Before I got here [school], I was homeless. I was living in my car in the parking lot of Walmart, that was maybe three years. I was still working, I had a job but was homeless. Until one day a security guard found out I was there and had my car towed. I had to go somewhere. (interview 1, March 27, 2016)

It was at this point he returned to live with his mother in Ohio and a friend of his sister’s helped him figure out the process for enrolling in school and applying for financial aid.

“I was trying my hardest to get jobs and it was not working. So that was the main reason why I got to school…no jobs!” (interview 1, March 27, 2016).

**Involvement at Community College**

Since enrolling at Civic Community College, Will has come to see campus as a home: “well, for me, I think it’s (pause)...a privilege, to be a student. You get treated like you are home. Overall I felt welcomed, more than I have anywhere in life, or in any job or even at home” (interview 1, March 27, 2016). He identifies the people as the greatest asset of the school, having caring people that are looking out for students and checking in on how they are doing. “I don’t really get that at home. Like back when I was at home, I never really got like ‘hey do this.’” He shared, “Yeah, I get to feel independent. People looking out for you, ‘Better be good I’m gonna be checking in on you’ – people that pushes you here” (interview 1, March 27, 2016).
Will has taken on an active role on campus, as well. Since being at school he’s been a loyal employee of the “Student Patrol” through the campus safety and security office. “I am the eyes and ears of the campus” (interview 1, March 27, 2016) he proudly shared. He is also active with STEPP, the Student Excellence and Peer Program, which he described as “a program for Latino students. They have different workshops to inspire us, make sure we study, and tell us about scholarships and activities” (interview 1, March 27, 2016). Finally, over the course of our interviews together Will also took on the role of President of the International Club, which celebrates culture and heritage across campus. He balances this campus involvement and student patrol job with two additional part-time jobs off-campus, working weekends for a beverage distributor and nights as security at a Latino nightclub.

While this introduction hardly scratches the surface of the life experiences that have led Will to where he is today, we can begin to paint a picture of how from his experiences as a child to his connectedness on campus, each has influenced the way that Will views himself in his community, and the influence and impact he believes he can have.

Civic Identity: Perspectives on Community, Role, Responsibility and Efficacy

“There’s nothing to like” was the response that Will gave when asked about his current neighborhood (interview 1, March 27, 2016). He grudgingly discussed how, over the past year, a major international factory in the neighborhood has been buying up homes and tearing them down to build parking lots,
They basically bought every single house on that side of my house. In front of us used to be houses, but now it’s all parking lots, so there’s nothing left. It’s not really a neighborhood anymore. We are just there until we get bought out. Most people have moved on. I always look back like how it used to be. Sometimes I see people that I used to play basketball with, but they all moved on. We just there until we get bought out. (interview 1, March 27, 2016)

It became clear, as Will described matters in his neighborhood, that he no longer feels a connection or responsibility to his current zip code: “that’s why it’s good not to get attached because people leave – that’s what happened to me. I got attached and they left. I feel kind of like (pause)... I feel abandon” (interview 1, March 27, 2016).

When we discussed if there had been any community attempts to stop the factory or to raise awareness to others about what was happening, Will paused, and then shared this analogy comparing community action to a failing sports franchise,

People don’t want to get involved anymore. They just don’t think they can do it, ‘cause it’s like – for example the Cleveland Browns. Browns haven’t even played yet, but everybody already saying they suck. It’s like why even bother, why give them a chance. Same thing with what’s happening here… why even bother?

(interview 2, May 9, 2016)

This sense of impossibility was pervasive as we discussed other forms of civic action, including writing or calling politicians to raise awareness about issues or a voter’s perspective, “I think it’s a waste of time, ‘cause it’s only one person – so you have to
have everybody, like the whole state of Ohio to write something for it to work” (interview 2, May 9, 2016), Will reflected.

As we explored current events, Will shared about his disdain for the media and news channels, “I don’t really care about national news, it’s depressing. Uh, local news, all I care about there is the weather” (interview 1, March 27, 2016). When I asked Will to discuss any social or community issues that are important to him, he sat up straight and said, “As a student, it’s just being able to afford to live… I’m just, just trying to survive” (interview 2, May 9, 2016).

Civic Identity: Positive Forces, Barriers and Challenges

While this picture may seem bleak, Will’s narrative about his lack of connection and skepticism towards civic action within his community is curiously balanced by his own engagement in community service initiatives, which he recognizes as a positive force in his civic identity development. Will recounted the numerous projects he’s been a part of through his involvement with the STEPP program,

Well, through STEPP we do community service, we did Toys for Tots; we did the wig…Wigs for Kids…yes, that and I think coming up in April we’re doing the dog pound in Parma. I’ve done that a couple of years. It’s fun, it’s very cool. (interview 1, March 27, 2016)

He also discussed many of the initiatives he’s been a part of that involves supporting youth, including a summer camp he worked at and his own organizing efforts,

I used to organize a community team in my neighborhood, a community basketball tournament with kids playing, um, this was like three summers in a
row. That came out great until kids started acting funny, so I had to stop it. That’s why I got into like helping kids and stuff. Organizing is in my blood. (interview 1, March 27, 2016)

Will reflected on his perspectives of community service and relayed his own personal definition. He said,

You know, help out as best you can. If you see someone and they on the roadside that needs assistance with their tires, that would be one thing. Um, if somebody is passed out. I’d do my best to see if he’s ok and then call for assistance. In my neighborhood I saw that a lot. I be out there and see somebody standing in front of a guy and I be like, are you gonna help? (interview 2, May 9, 2016).

From the opportunities that Will has had to be a part of community service projects and events he shared what he has taken away from these experiences,

I took away just the wanting to give time to see that you did your part to help somebody. It’s not changing anything, no, but if one person does something than you know, you did your part, and then whatever happens after that you know, at least you can say I helped make this happen (interview 2, May 9, 2016).

Civic Identity: Impact of Community College Experience

It gave me more courage to go out there, because when I first came in I was reserved, kept to myself. I got to be more open to people. It teach me to be patient with people. Not all people are like me, but I just learned to be patient with whoever is around me – campus and community in general (interview 2, May 9, 2016).
This is how Will described the impact that his time at Civic Community College has had on him as he thinks about his civic life and role in the community. He discussed how he had the chance to collaborate with others to create events, and built confidence through the opportunities he has had to be involved on campus and through classes, like criminology, where he had the chance to learn more about community issues and policies.

Will has very strong opinions that community colleges could and should be doing more to get students involved on campus,

I think schools should be more involved, um, like example, since the last time we met I became international club member. And through that I got voted into vice president and now I’m president, so I think people in general should be more involved in clubs and that’s basically a stepping stone to doing community stuff (interview 2, May 9, 2016).

He elaborated further,

I think they need to be more – they need to make a curriculum. You need to make involvement required, you can’t graduate unless you have some clubs under your belt and community service. It’s good for your conscience (interview 2, May 9, 2016).

**Summary: Just Trying to Survive**

At times Will seemed like a bit of a paradox throughout our conversations together. Based on his own isolation and disconnection from his community, he felt so strongly that individual and collective action at a community level was meaningless and that there
was no one there to listen to the concerns of community members; yet, he felt empowered through service to make a difference to individuals and particularly to youth. However, this sense of empowerment seemed to be a new, growing development has taken root as a result of his campus experiences and opportunities. When asked if he saw himself as a leader, Will quickly responded, “I think I got a long way to go but I see myself as a potential leader” (interview 2, May 9, 2016). His own experiences with frequent moves, homelessness and witnessing the decline of a neighborhood that has lost its community core, have left him feeling abandoned and without options against larger structural powers in the community. He was one of the only participants in this study that said a barrier he faced was lack of time as he operated in survival mode, just trying to make ends meet each day. However, he describes his experiences on campus with enthusiasm and positivity, demonstrating the powerful potential for a sense of belonging and community that campuses can provide to students.

**Alexis: Local Roots, Global Perspectives**

“*People are really disconnected, especially with situations that’s going on in American and internationally*”

Not two minutes had passed into our first interview together and people were stopping by the table to say hello to Alexis, to ask about upcoming events and to ask her questions about class registration process and timelines. I immediately understood why Alexis had been recommended to me to participate in this project.

Alexis is a twenty-three year old, part-time student and self-described workaholic, “school and work is my life” (interview 1, March 7, 2016) she shared early-on in our
conversations together. Both of Alexis’s parents were born in Nigeria and although she and her four brothers were all born in the United States, she still feels strong connections to the Nigerian community, both locally and abroad. She and her family make the trip back to Nigeria every two years. She is currently studying Occupational Therapy Assisting, a career path she literally tripped into when she sustained an injury due to a fall her sophomore year of high school. She underwent occupational therapy to regain full-function of her hand and was inspired by the therapist she worked with. Her long-term career goal is to open a clinic in Nigeria where both her and her brother, who studies physical therapy, can practice.

Family is a huge influence on Alexis. She described her upbringing as “sheltered”, explaining,

As a kid we were really private – we were not allowed to hang out with friends, we’re still not allowed to have people around the house. So friend-wise, I would have friends at school, but not outside of school – books…studying… that was all

(interview 1, March 7, 2016).

She recalled a very structured and rule-driven childhood at home,

My mom and dad were basically drill sergeants. We had to recite our multiplication tables every night. We had to go all the way up to 12 and if we got one wrong we had to start over. Which really helped, so I’m glad. But I guess that’s why I am where I am now because from a very young age there was a set way to do something

(interview 1, March 7, 2016).
However, the dynamic of the family was shaken dramatically in 2004 when her father suffered a stroke and was bed-ridden for the remainder of his life until he passed in 2007. During this time Alexis recalled,

> We had to learn stuff, either make stuff happen or learn how to do stuff. Even crossing the street, knowing how to cross the street, it’s embarrassing, I did not know how to do that until I was 13 without my dad. It was scary. When everything happened it was like, learning how to walk again. (interview 3, May 17, 2016)

Alexis’s primary support system now is her mother, who is a nurse and also got her degree from Civic Community College. Alexis lives in a house with her mother. All of her siblings remain close, except one brother who is deployed with the US Army. Alexis laughs and says, “we are a typical Nigerian family. We stay together until you’re done with school” (interview 1, March 7, 2016).

**Involvement at Community College**

Based on the number of people, both students and staff, that Alexis seemed to know it was clear she was very involved and connected on campus. I was not surprised to learn that Alexis works as a Student Ambassador and Peer Mentor for the campus. In this role she explained that she works to connect with first year students, assist with their First Year Experience course and provide advice and resources about campus resources and things like financial aid. Additionally, she’s recently taken on a leadership position with the newly formed service-oriented Circle K student organization chapter on campus. This is the first student organization that she has ever been a part of. She explained,
I try to avoid the conflict and drama and stuff in organizations, but it’s really…(pause)…this is where I think I’m supposed to be. I’m really glad that I’ve actually found a club that I am attached too. It’s pretty amazing. (interview 1, March 7, 2016)

For those unfamiliar with the organization, Circle K is an international collegiate service organization that is a sponsored leadership program of Kiwanis International. It promotes service, leadership, and fellowship (Circle K International, 2016).

The impact of both of these leadership and service experiences on Alexis is apparent and will be explored in further details in the following sections.

**Civic Identity: Perspectives on Community, Role, Responsibility and Efficacy**

Several things made Alexis’s perspectives different from many of those I interviewed. First, her identity seemed most aligned with a global, as opposed to local perspective. When we discussed leaders that she identified with or issues that were most important to her, they were almost exclusively on an international scale. She discussed the influence that Princess Diana had on her as a child, identifying with the struggle Diana may have felt in playing a particular role in a dynasty. Alexis said she felt similarly of the traditional Nigerian roles she encountered,

It’s not that she’s [Princess Diana] restricted from doing stuff but she was kind of, (pause), it’s not that she was told how to act, it was more of she was pushed into that way of thinking and acting and how you should and should not act. (interview 1, March 7, 2016)
She also frequently referenced the dramatic differences and privileges she sees between life in Nigeria and in the United States. She expressed major concern about the refugee crisis and turmoil in Syria and frequently spoke about the issues of power outages, corruption and unstable infrastructure in Nigeria and compared that with what she feels is a fairly stable life in the US.

Along these same lines, Alexis was one of the only participants to describe her neighborhood in a very positive light. She felt that there was trust in her neighborhood and said, “I don’t think I would change anything. It’s comfortable, everyone helps each other” (interview 1, March 7, 2016). She continued, “I just like how were close to literally everything, take a bus, 1 minute from my house to downtown in 20 minutes or uptown in 30 minutes” (interview 1, March 7, 2016). She shared that she really came to develop this feeling of trust and community when her father was ill and many of the neighbors would check in on them and watch their house for them while they were away.

Alexis is very informed on global issues and she discussed the many ways she seeks out information about global, national and local news, including signing up for listservs and newsletters, being an avid news-watcher, and keeping up on sites like Change.org. She expressed concern that many of her peers seem to be uninformed about what is happening, especially in an international context,

Yeah, people are really disconnected. Especially with like, situations that’s going on in America, but also internationally. One of my best friends, she’s not really into the news, like when I would tell her stuff she’s so interested because I would rant and rant and she, (pause), I think, she doesn’t want to say it, but it seems like she feels
disconnected because she doesn’t know about stuff that’s going on. (interview 2, April 14, 2016)

Through these discussions about the plethora of issues that she is informed and concerned about, we began to explore whether this information drives her to action. She shared, “If there is something I can improve but don’t act upon, I hate that feeling. It’s an obligation that I have to either make a way or find a way” (interview 3, May 17, 2016). She described efforts she has taken to contact public officials about local issues, “anything I can do where, I know it’s not much, but it’s something” (interview 2, April 14, 2016), she reflected about the experience. She shared that she has signed many petitions for issues that are important to her, but has never participated in any form of rally or protest. She also reflected, “I do vote, I vote anytime, in primaries, general election, but I don’t think people are actually paying attention to what is actually going on” (interview 2, April 14, 2016).

One of her most significant efforts has been through community service initiatives with the student organization, Circle K. She shared, “it’s nice to be a part of something that is for service, leadership and fellowship. People who actually care about what’s going on” (interview 2, April 14, 2016). Throughout each of our interviews she reiterated her pride in her own helping nature, which she attributes to taking after her mom. “I’m always the first person to help out” (interview 1, March 7, 2016), she declared with a smile. She defined service as “anything that can help the community” (interview 2, April 14, 2016), however she does not believe that service is going to make an impact beyond just on the individuals being served,
I see the impact, especially that people that are in need of service, it seems like they are appreciated. I don’t know if that makes sense, you know that someone is actually willing to help them in their situation. The looks on those kids’ faces, they’re all dressed up. Just the look on their faces – and the satisfaction you get from that, I live for that I love it. (interview 2, April 14, 2016)

She suggested that service, though, is not connected to larger societal issues facing our communities, “Yeah, they’re not connected, bigger issues… yeah, it doesn’t pertain to that. I wish…but no” (interview 2, April 14, 2016).

**Civic Identity: Positive Forces, Barriers and Challenges**

Alexis identified her up-bringing in a globally-conscious family with her own interest in current events and global affairs, but in terms of connecting locally and putting ideas and knowledge into action it was her experience with Circle K at Civic Community College that she said made the greatest impact,

I mean, ‘cause I was a sheltered kid, everything revolved around school, so um, really what has opened me up to the community is Circle K International. That’s the only thing, but other than that I don’t think I’ve connected with the local community at all (interview 3, May 17, 2016).

She identified social media as an asset that helps to inform her and her peers about issues and community concerns, but she also expressed frustration that it can be a double-edge sword which also prevents people from moving to action,

Social media has really come up in these past two years. People are now, I’m not gonna say, like the whole Black Lives matters movement – yes, it matters - but
instead of people acting upon it, you can do something in your community or going to your state representative. They are just recording and posting. Nothing is gonna get done by just talking. Yes, that plays a part, but you have to start from cities and states, Hit ‘em where it hurts – not just record and post on social media. Ugh. They’re like well it’s the only thing they can do. No, it’s not the only thing you can do, you can do your research (interview 2, April 14, 2016).

She also suggested that even when they want to, she and others often feel that they don’t know where to start when it comes to getting involved in community issues or speaking out about issues, “either they don’t know how to go about that or they don’t know how to or who to contact or what their resources are” (interview 2, April 14, 2016). She reflected on the value of her civic network that she’s been able to build with mentors over the past few years,

    It’s really who you associate yourself with. I think that’s, who you associate yourself with or what connections you have. People are stubborn, I’m stubborn. Either they don’t have connections or they’re not willing to find connections or get out of their comfort zone. This started back in high school, my Guidance counselor was like a big sister to me, she really pushed me to look for resources. At a local school a graduate was a connection from her and then she connected me to a previous boss, who started a restaurant by the school and he’s connected me to other opportunities. And it’s like a domino effect - people connecting me to other people. (interview 3, May 17, 2016)
We talked about the concept of social capital, an idea Alexis was not familiar with, but was excited to learn about.

Alexis did express a frustration with her peers who are aware of things happening in the community or globally and are passive observers,

I don’t know why – the typical response that I hear is “too much bad stuff going on”, are you freakin’ serious? If there is bad stuff going on wouldn’t you want to know about what’s going on so you can possibly change whatever’s going on. That response just annoys the living crap out of me, are you serious? Because you’re watching local news probably. If you open your surroundings, you’re probably gonna figure out or learn more about today’s world. I don’t… but that response annoys the living crap out of me. (interview 2, April 14, 2016)

Civic Identity: Impact of Community College Experience

Although Alexis grew up in a politically and civically informed household, she attributes her ability to act on these ideas as coming from her experience at Civic Community College, "I think being a student ambassador has helped me get out of my comfort zone" (interview 1, March 7, 2016). As was mentioned earlier, she sees her experience with Circle K as one of the first times she was challenged to connect with her local community and began to understand a role she could play through service. She wants other students to have this same opportunity, sharing,

I just wish there was more organizations that pertain to the community because people won’t be looking for that, either they go to school and then they go to work, if something is in their face all the time, I think that would help get more
people involved. I wouldn’t have known about Circle K if it wasn’t for one of the financial aid counselors. I didn’t want to add one other thing on my plate. I’m glad that I took the risk. It’s the only thing that has connected me between college life and community (interview 3, May 17, 2016).

Alexis also reflected on other opportunities that the campus provides for students to become informed about various civic issues,

I think the Black American Caucus up here, plays a really big part, ‘cause even with social issues like what’s going on with Flint, Michigan, they were asking students to donate water bottles so they can take them to Flint with the whole water situation. They play a really heavy part into that. I guess it’s rewarding for students to see that they’re a part of something bigger. (interview 2, April 14, 2016)

She discussed her desire to take a service-learning course, which she was aware that the university offered, but didn’t have the ability to fit into her schedule,

I wish I did. The only reason I did not is every class that I’ve taken has gone toward my major. I really wish that I would have. I had the chance to, but I ended up taking introduction to Theology. There are classes here. They didn’t work with my schedule or timeframe of the class I was already taking another class (interview 2, April 14, 2016).

Summary: “That’s My Thing”

Overall, Alexis maintains a positive outlook on her community, conveys a sense of belonging both on campus and in her local community, and articulates a responsibility to
address civic issues of importance through multiple channels of informed action. Her lens tends to focus on international issues. She shared about a recent news story she saw about the international refugee crisis, “You know just seeing situations like that. It makes me want to just jump into the Peace Corps and try to help out any way I can” (interview 2, April 14, 2016). She described her helping and service-oriented nature as central to her identity,

I don’t know, that’s truly my thing, I just look for different ways to help out and if someone needs a helping hand I am the first person to go to or I’m the first person people email because they know that that’s my thing. (interview 1, March 7, 2016)

During our final interview together Alexis was beaming with excitement as she shared that she had been accepted into a bachelor to master’s program in Occupational Therapy at a local four-year institution. She will begin her classes there this Fall and says she hopes she can start a Circle K organization there and continue to become even further engaged on her new campus and in the local community.

Crystal: Pushing Beyond Potholes

“I don’t really think about my neighborhood…except the pot holes”

Crystal’s transition to Civic Community College from a private, four-year, liberal arts school located two hours from home has been difficult. She had relished in the freedom and autonomy she felt as a student, living away from home and in a new city at her previous school. She elaborated, “I feel like everyone should have the opportunity to go away to school when they graduate high school, just to give them a different
experience” (interview 1, March 29, 2016). However, when financial obligations became too much, she felt that a return home was her only option. She reflected,

It is a very tough transition, coming from a four-year university and transferring to a community college. There’s nothing wrong with community college, I hate the stigma that’s attached to it like, oh it’s just a community college. They don’t have much to offer. I’ve heard it in the past, like I just don’t even remember where I heard it from, but I always had it in back of mind. Sometimes I find myself listening to the stigma, and I’m like no, there’s nothing wrong. There’s a lot of good people that come from here. (interview 1, March 29, 2016)

Crystal is 22 and a full-time student studying for her Associate of Arts with aspirations of going back to a four-year school to complete a degree in psychology. She identifies as Black / African American and is the first in her family to go to college. She currently lives in a house with her mother. She hasn’t figured out exactly what she wants to pursue in the field of psychology. She explained that prison outreach has always been interesting to her, although she’s not fully committed to that idea yet,

I don’t really know it’s just different things that catch my eye and peak my interest. I was in class recently and there was a lesson on like child abuse and stuff, so that really peaked my interest. I’ve always been interested in why bad people are the way they are. (interview 1, March 29, 2016)

Involvement at Community College

Crystal has not gotten involved in anything outside of classes during her time at Civic Community College. She seemed a bit regretful of this when we discussed it, “I did
a lot more sociable things when I went there [her previous college] than being here. Although I am trying to like, be more sociable here…but it’s hard” (interview 1, March 29, 2016). She discussed the only time she could recall that she was really involved in any type of formal organization or program, which was during her time in an Upward Bound program in High School,

I’ve never been much of a people person, so the only time in High School I actually was involved in something I was involved in the Upward Bound program and that was just like a place where, a situation where they just got you ready, groomed you for college. So if I wasn’t involved with that I wouldn’t have had a clue what to do in college. (interview 1, March 29, 2016)

Civic Identity: Perspectives on Community, Role, Responsibility and Efficacy

Unlike some of my participants who have moved frequently and lived in many different locations, Crystal has lived in the same neighborhood for the entirety of her life. Yes, actually I don’t live too far from house that I grew up in. It’s actually like right around the corner. So I mean we moved a few times, but we stayed in those places for at least four years each. The house I grew up in I probably stayed in at least eight years. (interview 1, March 29, 2016)

However, as we began discussing her perceptions of her neighborhood it became clear that there was not a strong feeling of connection despite her long time residency, “Um, It’s kind of hard to like connect with people, I guess, I don’t know. I’m just not open to connecting with the neighbors. I’m not sure if there is trust, but everybody is friendly” (interview 1, March 29, 2016).
During our initial conversation Crystal also struggled to identify things that she liked or would change about her neighborhood. When I asked her to tell me about her neighborhood she simply stated, “A lot of potholes, a lot of pot holes. That is the only thing that I can think of, (pause), it drives me insane. Besides the pot holes, I don’t really think about my neighborhood” (interview 1, March 29, 2016). However, as we moved on in our conversation it became clear that this question about her neighborhood stuck in her mind, because several times later she chimed back in with things that she had thought about related to her community. The first was something she thought she’d like to see changed,

There are a couple of like empty lots and abandon houses that I’d really like for it to be occupied with something beautiful. Something visually appealing would be awesome, a garden or a new house for people to live in. There’s just so many abandon places in the city that it’s just so sad. You have all of these people on the streets with signs begging for food and it’s like, come on, because it’s ridiculous – everywhere you turn there’s an abandon building. Can we do something about this? My mom says the city used to be so beautiful when I was a baby… I’m like well why can’t it get back to that? (interview 1, March 29, 2016)

Additionally, by the end of our first interview she shared, “I think people have the wrong idea about violence in my neighborhood” (interview 1, March 29, 2016). She continued about this misconception,

I am fortunate enough to live in a neighborhood where it’s not very life threatening. Sometimes my cousin, who lives in a suburb, she gets so nervous
coming down and visiting and stuff. And I’m like violence can happen anywhere—so it’s really not the area. And my area really isn’t bad at all. I wouldn’t be afraid to walk to corner store or anything. (interview 1, March 29, 2016)

However, she wishes that others didn’t have such a stigma of her community as it relates to violence. Upon further reflection she shared, “I wish there was something I could do” (interview 1, March 29, 2016) referencing the growing number of abandoned homes, perceptions of violence and number of people begging on the streets that she witnesses.

During each interview we explored her perceptions of various forms of civic action. She was particularly enthusiastic about voting,

I couldn’t wait to turn 18 so I could exercise my right to vote because, I just feel like something you have to do, it’s your duty to exercise your right to vote, to kind of have an opinion on who’s running what. (interview 2, June 7, 2016)

But when asked about other political involvement she said “No, I try to stay away from politics” (interview 2, June 7, 2016). She expressed her extreme dislike for the Donald Trump campaign, but shared that she is too passive to get involved in rallies or anti-Trump events,

I have not, I have not gone to any events. The thing about me is I can feel strongly about something, but a rally or something I probably won’t get into it. I’m so passive aggressive in my views. It’s ridiculous. So I haven’t attended any events of anything. But I’m happy for people that go and boycott his rallies, it makes me proud. I think the main thing is the election, the actual voting day. (interview 2, June 7, 2016)
Civic Identity: Positive Forces, Barriers and Challenges

Over the course of our meetings together Crystal expressed that she genuinely does care about her community, but has just never felt compelled to get involved,

I don’t know… I don’t know… I don’t want to like put to the blame on the something else, like I’m too busy because it’s no excuse. But, I’m just not much of an activist type of person. If that makes sense? (interview 2, June 7, 2016)

I asked her to clarify the type of person she envisioned that it took to get involved in the community and she shared, “You have to kind of have to have that activist spirit inside of you to really be proactive against stuff like hate crimes and racial issues” (interview 2, June 7, 2016). She said of those she sees as community leaders,

Anyone – I don’t really have a specific person that I think of like a leader, but I think anyone that has the guts to like believe in something and stand up for it and like be boisterous about it is, ya’ know, (pause), someone that I look up to because a lot of time it’s hard to do that. You can believe in something but it’s hard to really stand up for it. And voice your opinion. So I admire those people that can do that. (interview 2, June 7, 2016)

She gave examples of the work of Dr. Martin Luther King and expressed the desire for public officials to do more related to issues of importance to the community,

Public figures I think there could be more of an effort put in on their part because they are public figures and people look up to them, and people tend to follow what the celebrity does. So I think if they made it more of a priority that it could actually be beneficial toward the younger generation. (interview 2, June 7, 2016)
Civic Identity: Impact of Community College Experience

As was shared earlier, Crystal has not gotten involved in anything beyond courses at Civic Community College, however she eagerly confided that she felt positively that her education at Civic Community College has given her skills and confidence that could help her if she were to get more involved in her community. She shared,

It’s definitely given me more confidence to, you know, be more active in the community. It’s definitely given me the tools that I would need to start being more active, and speaking to people, and being proactive and helping and stuff. I think [this school] has helped a lot (interview 2, June 7, 2016).

She wishes that she knew about more ways to get involved on campus related to current events, especially around recent hate crimes and police brutality events,

I think that there should be some type of group or rally even about stuff like that because it’s a really big issue that’s affecting our generation. And is gonna affect the generations to come. So many people have lost their lives due to ya’ know such nonsense stuff. (interview 2, June 7, 2016)

Summary: Envisioning Future Action

I witnessed a big shift in Crystal throughout our meetings together, from our initial meeting where potholes were her biggest civic concern to our final meeting where she shared, “well I’m not very active in my community at all right now, but in the future I would like to be more active in the community and helping improving things as much as I can” (interview 2, June 7, 2016). She expressed concern for community issues, but identified a lack of connection to her own neighborhood. She looked to outside entities to
address issues, such as politics or public officials, as opposed to acknowledging the responsibility or impact she could personally have.

**Joshua: A Voice for Those Without One**

“I would like to change the world one person at a time. And I believe that.”

During my first interview with Joshua I was greeted by his giant smile and unbelievably gracious outlook. “Thank you so much for doing this,” he said, “and thank you for inviting me to be a part of this” (interview 1, April 1, 2016). I had to continually remind him that he was the one doing me a favor by lending his time and sharing his story. Joshua is a 48 year old, African-American, full-time student studying Human Services. He came to Civic Community College three years ago, after a brief military career and rewarding professional work experience. He said he always had the desire to pursue higher education, but never had the confidence to go for it,

Straight out of high school, I didn’t feel as though I was capable of being successful in college, and I hate to say it like that. ‘I’m not smart enough to go to college, I’ll go to the military’…I don’t like that, but the military supposed to make a man out of you, so straight out of high school I graduated and went to the Air Force. (interview 1, April 1, 2016)

After 4 years in the military Joshua knew he had financial opportunities to support the pursuit of education, but he explained,

My insecurities and lack of confidence still prevented me from going. I think back, wait a minute, you could have gone to school for free, but I didn’t make it
back. I still had this stigma that I was not smart enough. So I jumped from job to job. (interview 1, April 1, 2016)

He eventually worked his way up from a seasonal employee to a sales representative. “It was very good, I had a company car, we would go to Las Vegas every year. They flew me to a White Sox game in Chicago” (interview 1, April 1, 2016). However, even with all the perks he admits that he knew it was not what he truly wanted to be doing with his life, “but I did my best” (interview 1, April 1, 2016), he said.

Life took a different path when Joshua’s father became ill with cancer and he became a primary care-taker, “I saw how my father cared for my mom when she died of MS and he refused to put her in assisted living. I wanted to do the same for him” (interview 1, April 1, 2016). Joshua tried to balance a demanding full-time career with the responsibilities of caring for his ailing father,

My male macho pride got the best of me and I felt that I could do my job and take care of my dad, which in the high competitive field of sales, I didn’t realize I couldn’t get my work, but my work suffered to where in June 2012 my father died of cancer and I lost my job the same month. It was rough. I didn’t do anything because I didn’t know what I was going to do in life. (interview 1, April 1, 2016)

Within a few months Joshua heard about a Vocational Retraining Program, being offered by the military and finally took the leap to enroll at Civic Community College. Three years later he maintains a 3.97 GPA and is preparing to transfer to a Social Work program at a nearby four-year institution. Joshua lives independently. He has full-custody of his son, who is autistic, and plays a big role in Joshua’s life. He discussed the difficult
relationship he has had with his son’s mother, who struggles with drug and alcohol addictions. This personal experience, plus his lived experiences in his neighborhood and church have influenced his current career path to work as a social worker in a chemical dependency program.

Involvement at Community College

Joshua has taken on a prominent campus leadership role during his final year at Civic Community College. In his role as Board Student Scholar, Joshua explains,

I communicate with all the campuses Student Government presidents, and listen to the concerns of their campuses. If there is a concern that embodies all of the campuses then you bring it to board of trustees, saying, this is a concern of the students. I am supposed to be the voice of students of all Civic Community College. All campuses, all students. Not one campus, not the other, just all the students. (interview 1, April 1, 2016)

He continued, passionately describing the work of this position,

It’s interesting you know, you’re pulled in every direction, but it is rewarding. You do talk to people and make results as far as what’s going on, results may not be necessarily what each president wants but you’ve exhausted that, you’ve done what your job is supposed to be. (interview 1, April 1, 2016)

Although he was clearly passionate about the opportunities and responsibilities of this role he admitted that it is challenging at times, “You’re like a ring master, you’re conducting over here and over here, it has to be a balance it’s a learned skill, you know. It is difficult to balance personal life - school – work” (interview 1, April 1, 2016). When
asked what his favorite part of this leadership role has been for him, he shared, “As far as if I had to put my finger on one thing, you know I believe that I have made a difference by connecting people to the resources they need and being a voice for those who don’t have one” (interview 1, April 1, 2016).

Civic Identity: Perspectives on Community, Role, Responsibility and Efficacy

Joshua presented a very strong sense of self within his community, and a clear identity and feeling of responsibility to use his talents, skills and knowledge to help others,

My whole makeup is to try to make a difference 1 person at a time. I was raised in the church, you learn to help somebody, that’s how you get your blessings, by helping others it helps you in the long-run. And it’s, for me, not about title – it’s what you do that defines you. (interview 1, April 1, 2016)

Two things became very clear about the approach that Joshua takes in his work with community. First, he believes strongly in the impact that one person can have on another. Secondly, he advocates for open dialogue and working to correct misinformation and myths about people and communities. He discussed the enjoyment that he gets while he volunteers at a local center serving the homeless community. He shared that they often have groups of high school students that come in to get volunteer hours for school or scholarships,

I really enjoy enlightening them about different things. I try to enlighten them to the society, in the society we try to push them [the homeless] away. It’s funny to
see them [the students] change their thoughts. We could all be in this situation, I tell them. (interview 1, April 1, 2016)

In a later interview Joshua discussed the importance he sees in demystifying the urban community, “I think there is a lot of misconceptions or myths about things that go on in the inner city. I believe that, we have to demystify these myths that people believe” (interview 2, May 25, 2016).

Even with this desire to inform and educate those unfamiliar with issues or communities, Joshua shared that he has some grave concerns about the state of his own neighborhood,

The neighborhood is not a very good neighborhood, at one point it was a high drug trafficked area, where that was an area hard hit as far as heroine epidemic and women used their body to get drugs and that was what was going on. Guys burglary to get money for drugs, so there is still that lack of trust. (interview 1, April 1, 2016)

However, being the optimist that he describes himself as, he still saw the positive developments around him,

What do I like about it? They are in the process of rebuilding, build houses, redoing streets, the reconstruction of area is being done. And the local CDC is making an effort to bring resources and different business back to neighborhood; I think that is good. That will drive the will to help. I’d like to change stigma of that area. For example, the Boys and Girls Club there is beautiful, they’re right
there. So what would I change, I mean keep doing what they’re doing, but more of it and faster. But I know change takes time. (interview 1, April 1, 2016)

In addition to his perspectives on community, Joshua articulated a strong personal efficacy in his ability to make a difference. He reiterated on multiple occasions that his approach is about impacting one person at a time,

I call it the butterfly or ripple, you help one they help one and so on. If I did this to look for major changes I wouldn’t do it, because if you can change one person, to me if this building caught on fire and I drug ‘em out ‘he saved me’ that’s just one. So I believe, that, what makes me feel as though I can make a difference is I know I can make difference in at least 1 person, that’s all I look at – one person.

(interview 2, May 25, 2016)

Joshua went on to describe the role of connector that he has enjoyed playing,

I believe there’s information out there, and there’s people that need it and there’s a gap there. You do this, you look back and pull somebody up because I’m gonna need some help, always someone in your path that gives of themselves, going out their way for you so you have to give back – you’re always in the middle and you should be thankful for that because there’s always somebody worse off than you and somebody better than you so we should be thankful. (interview 2, May 25, 2016)

As we discussed some of the larger challenges he sees within his community, including drugs, violence and gangs, Joshua said that he doesn’t focus his efforts on changing the larger structures or issues at play,
As far as the bigger community, I think if enough people, individuals change, I think the community has to change. I don’t look at it as the big picture, I look at the little tiny things. Did I make a difference here? Yeah, they tell me I do. But I just try to be myself, be genuine, be for real and whatever happens it happens. I believe I made a difference. (interview 2, May 25, 2016)

**Civic Identity: Positive Forces, Barriers and Challenges**

Joshua identified his mother as a civic role model, and his involvement with church as a tremendous influence in his own engagement with the community and belief that he has a responsibility and ability to be involved with civic issues, “It [church] did shape me and started when I was young because I was actually helping people, my mom right beside me, we lived in the church, making a difference in people’s lives” (interview 1, April 1, 2016). Religion and involvement with a church community continues to shape Joshua’s perspectives on civic life, and continues to be a major avenue for his own involvement in community. In fact, in his role as a youth worker in his church he said he pushed for his church community to become even more active in the local community,

We need to get more into the community, we need to get more into community. You see negative and bad behavior from youth is a cry for help to us, and that’s that uh…. changing the myths ‘oh that kid is bad’, yes, but that’s a cry for help. We’re trying to sure up the difference between Sunday to Sunday, we’re trying to get involved in Tuesday, Wednesday, you know, start a mentoring program. Mentoring program that will deal with a lot of the misconceptions. (interview 2, May 25, 2016)
He described his voluntary role at the church, “I work with the youth of the church and I give life lessons with spiritual background” (interview 2, May 25, 2016).

Joshua also identified numerous issues, challenges and barriers that prevent relationships and trust from being established within his community,

You can’t trust your neighbors because those are the ones that break in your house. You gotta move in at night, because if you move in during the day everyone knows what you have. There are things that people have to do in the inner city that you don’t have to in the suburbs. You can’t leave your doors unlocked as far as in your car. It’s called street-justice now where violence is the way to go. Violence is the governing body. You see, on YouTube or on websites where fighting is glorified. It’s like – and I’m looking like that’s not good. (interview 2, May 25, 2016)

He also discussed the complexities that he sees in the relationships that community members, especially youth, have with the police,

The youth of the church believe that the police are all bad and I tell them, now that’s a myth. That is a misconception and I tell them, just like anywhere you have good and bad. And your bad ruin it for the good. (interview 2, May 25, 2016)

Beyond myth busting Joshua said he tries to instill confidence and skills to help the youth navigate the community and relationships with police,

I tell them how to negotiate and deal with police because believe it or not the police are put in a very messed up situation for the youth. I tell them listen, do
what they have to do if you have an issue grievance it later, but for right now you
do exactly what they say. (interview 2, May 25, 2016)

Finally, Joshua expressed a real concern about the impact that gangs are having on
youth and their relationships with their communities,

Gangs to me is a form of foster family, that they get a sense of belonging.

Maslow’s hierarchy of basic needs have to be met. A sense of belonging, safety,
security, and I believe that that is affecting youth. I think they are they are afraid.
They feel there’s no control in the community. I believe that because people move
from place to place to place there is no community cohesion. No sense of
responsibility. (interview 2, May 25, 2016)

With each of these complex barriers, Joshua did share a path to a solution that he
sees, and that is open dialogue. In discussing the relationships between schools, church,
police and the community he shared,

The police are looked more as an adversary. There are things that perpetrate that
adversarial, they want to keep people, keep the separation (punching fists
together). But no, I would change the way that things are right now, you have to
confront issues. No, I want to open up dialogue, tell me what the problem is! How
is it that we know things are not right and we’re not doing anything to correct it.
Let’s start attacking these issues. I ask people all the time, how do you eat an
elephant? One bite at a time. So that’s where I’m at. (interview 2, May 25, 2016)
Civic Identity: Impact of Community College Experience

Joshua shared that it was his lack of confidence that kept him from pursuing higher education for over ten years after he left the military, and admits that this lack of confidence is something he still struggles with,

I still suffer from low self-esteem and confidence. Well I hide it very well. They ask me to write reports all the time, and when I turn them in I’m nervous. I don’t know if I’m a perfectionist, or where I’m like, you know what, I turn them in and I say – if there’s anything you want to change just let me know because I assume they are not good enough. For the longest I used to think that professors liked me as why they would give me the grades that they did and then I talked to one who’s like– no you earned whatever we gave you. (interview 3, June 7, 2016)

However, he conveyed that the opportunities that Civic Community College has provided him has helped to boost his self-esteem tremendously,

I attribute my boost in confidence and who I am to the Upward Bound program and the staff at Civic Community College. Because they made me believe in myself when I didn’t know where to go. And they were like try this, fill this application out for Board Student Scholar, I didn’t think I could do it but they said try it, so I did. I still suffer from low self-esteem and low confidence but I don’t let it stop me as much as it used to. (interview 1, April 1, 2016)

Joshua said he knows that he had developed some of the skills that he is able to use in his civic life before coming to school, however he asserted, “They [Civic Community College] have given me a platform to do this on a larger scale” (interview 1, April 1,
Summary: “It’s Not Me, It’s Us”

Of all of the participants in this project, Joshua was the most assured in describing his perspectives on himself as it relates to his community and the motivations for his civic involvements and perspectives. He shared that he does see himself as being different from most of his community college peers, in this regard, however, he explained,

I don’t believe that I’m your typical community college student, I’m a non-traditional. I’m an older student, which that puts me in a different bracket. Not that I’m in the know, but just because of where I’m at. If I look at the average age of community college student, I would say, I don’t think that they look at it in quite the way than I do. It’s more an age thing. (interview 3, June 7, 2016)

It was clear that his involvement in his church, in his leadership role on campus and through his various other community service-related activities are truly at the core of Joshua’s identity, so much so that he describes his perspectives on leadership in this way,

It's not me it's us. Leadership is bunch of responsibility. You know, I’m like oh now, it’s not me. It’s us. I feel a responsibility more so to the people. I’m watching making sure where everybody at, what’s going on. But I do feel a responsibility to look out for everybody and make sure everybody’s ok. (interview 2, May 25, 2016)

Additionally, Joshua expressed the value of collaboration and join efforts to build community. He conveyed,
We all need to rely on each other, I would want more of a cohesive unit, not only in the community but in everything that affects a child in the community—school, church, police—everybody needs to work together not against each other. I like that whole collaborative, togetherness to ensure a better community.

(interview 2, May 25, 2016)

This collaborative approach to community efforts made Joshua’s perspectives unique compared with other participants.

**Monique: Bigger than What Society Puts A Hold On Me**

“My biggest barrier is the people that’s afraid of change.”

Monique was fervent in discussing the issues she has witnessed in her community:

I’m bigger than what society puts a hold on me, because in society if you grew up in the ‘hood, go to public schooling, you have low education, I’m really here to say, no, no, it’s not true. Because I grew up in public schools, in the roughest neighborhood in Jamaica (pause), poverty (pause), like going without food to eat and I’m here now. I would definitely say, I’m a 20-year-old with a 40-year-old mindset. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)

She articulated the challenges she has faced in having her own voice heard, and the injustice that she has experienced throughout her life.

She is a 20-year-old student who has been studying full-time at Civic Community College for 2 years. She is in the Obstetrics/Gynecology Sonography program, but has aspirations of medical school someday. Monique was born in Jamaica, but has lived in the United States for the past 12 years. Her experiences of living in foster care since the
age of 14 have shaped much of her worldview. She currently resides independently in an apartment. Our conversations always had a serious tone as she expressed her anger, frustration and disappointment, however this was balanced with what was an obvious deep care and compassion for people and concern for the state of our society. During our first interview together she described herself as a people-person.

Monique was raised by her grandmother in Jamaica, and described the difficulty of having to leave her grandmother to come to the United States to live with her mother,

I was always close with my grandmother, so when I had to leave I was kind of upset ‘cause that was my baby. She was important to me, so it was basically like leaving grandma here to go with your mom. When I did here we never really had a close relationship because our personalities so strong. She [her mother] had kids at a young age, so it was like she still was being a kid herself. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)

Within a few years of moving to the United States, Monique was in foster care due to her mother’s inability to care for her and her eight siblings. This became a challenging time for Monique, moving from home to home and transferring schools several times, which resulted in a delayed graduation from high school. However, Monique recalled that she managed to remain positive and find positive outlets for the stress she was feeling,

I was definitely involved, I did volleyball, basketball, like I said that [basketball] was one of my favorite things, that was my outlet through all of it. Basketball was something that I was like ok, this is the only thing that don’t stress me out, so I definitely involved myself in basketball. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)
Monique said she chose to come to Civic Community College because it was cost effective and she didn’t want the pressures of partying that she felt a four-year school presented,

At first, I was in foster care for a while, and I wanted to go to get that college experience like in a dorm, but I know me, like having to go away and I don’t really have parents that structure things really on me, so I was like, I want to go to Civic Community College just to get that college life experience, and I don’t have to be rushing and parytin’ without pressure of actually being at a four year college. Just fresh out of high school, I’m like ok I’ll go to a community college, see what it’s like and get the feeling, and then go away. Cause it’s technically the same education, just living in the dorm is more expensive. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)

**Involvement at Community College**

Monique shared that she has really focused her time on being a successful student, and for this reason has not looked into getting involved with any co-curricular experiences on campus. She expressed her concerns about balancing things with school or a job,

That was one of the main reasons why I didn’t get a job cause I’m like job and working, no, I’m like I did that my whole high school years. I just wanna be free, be a college student and take that time off for you and just do that. So I don’t work or get involved right now. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)
Monique has a multifaceted perspective about her community, given that she has moved so many times during her time in foster care, including moves to suburban communities which she contrasts with her experiences in urban communities and in her hometown in Jamaica. She shared, “When I was dependent on someone else I had to move around. So it’s like if I had to count how many houses I moved to, from being a kid it’s like 40 houses literally” (interview 1, April 15, 2016). However we did spend time talking about her current neighborhood, which she has lived in for approximately six months. She shared, “I don’t go outside much, but I love that right in our backyard, close to our backyard, is the lake. See the view, like I said I love to sightsee so I always go down there” (interview 1, April 15, 2016). However, Monique makes a very clear distinction between where she goes to the lake and the private areas that are not accessible to the public,

For like the rich people that have the boats and stuff down there, they got like a little private area you can go on, but it’s so reserved. I found this spot that I could go to last year and every summer I go down there everyday and sit there for at least an hour and just look at the water that’s my favorite of everything.

(interview 1, April 15, 2016)

She expressed that there are some things she’d like to change about her neighborhood,
It’s right there by the ‘hood, so sometimes you hear like gun shots and stuff like that. Little minor stuff, but because we’re so close to the ‘hood like the hood-hood area right there. You know I’d change that part. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)

She said she doesn’t really know any of her neighbors and hasn’t established a feeling of trust in the community,

There are older people in my building, like everyone’s quiet. So it’s like I’m quiet, you’re quiet, that’s ok with me. I’ll say hello to someone, but I don’t personally know their name. Like hello if I see them coming in the building, but like personally know them or spoken to them on a personal level, no I don’t know them. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)

Monique also expressed that she wished there wasn’t a misperception of violence of her community,

Because it’s at the borderline of the ‘hood, people like, it’s a dangerous area. No it splits off, like certain areas. That’s part of the area is not a bad area, but if you go down a little bit more because we’re neighbors, like literally, it would be bad, but everybody think that just right on the border that’s considered the hood and that’s considered the hood to, but no it’s not. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)

Given her astute observations about the various communities that she has lived in, as well as the directness and honesty with which she describes the challenges she sees I was curious to learn more about Monique’s perceptions of her own role or potential impact. She discussed that service has been a big part of her life, starting when she was in foster care and they would volunteer together, “I’ve done volunteering. I have always
volunteered, soup kitchens, yard work, just helping people in general. Like I said, I’m a
people person so I do like to help people” (interview 1, April 15, 2016). She described a
haunted house at a community center that she used to volunteer with, a program designed
to give youth a safe, family-friendly space to trick or treat, she says of her motivation to
be involved with this “I was always caring about somebody other than myself, so that is
important” (interview 1, April 15, 2016).

However, when we discussed the connection between her community service
experiences and the larger issues of injustice that she’s witnessed, she said that she didn’t
believe the two were connected, “I don’t think it’s making a difference on these big
issues. Passing out food for the homeless, ‘how you doing man?’ We’ll talk about how
you been, just little conversation is so different” (interview 2, June 10, 2016). She went
on to express a loss for not knowing where to begin, “I don’t know how to go about it. I
don’t know how to go about to get the world involved. I think I’m one of those young
girls with an old soul thinking about these things” (interview 2, June 10, 2016).

Despite the fact that she said she doesn’t know where to start on taking action related
to some of the larger community issues she is concerned about, Monique also lamented
that many of her peers believe that young people cannot make a difference,

I think it’s important for people to put their kids in that predicament where they can
help themselves out in the long run. Be an entrepreneur, encourage people to do
bigger things, do better things. They feel like they have to be older… wait til they
older - no – you don’t have to wait until you’re older. Put time in now you become
bigger when you’re older. (interview 2, June 10, 2016)
Monique described some of the individuals that have been influential to her in terms of how she thinks about the community and her role or responsibility in it. First, she discussed a service-learning course that she took during her time at Civic Community College, specifically she remembers the close relationship she formed with that faculty member:

She was special to me, because even though she was stern she understood, you know, she had that sweet, bein’ like that motherhood, like ok I’m gonna be tough on you on this, but I’m gonna help you on the same token. And I think with me not really growin’ up with a mother like, and I did find outside mothers, that drew me in to her. I really like this professor, because she’s understanding but she pushed you to do harder. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)

She went on to describe some of the projects they did for their service-learning course, “Oh yeah we did a project at a local elementary school, we had a fundraiser for a final day of school for a final” (interview 1, April 15, 2016). She then went back to discussing the impact of the faculty member,

And that’s another thing I like about her, she cares, you know? She cares about the community and the people, you have to love people that care about people. So we learned about that, just really through volunteering. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)

In addition to this influential faculty member Monique identified several historic figures that have shaped her view of herself in a civic space,
Growing up, I honestly say, I started seeing role models when I got older, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Harriet Tubman, that the kind of people that were influential to me because they were a part of history, they changed the life, not just for me but for a lot of people. So to me them those are the people that will be my inspiration and stuff like that. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)

She paused and then expressed her concern,

I know some people that’s my age don’t even know who they are, it’s like, that’s part of you, that’s a part of history, so I think that was always important to me, so that’s why I took the time out to get to know about these people. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)

Finally, Monique regrets that she is not a citizen and is not able to vote. Her concerns regarding the current election cycle will be examined later in this discussion.

**Civic Identity: Positive Forces, Barriers and Challenges**

Monique spoke more openly about the barriers and challenges that she witnessed than other participants. She was candid in her thoughts about structural injustices and the economic and racial divisions she has experienced across communities. Fear is one of the greatest barriers she said holds her and others back from truly raising her voice or taking action on community issues,

My biggest barrier is the people that’s afraid of change, especially people that are rich. If the world make a difference and people start waking up. My biggest fear, some people are evil in this world, they are out for self. If someone cutting off their money, those are the jealous people. Think, like MLK he made a world
change, they would assassinate me like they did him. Malcolm X, Lincoln, all those people trying to change and look how that ended. (interview 2, June 10, 2016)

Over the course of our conversations Monique identified numerous issues that she felt presented barriers to individuals being truly engaged in community. She described the challenges of re-entry and employment holding people back from getting ahead,

Talking to my friends who have experienced it, young kids, they were doing young dumb stuff that landed them there [prison], but once you come out you’re ready. You can really grasp life and you’ve got a little bit more mature and they want to do something better with themselves. Society still hold that on them and some of them have kids, but no one will hire them. (interview 2, June 10, 2016)

She also discussed her concerns over racism within the judicial system, citing a recent example of a student charged with rape from Stanford, who received a vastly different sentence from another black student charged with a similar offense. She shared, “It makes me have fear for my people, in today’s world it’s still kind of a white society” (interview 2, June 10, 2016).

Monique painted a picture of the two very different lives that she’s lived, having grown up in poverty in Jamaica she shared,

I’ve been just begging off the street for money to eat to have something to eat period. Period. People with money going into restaurants, and at five years old going into asking them ‘sir can I have something to eat?’. At five, (pause) in poverty (pause) and everybody turn a blind eye. You don’t know what it’s like to
be hungry as a kid, hungry days without eating with pain in your stomach, and
watch someone throw something away in front of your face when you ask them
for something to eat. Tell me what type of world is that? (interview 2, June 10,
2016)

This contrasted with the time she spent in an affluent suburban community in foster care,
where she witnessed the stark differences in schools,

I lived in a white neighborhood, that foster family got money. I’ve been to good
schools. I’ve been to prestigious schools. Period. I’ve been to those schools and they
were on college level – Harvard, Stanford level – and then when I come back to the
‘hood these kids they are in elementary we don’t even get through one chapter. The
curriculum is so messed up. I’ve been to private schools, ones that have tuition. And
I was way beyond my time when I went back to the ‘hood schools. I was sitting in
class like this is so easy, I was telling all the answers, teachers said ‘ok let someone
else answer the questions.’ (interview 2, June 10, 2016)

As we examined these differences and the potential role that schools can play in
developing civic identity she conveyed, "The schools is part of the crooked system, too -
even the university” (interview 2, June 10, 2016). She raised a concern that schools are
trying to erase history, specifically about slavery, racism and other historic injustices,

I don’t think we learn about them. Not just that, I have a personal feeling like they
trying to erase history. I don’t get to learn about them here. Don’t talk about it,
..what do you mean? Don’t talk about it, it’s a part of history, whether it’s good or
bad. We don’t want people to have a negative aspect. They not informed and they
come across it, and that’s still negative aspects. So it’s just best for them to be informed. (interview 2, June 10, 2016)

In addition, Monique expressed her concern over the apathy she sees in her peers, “It’s sad that a lot of people don’t know the truth, they don’t know their background, so they be like, whatever or they just don’t care and that’s sad” (interview 2, June 10, 2016). She said that people often don’t worry or get involved until something immediately impacts them,

A lot of kids walk around here and don’t care. It don’t affect them, til it affect them. So they’re going about their day, like whatever, let them deal with that I’ll kick it, I’ll smoke, but you know do whatever, but then when it’s time for it to really affect them. Oh you can’t work here cause your black, you can’t do that because you’re black, then their mad. No, you can’t be mad now because to set a change it comes from having knowledge. You don’t have no knowledge about anything, you wait for it to hit you in the face when it’s harder to change it. You could have changed it a long time ago. (interview 2, June 10, 2016)

Monique shared a similar concern that was expressed by other participants, about the impact of social media. She discussed how she had interests in voicing her concerns about some of these issues and working with her peers to raise awareness,

I always wanted to go about that, but I don’t know what aspect to go about it in because half of them don’t want to hear it. They focused on Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, the wrong things. Their mindset is different. They still in that kid stage like ok whatever, I’m gonna do stuff that’s relevant now. Not do stuff that’s
gonna benefit us in the future. They don’t think about the future, they think about now. So I was set back from that like. I don’t think I have the time, and energy to go and speak to people that don’t want to hear it. That’s gonna turn their heads anyway. That one of the main reasons I never did it. (interview 2, June 10, 2016)

Civic Identity: Impact of Community College Experience

Monique identified the opportunity that her community college experience presented for her to begin to truly move towards her aspirations and begin working towards her goals. Additionally, she acknowledges that for the first time she feels that she has a place she belongs,

Really, I would say the best part of being a college student is you feel like you’re a part of something. You got dreams, you got goals, I think that would be the best part for me like, ok now you’ve grown up now you didn’t stay at that standstill, you’re not at the same place you was, your mindset is different. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)

She has also found that her relationships with those she has met in college have been different from those she experienced in high school,

College is a life experience, cause you meet different people that will change your life. They been through different things and you would never imagine ‘cause in high school you don’t really take the time out to get to know your peers. You know. It’s all fun, like lets go to basketball games, it’s on a deeper level; you help with homework, studying, it’s different, just hanging out with college friends is a different experience versus high school. (interview 1, April 15, 2016).
However, she poignantly describes the challenge of arriving at school and feeling unprepared,

Coming here it was like throwing a fish on dry land and expecting them to know what to do. So I have to be able to wing it like, ok… this your job now, you’re an adult, you have to find ways to figure it out. I think that’s the hardest part of being a student here. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)

She went on to discuss the confidence that this experience of starting over has developed in her.

Summary: Going to Make her Mark

It was clear from our conversations together, not just from what she shared, but from her openness, vulnerability and willingness to commit so much time to this project, that she is a truly giving and generous person, despite the loss and challenging times she has gone through in her life. Monique explained,

People see me, oh, she’s big, she’s dark-skinned, but my spirit goes beyond. I’ll give my last to someone. I’ll literally take my shoes off for someone. I’ve done it before. I was walking around one summer and I saw this guy, I don’t know what kind of shoes they were but they had tape around them. I knew I had extra shoes at my house, I said, ‘sir what size you wear?’ I took my shoes off and I gave it to him – brand new. Because the fact is, even though I’m on the verge of doing what I’m doing, I’m more fortunate than a lot. I have extra shoes to spare. I have clothes, I have food. I can go do that. This man was probably walking around with his feet hurting. I wish I could do so much more. Them are the little things, you
should have seen the smile on this man’s face, it was like a lightbulb that light up my heart. Wow this man smiled like I gave him a million dollars.” She talked with me about her peers at school that are homeless and how even when they have so little they are always willing to share and support each other. (interview 2, June 10, 2016)

During our last interview, Monique took a long pause and leaned forward to confide, “I want to make my mark on history, on life period” (interview 2, June 10, 2016).

**Ariel: Career – Community Connections**

“I see myself as a leader, yes, especially at my job. People look up to me."

Ariel is 25-year-old, part-time community college student. He is completing his entry courses in preparation to begin in the Nursing program next Spring. He identifies as bi-racial with a Caucasian mother and African-American father, an identity that, along with his LGBT identity, has impacted his connection in some communities that he has lived in, as well as his experience on campus. Ariel currently lives independently in an apartment, although he has plans to move in with his older sister who is relocating to the area soon.

His parents separated when he was five years old and he has step-siblings on both sides, and is the oldest of his three immediate siblings. He sees several of his family members as role models. He shared, “my mom was a role model because after she left my dad she was just by herself and he didn’t really help out, so she did everything, she took care of us” (interview 1, May 23, 2016). He continued, And my grandma, my mom’s mom, she was basically my dad. She always had us.

And for a while we all lived with her too. But then, when my mom had my sister she
moved in with us cause she wanted to help my mom out. (interview 1, May 23, 2016)

Ariel reflected on a very difficult time when he was nine years old and his father got custody of him and three of his siblings,

When my dad got custody of me and my three siblings, they starved us, basically, and beat us, and ever since we got away from them I’m like, ‘I’m not gonna be bothered by them. I’m gonna do my own thing.’ (interview 1, May 23, 2016)

Since this time Ariel has taken on a protective leadership role to his younger siblings, a caring nature that carries over into his work on a pediatrics floor of a large hospital today.

Ariel never believed he would pursue higher education. However, his mother and father both had some community college experience, and his older step-siblings were all enrolled in the Marines. His impetus for attending college was “when my mom’s boyfriend kicked me out, I was 18, I had to start being an adult and so I got my own place. That was in 2007” (interview 1, May 23, 2016).

He was initially interested in pursuing a career through the Navy, however recruiters told him that he would need to lose weight in order to meet the physical standards,

I wanted to go to the Navy and they told me I was too big. I lost about 80 pounds, but they still wanted me to lose 20 more pounds. I couldn’t lose more and that’s what made me look at other options for school (interview 1, May 23, 2016).

At that point Ariel enrolled at a large, four year, state school where he initially studied zoology and veterinary science, pursuing his love of animals. However, when he
came to learn that he had maxed out his loans, he was unable to finish his third year or return to finish his degree. With few options available Ariel took a break from school for two years, first moving to Florida to live with a friend and then to California to house-sit for his sister during her deployment to Afghanistan. When his youngest sister became very ill he felt compelled to return home to support his mother,

One of the twins had disease called RSD where it affects your nervous system. It basically makes her feel like she has pain everywhere. She couldn’t walk, so when I moved back up here I had to carry her everywhere. And the other twin was borderline neglected because the other one had so many needs. So when I came back up here the other twin started being better too. (interview 1, May 23, 2016)

During this time while his sister was recovering, Ariel began to have an interest in returning to school, “I just felt like I wasn’t doing anything with myself so I said going to school will make me feel better. Plus, my job said they would help me pay for it” (interview 1, May 23, 2016). Ariel’s job is with a large healthcare institution, an opportunity that came about due to his mother’s employment with the same organization. Ariel enrolled in Civic Community College to pursue a degree in nursing.

**Involvement at Community College**

Ariel has had a more diverse experience than some of the other participants in this study, as he has taken classes at multiple branches of Civic Community College, as well as taking multiple courses online. He shared that his focus has really been on work at his full-time career as a nursing assistant, therefore his involvement on campus has been limited. “Plus,” he shared, “the only thing I see to get involved in is student government
and I have no desire in that” (interview 1, May 23, 2016). He also reflected on the different culture of each campus, and how that influenced his feeling of connection,

Going to the one campus you recognize that you’re the only black person in the class. I feel like sometimes you have to be a representative for everybody, even if you don’t want to. We’d be writing random things about slaves, and everybody would want your input. (interview 2, June 16, 2016)

He shared that working his full-time, third shift job also makes getting involved on campus a challenge, “I would say just going to class, trying to get to class, working 3rd shift sucks and doesn’t make me want to go to class, so that’s probably the hardest part” (interview 1, May 23, 2016).

Civic Identity: Perspectives on Community, Role, Responsibility and Efficacy

Ariel has had a number of moves which have shaped his perception of himself in community, moving from a rural hometown to two different urban communities and his most recent move to a suburban community. He described the challenges he faced being bi-racial in a primarily white, rural hometown,

Where we lived was called “Little Kentucky”, it was super racist. You felt like you didn’t belong in your own community. When I came here to the city, even when I first came, I didn’t feel like I fit in that community either because they would talk about us for being mixed, too. But where I am now is good. (interview 2, June 16, 2016)

When discussing the suburban community that he’s just moved to, Ariel shared,

I like how safe it is because all the places before that were not safe at all. I feel
like the neighbors are easier to get along with, too. There was things happening—on the east side, there was always people shooting. At school that we went to, they would pull fire alarms and people would run out and fight. And then we moved on the West side, neighbors were always putting sand in gas tanks, people would fight each other with baseball bats. There was people fighting in alley one day and a car hit them all and multiple people died. (interview 1, May 23, 2016)

However, while Ariel feels safer, more trusting, and more connected to his current community, he shared that he doesn’t necessarily feel a responsibility for getting involved in anything beyond work and school at this point, “No, I just feel like I’m not stable within myself to be able to go out and do things for the community. I gotta worry about myself first and then what’s immediately around me” (interview 2, June 16, 2016).

Despite not engaging in the local community, Ariel did describe how he views education and advocacy as a form of service that is important to him. He described service in this way, “education…educating people in your neighborhood on different things. I would say, getting more involved in your community and being more a part of it. Education would be a part of that” (interview 2, June 16, 2016).

He described the role that he often plays within his circle of friends of raising awareness, advocating and speaking up,

When I’m around my friends, if they say something I don’t agree with I’m going to let them know. It’s because I’m comfortable around them, it’s a safe space that I can speak my mind. I’ve seen that change their way of thinking and actions. (interview 2, June 16, 2016)
Like some others in this study, Ariel also expressed the concern that he did not have the “big enough” personality to be actively engaged in the community or working for causes that were important to him. He reflected, “I don’t feel like I’m a big personality. You have to be a big personality, people listen to you better when you’re like that” (interview 2, June 16, 2016)

**Civic Identity: Positive Forces, Barriers and Challenges**

Work and career have been the biggest positive motivators for Ariel as it relates to his engagement with community. Nearly every community-based experience that he discussed was connected to either career preparation or directly the result of a work-based initiative. He discussed community service programs that he was involved in during his time at the large, state school, volunteering with animal shelters and a horse program. He recalled the push for community engagement for career preparation, “they said it looked better to be in the clubs and do things like that, so I did” (interview 1, May 23, 2016).

In terms of work-place initiatives, Ariel described several ways that he was able to get involved in the community through his places of employment. When working for Target, he described community events that his store would host for local children that Ariel had the opportunity to be a part of. Additionally, his current employer, a large hospital presents numerous active and passive ways to connect to community, They always have random events, like they’ll do 5K’s to raise awareness for various diseases and then they send out emails if a nurse and her family are going through hardships asking people to contribute or donate PTO. (interview 2, June
However, Ariel noted a disconnect between the hospital and the immediate community in which it is based,

I don’t think they have a relationship with the local community, all the events they do, nothing is ever for the close community to them – it’s for stuff that will benefit them, raising awareness and funds. (interview 2, June 16, 2016)

While work has been a positive force in Ariel’s civic identity development and engagement, he reflected on how he felt his racial identity served as a barrier to him truly feeling a part of a community. He shared this example,

I used to get pulled over a lot in my hometown and one time they like made us get out of the car and handcuffed us and made us get on the ground. For nothing. They said because my car matched a description of someone else. My mom never talked to us about anything like this because she’s white so it doesn’t really affect her that much. It makes me think it’s not safe, that authority isn’t safe. (interview 2, June 16, 2016)

Civic Identity: Impact of Community College Experience

Ariel did not feel that his community college experience has had a significant impact on his own civic perspectives to this point. He shared, “No, classes that I’m in, they don’t mention anything about doing things in the community or what’s happening in the community” (interview 2, June 16, 2016). He reflected that he did have a class in high school that was influential to him as it relates to his interest in politics,
Maybe with pre-req classes, like a political kind of class that would help. I know since I’ve been in college I haven’t had to take any of them. We did have to take them in high school. The first time Obama was running we had to watch all the debates. That’s what first got me educated about politics. (interview 2, June 16, 2016)

**Summary: Awareness and Advocacy**

Overall, Ariel passionately, but briefly discussed current events and issues that were important to him, including the Black Lives Matters movement, as well as women’s and LGBTQ rights. He shared that he hopes to volunteer at the local LGBT Center in the future. While he is not actively involved in any type of community initiatives or organizations at the moment, he sees his career in nursing as a way that he can make an impact. Additionally, he views his one-on-one relationships with his friends as an opportunity to educate, advocate and raise awareness about various civic issues.

**Civic Narratives: Civic Identity in Context**

When I set out on this journey to listen to the stories of community college students, about their community and school experiences, as well as their perceptions as it relates to civic identity, I never imagined I would have the opportunity to connect with and learn from six such distinctly different voices. They each gave generously of their valuable and limited time, and each expressed a genuine interest in the topic of the study with insightful questions and curiosity that added tremendously to my own understanding as the study developed. The stories presented in this chapter highlight six unique life journeys, with some similar connections and many diverging paths. The one touchpoint
that connects each of these individuals is their current endeavors as students at Civic Community College. The impact of this community college experience will now be explored in greater depth, and resonant themes and significant findings related to civic identity that have emerged from the exploration of these civic narratives will be identified in the following chapter.
CHAPTER VI

CAMPUS AS COMMUNITY: EXPLORING SIGNIFICANT THEMES

The purpose of this study was to gain insight, through each unique story of individual civic identity development within the context of community college students’ lived experiences, as opposed to generalized statistics of singular actions such as voting or volunteering universalized to whole groups, common in current literature on civic engagement and higher education. As defined in the research and for the purposes of this study, civic identity encompasses an individual’s sense of belonging, responsibility and connection to and efficacy of participation in the civic realm (Rubin, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 2006). The civic narratives highlighted in the previous chapter provide insight into the research questions explored in this study, as well as the influences of one’s lived experience on the development of civic identity. However, even with this intent of focusing on individual narratives, some important themes and connections across stories did emerge throughout this research process.

Rooted in these connections that emerged across individual narratives, I will discuss themes that confirm prior research highlighted in my theoretical framework, related to civic identity development. Additionally, I introduce and explore an important new finding which expands upon current literature related to the influence of campuses as significant sites for community belonging that arose throughout this study. I argue that while these narratives confirm previous research findings, such as the importance of early
civic experiences as youth, they also point to the crucial role that community colleges can play in the civic capacity-building and identity development of students, by serving as a site for positive community connections, civic skill building, and interpersonal relationships. The significant role that a campus community can play for students’ sense of community belonging, in contrast to feelings of rejection or disengagement from the general community, and subsequent opportunity for positive civic identity development, is a new direction which emerged from these student narratives. Additionally, I suggest that more attention must be paid to the types of civic experiences students have the opportunity to engage with through community colleges – moving from community service to social change efforts, as well as seeking additional ways to engage the needs and interests of students in the political arena, a space that many students feel excluded from.

Revisiting the Theoretical Framework: Re-affirming Key Influences on Civic Identity

In this first section I revisit key sections of my theoretical framework that were reaffirmed by data collected in this narrative study. These themes include: the importance of early civic experiences and available platforms for practicing civic skills in civic identity development, as well as exploring the importance of civic context and forms of engagement that have proven to be influential.

Importance of Early Civic Experiences

As was highlighted in the literature review and theoretical framework, prior research has emphasized the importance of early civic experiences and the impact that this can
have for positive civic identity development, as well as life-long civic engagement (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Biesta, G., 2011; Flanagan, Levine, & Settersen, 2009; Rubin, 2007; Rubin et al., 2009; Yates & Youniss, 1999). Many participants in this study told stories of civic experiences from their youth that they identified as being influential to who they are today, aligning with previous research findings.

Alexis acknowledged the value that she now places on having grown up in a home where current events, politics and news were openly discussed and debated. She shared that her current interests in civic issues, topics and events can be attributed to this early familial influence,

> We are news junkies in our household. We watch the Rachel Maddow show, Lawrence Donnell, yeah, MSNBC in our household is a big thing. We are news junkies, so we watch. Especially when there is, ya’ know, something political going on. That was always really big in my household, and I’m glad because if that was not introduced to me at an early age I don’t think I would be interested in watching news or keeping up with today’s world or stuff like that so I’m thankful that we did. (interview 2, April 14, 2016)

For Monique, early volunteer experiences as a youth through a Foster Care organization empowered her to share her story with younger children to motivate them to keep striving for their goals and to have confidence in themselves. She talked with me about her experiences with volunteering and motivational speaking,

> I’ve done volunteering. I have always volunteered, soup kitchens, yard work, just helping people in general. Like I said, I’m a people person so I do like to help
people. I was in foster care and we did volunteering at places and for like the younger kids. ‘Cause kids in foster care they go through a lot, so basically like motivational speaking, I would do that. (interview 1, April 15, 2016)

Finally, while only one of the six participants in this study identified with any particular religious affiliation, Joshua firmly believes that his current level of community engagement can be attributed to the direct influence of his parents and religious upbringing in the church as a child. Joshua reflected,

It did shape me and started when I was young because I was actually helping people, my mom right beside me, we lived in the church, making a difference in people’s lives, re-evaluating our value system. It was more or less helping people. What lives are you making a difference in? Not so much monetary, so yeah the church has played a large part of who I am today. (interview 1, April 1, 2016)

These three examples of early civic exposure through civic discussion, volunteerism, and religious activities can be contrasted with the stories of some of the remaining participants who were not able to identify specific positive early childhood experiences that have resulted in active civic engagement today or were seen as influential to their view of self in community. In fact, two participants, Ariel and Crystal, who could not identify any forms of active engagement or civic influences as children, appear, from the narratives they shared, to remain more passive in their community engagement today, and convey a less developed civic identity, unclear about the role they play in a community or the potential efficacy of their actions. Whereas, Joshua and
Alexis, in particular, are two individuals who have taken on more active roles in their community through continued service and an articulation of how civic life is a part of their larger identity and purpose.

Yates and Youniss (1999) highlight this as a key function of civic identity, whereby one’s early civic experiences build and become habitual, establishing a foundation for one’s civic identity. They explain,

the acquisition of practices that may be habitual insofar as they are long lasting and become integral to one’s identity. Rather than viewing practices as discrete behaviors, they are more appropriately construed as habitual ways of acting that are a part of a person’s self-concepts, or essential components of a person’s identity. (Yates & Youniss, 1999, p 8)

While civic experiences as youth appear to be critically important in positive civic identity development, this study confirms what others have suggested, that there are substantial opportunities to continue developing into civically aware and active individuals far beyond childhood, presenting an important opportunity for community colleges to consider (Boggs, 1991). It is this opportunity and the influences that appear to be significant during ones college experience that will be the focus of these remaining themes.

**Invitation to Participate: Providing Opportunities and Instilling Confidence**

Another significant theme that emerged through this study was the important role of relationships and mentoring between campus faculty / staff and students. This resonates with previous literature presented in my theoretical framework, exploring the importance
and influence of civic mentors in the lives of students (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Rubin, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1999). Several of this study’s participants got involved in community events or leadership positions simply because someone asked or encouraged them to. These stories serve as a reminder to campus faculty and staff not to underestimate the power of a simple invitation to engage. We have a great opportunity to build interpersonal relationships and invite students to get involved, to provide platforms for engagement and to provide encouragement for students to see themselves in a new role within their community.

As we reflected on the different ways that Monique had engaged with her community or taken a stand on community issues, she shared a memorable experience she had as a teenager at a local neighborhood anti-violence rally and march. When I asked her how she came to get involved with this march she said, “because I grew up being free and in the hood, in rough neighborhoods, one day they were walking around like ‘stop the violence’. They were marching and protesting like. They invited me to join them, (pause)… so I did” (interview 2, , June 10, 2016). She shared that without that simple invitation she probably would have just sat by and been a passive observer, as opposed to an active participant, even though it was an issue that was important to her. That march and rally has made a lasting impression on her as she reflected on herself in her community, and she mentioned it multiple times throughout our conversations.

Several study participants pointed to campus faculty and staff who were influential in mentoring them (often through informal channels) and connecting them to opportunities to become involved in community experiences and gain leadership skills.
Will discussed one of the more impactful community experiences that he has been a part of was working at a summer camp for at-risk youth. He was invited to participate in this experience by a simple invitation from a campus supervisor at campus security.

Additionally, Alexis shared two key moments that have shaped her college and community experiences, as well as her perspective as herself as a leader, thanks to the invitation of campus staff. The first led her to become a campus ambassador, supporting new students in their transition to campus life,

So many people had been asking me “are you a student ambassador?” because I would help random people on campus. I didn’t even know what a student ambassador was, so I was like, “no I’m just helpful”. So one day a lady in the office was like “you should apply to be a student ambassador” so I was like ok I might as well be paid and help people at the same time. (interview 1, , March 7, 2016)

Beyond this campus leadership opportunity, a financial aid counselor was responsible for encouraging Alexis to take on a leadership role with the newly formed Circle K service organization, opening the door to wider community engagement for Alexis. She reflected,

I wouldn’t have known about Circle K if it wasn’t for one of the financial aid counselors. I didn’t want to add one other thing on my plate. I’m glad that I took the risk and did it, because that’s the only thing that has connected me between college life and community. (interview 2, , April 14, 2016)
Finally, Joshua holds a role as a student leader with a very influential campus and community position. He attributes his involvement as Board Student Scholar, serving as a representative of his campus on the college’s Board of Trustees, to a chance meeting with a campus administrator. It all began on the day he went to the Dean’s office inquiring about his Dean’s List Award. He reflected,

I came in here, and I was just laughing and joking and talking to her. And she sent me over to President’s office around the way. So I didn’t know that in her mind she was looking for candidates to apply for this position. And she had one or had some and she wanted more. So I was like, ok. So she said she didn’t know who I was. She remembered my first name, but she didn’t know my last name. So then I was walking by the next day and she saw me and she ran out of the office and caught me and told me that I should apply for this Board Scholar position. And she said it was just my luck that the next day I was walking here and then she saw me and the rest is history. I would have never known about this opportunity or thought I was qualified to do it if it weren’t for her. (interview 2, May 25, 2016)

Even Crystal, who acknowledges a lack of connection to and engagement with her community currently, suggested that having someone encouraging her to get more involved would help to move her in that direction. When discussing the idea of community service she shared,

"I mean, I respect anybody that’s done community service. I wish I was one of those people that does, but unfortunately I don’t make an effort to do it. So, ya’
don’t know, (pause), I have a procrastination problem so, like someone pushing me to do it would be problem the best way to get me to do it. (interview 2, June 7, 2016)

Each of these examples serve as a demonstration of how simple, even random encounters ended up shaping the future direction for these student’s paths. When there is an assumption that students are too busy or not interested, opportunities such as these go uncovered. These examples also show that while formal programs and civic initiatives are important, sometimes interpersonal relationships and one on one coaching can make a significant contribution to student’s identity development, as well, by providing an opportunity to engage and instilling a sense of confidence in the student that they are capable and qualified. Alexis, Joshua and Will all discussed tremendous learning and growth that came about from each of these leadership roles that they were invited to consider. Without the simple gesture of these staff and faculty, these students’ stories could likely be very different today.

**Impact of Campus Involvement: Building Civic Skills**

In addition to the important potential influence of faculty and staff as civic mentors for students, another theme related to the impact of the community college experience that emerged from these student narratives was the opportunity for campus experiences to help develop vital civic building blocks for students by providing an arena for students to *practice* newly developing civic skills and foster the development of personal agency. As is highlighted in my theoretical framework, a great deal of work has been done in previous research demonstrating the developmental process of civic
identity, and the crucial role that the opportunity to practice these budding skills has on sustained engagement over time (Rubin, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1999; Youniss, et al., 1997).

Each of my participants articulated ways that their experience at Civic Community College had either taught them more about their community or community issues, or helped them to develop and practice skills that they viewed as being helpful to them in future engagement efforts. Many of these impacts came through formal involvement with student organizations or campus-supported programs, as discussed in the previous section.

Alexis identified her involvement with a student service organization, Circle K, as one of the only direct connections she has felt to her local community, in addition to the positive ways it has helped to stretch her out of her comfort zone. She reflected,

I think being a student ambassador has helped me get out of my comfort zone. I mean, cause I was a sheltered kid – everything revolved around school, so um, really what has opened me up to the community is Circle K International. That’s the only thing, but other than that I don’t think I’d connect with the local community at all. (interview 3, , May 17, 2016)

Joshua enthusiastically shared how his experience at Civic Community College has helped to build his self-esteem, which he has struggled with for most of his life. He explained,

I attribute my boost in confidence and who I am to the Upward Bound program and the staff at Civic Community College. Because they made me believe in
myself when I didn’t know where to go. And they were like try this, fill this application out for Board Student Scholar. I didn’t think I could do it, but they said try it, so I did. I still suffer from low self-esteem and low confidence but I don’t let it stop me as much as it used to. (interview 1, April 1, 2016)

Will conveyed how his community college experience encouraged him to get involved in organizations and programs that he never would have considered previously. He said that he has been so impacted by his campus involvement experience that he suggested it should be a requirement of the campus experience, “You need to make involvement, (pause)… you can’t graduate unless you have some clubs under your belt and community service. It’s good for your conscience.” (interview 2, May 9, 2016)

Will felt that his campus involvement helped him to develop skills and capacities that would be useful in future community efforts. He concluded, “I think people in general should be more involved in clubs and that’s basically a stepping stone to doing community stuff” (interview 2, May 9, 2016).

Although Crystal has struggled with the transition from her former four-year institution to the community college experience, is not involved in any on-campus organizations or programs, and has not taken the steps to become active in her community, she does see her community college experience as giving her a boost in confidence. She reflected,

It’s definitely given me more confidence to, you know, be more active in the community. It’s definitely given me the tools that I would need to start being
more active, and speaking to people, and being proactive and helping and stuff. I think Civic Community College has helped a lot. (interview 2, June 7, 2016)

Each of these examples, and others that participants shared regarding the impact of their campus experiences and the translation they see to their roles and abilities in their community, resonate with important previous research demonstrating the value of having a space to practice civic skills and the positive impact this practice and experience can have on one’s civic identity. In previous research, civic identity has frequently been explored as a developmental process, whereby practice and experience are essential and influential (Biesta, 2011; Rubin, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1999; Youniss, et al., 1997). Providing opportunities for students to practice, test out new skills, and learn through participation, whether on-campus or in the community, begins to lay a foundation for future action, as well as builds confidence. Yates and Youniss’s (1999) work highlights how these practices can result in “habits that become part of the individual’s self-definition and shape the individual’s relationship to society” (p.7). Biesta (2011) argues that a lack of experience and practice in the democratic realm are part of the root causes for a growing social and political disengagement, “it is not the lack of people’s civic and political engagement that has led to a crisis in democracy. It rather is the crisis in everyday democracy, manifested in the limited opportunities for democratic experience and democratic practice in the actual lives of many people that has brought about civic and political disengagement” (p. 83).

Additionally, and especially important to the community college context, is research demonstrating that student involvement supports larger institutional goals such as
achievement of student learning and retention (Astin, 1984, Chavez, 2002, Tinto, 1987). In fact, Campus Compact has launched a series of new initiatives exploring the opportunities to impact both access to college and retention through civic engagement initiatives. In their report, “A Promising Connection,” they discuss the promise of civic engagement and college outcomes,

College students who participate in civic engagement learning activities not only earn higher grade point averages but also have higher retention rates and are more likely to complete their college degree. They also demonstrate improved academic content knowledge, critical thinking skills, written and verbal communication, and leadership skills. (Campus Compact, 2010, p 1)

Civic development and the development of job training and relevant career skills can also go hand in hand. Ariel expressed how his community engagement had all been motivated by career development and employer-based opportunities, providing an example of how these two distinct paths can, in fact, be complimentary.

The experiences of the student participants in this study who have invested time and energy into their college experience through co-curricular involvement have also demonstrated outcomes that resonate with this research, including expressing a greater engagement in their own learning, gained confidence and relevant civic skills, demonstrating the potential for on-campus civic experiences to be an on-ramp for successful future engagement in other contexts.
What They Do Matters: Service versus Social Change

Just as important as having the opportunity to develop and practice civic skills, previous research informs that what they do matters in relation to civic identity development. In the case of this study, participants drew distinctions between community service and other forms of engagement such as activism and political engagement, both of which will be explored in the following two sections.

Several of this study’s participants were actively involved in community service initiatives, both through the community college, as well as through outside entities such as church or other grassroots organizations. However, each student made the clear distinction between the impact of those community service efforts, which most saw as having only an individual or small scale impact, versus working for larger social change efforts related to community issues that they identified as important to them.

When talking with Alexis about all of her community service experiences with Circle K, I inquired about the impact that she felt these experiences were having. She saw a positive impact on individuals she served with, feeling her time had made an impact,

Yeah, definitely, especially that people that are in need of service, it seems like they are appreciated. I don’t know if that makes sense, you know that someone is actually willing to help them in their situation. The looks on those kid’s faces, they’re all dressed up. Just the look on their faces and the satisfaction you get from that. I live for that. I love it. (interview 2, , April 14, 2016)
But when I asked if she felt her time spent volunteering was impacting any of the larger social issues that she had previously discussed, she shared, “Yeah, they’re not connected, bigger issues (pause)… yeah, it doesn’t pertain to that. I wish, but no” (interview 2, April 14, 2016).

Will summarizes his service experiences as a feeling of wanting to do his part, but not seeing any larger change coming about as a result of it,

I took away just the wanting to give time to see that you did your part to help somebody. It’s not changing anything, no, but if one person does something than you know, you did your part, and then whatever happens after that you know – at least you can say I helped make this happen. (interview 2, May 9, 2016)

Finally, Joshua intentionally focuses his time and energy on the impact he can have on one person, as opposed to focusing on the larger issues at hand,

I think that my measure of success is not, (pause), how can I say this, on the bigger scheme. I guess I try not to look at the bigger scheme. I look at the little bity individuals, and their lives. I can see because they tell you “thanks Joshua” and that confirmation that comes to you out of the blue, “because of you” I went this path. But as far as the bigger community, I think if enough people, enough individuals change, I think the community has to change. I don’t look at it as the big picture, I look at the little tiny things. I really don’t. Did I make a difference here? Yeah, they tell me I do. But I just try to be myself, be genuine, be for real and whatever happens it happens. I believe I made a difference to one person at a time. (interview 3, June 7, 2016)
Nationally, while many civic initiatives at the community college level do focus on a model of charitable volunteerism and service, including many service-learning efforts, more are being designed to explore the value of engaging students in advocacy, policy and other efforts working toward larger social change. Wang and Jackson (2005) highlight the work of several scholars who explore this continuum of efforts and intended outcomes from service to social justice. Delve, Mintz, and Stewart (1990) seek to move students from charity to justice through formal academic service-learning initiatives. Kahne and Westheimer (1999) distinguish between the charity approach and change approach. The charity approach emphasizing altruism and joy, as we see reflected in several of the student narratives in this study who expressed finding satisfaction in being able to provide a service to one individual or seeing a smile or receiving a thank you from those served. In contrast, the change approach has a focus on political action and seeking solutions to root causes and structural problems, which was less apparent in the narratives of this study.

Similarly Biesta (2011) argues, “citizenship involves more than only doing good work in the local community but requires an ongoing orientation towards the wider political values of justice, equality and freedom” (p. 2). He references additional work by Kahne and Westheimer (2004) that challenges educators to examine the normative outcomes of civic education by determining “what type of citizen” they seek to develop (p. 29). They identify three “types” of citizens: personally responsible citizen; the participatory citizen; and the justice-oriented citizen. An example they share to distinguish the three, “If participatory citizens are organizing the food drive and
personally responsible citizens are donating food, justice-oriented citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover (p. 29). Biesta (2011) challenges educators to re-direct focus from the personally responsible citizen model on the grounds that:

the emphasis placed on individual character and behavior obscures the need for collective and public sector initiatives; that this emphasis distracts attention from analysis of the causes of social problems and from systematic solutions and that voluntarism and kindness are put forward as ways of avoiding politics and policy (p. 31).

Like Biesta (2011) I believe that students can be challenged to envision themselves working against the status quo. Biesta (2011) challenges civic education that solely focuses on “the reproduction of the existing socio-political order and thus on the adjustment of individuals to the existing order” as opposed to providing an “an orientation towards the promotion of political agency and democratic subjectivity, highlighting that democratic citizenship is not simply an existing identity that individuals just need to adopt, but is an ongoing process that is fundamentally open towards the future” (p. 2). A participatory, problem-based approach is explored as a possible strategy later in this study.

The Rappaport Family Foundation has led an effort across the state of California to engage community college students in programs to develop “a generation of committed, skilled, life-long, progressive activists” working on relevant current issues, such as
college access and immigration reform (Cohen, 2013). These programs go far beyond the one-time, ad hoc community service efforts prevalent on many campuses.

While community service experiences can serve as an influential on-ramp, as demonstrated by the impact that community service has had on the participants in this study, it should be a priority for community colleges interested in developing the civic identity and civic capacity of their students to look at skill-building, awareness raising, and participatory opportunities for students to begin to move towards other forms of civic engagement such as advocacy, organizing and efforts to work towards social change. Research has demonstrated that students who have an opportunity to work on community change projects (beyond general community service) with real, demonstrated impact (successful or not) are more likely to sustain their engagement in the future. One example is a study looking at summer participants during the Civil Rights Movement who were found to be distinct from non-participants in sustained civic involvement as adults (Youniss et al, 1997). I found that my participants were not opposed to exploring opportunities beyond service, with many expressing a desire to take action on various community issues, however most shared that they just didn’t know where to begin.

**Preventing Political Engagement: Trump Terror**

Finally, previous research, highlighted in my theoretical framework, has drawn our attention to the importance of civic context in civic identity development, from changing forms of government and exposure to war, community violence and civil strife, to vastly different neighborhood and school contexts, many scholars position their civic identity concerns within this space (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Flanagan, et al., 2010; Rubin, 2007;
Yates & Youniss, 1999). The civic context of this study was highly influential, as evidenced by stories told by study participants, with a key focus on one particular area of concern.

While the timing of this study, during the Spring of 2016, landed during a period of many civic struggles, from local and national cases of police brutality, mass shootings and terrorist attacks both at home and abroad, legislative action on immigration, and historic rulings on abortion rights, the most divisive topic that every participant brought up as being at the forefront of their minds was the Presidential race and the rise of Donald Trump.

Some participants expressed a general dislike and distrust of Trump, as well as concern over what his success meant for the political process. Crystal lamented,

I’m not into politics, but I’m into Donald Trump. Let’s be honest, I’m really just confused at how he’s even able to run. His views are just so awful. I just find myself asking my friends, who would you vote for? Why would you vote for him? Hillary Clinton’s not the best either. They just say “anybody but Donald” but she’s kinda bad too, so. So that’s currently what’s on my radar. (interview 1, , March 29, 2016)

Alexis’s sentiments are along this same line. She expressed how Trump’s candidacy has weakened her interest in the political process during this race, ”Donald Trump, he’s just putting on a show. It’s a clown show. So, I’m really indifferent.” (interview 2, , April 14, 2016). She shared her concern, though, from an international perspective, about what his candidacy says to the rest of the world about the United
State’s values and priorities, "I don’t know, I think that people from other countries look at our country like a circus, it’s embarrassing. It’s so embarrassing. Because if we’re supposed to be the free world and we’re acting like this" (interview 2, , April 14, 2016).

Ariel, too shared that the rise of Trump does reflect the values of society as a whole, which he found very concerning,

Trump, he’s a mess. I don’t think anyone should be able to put a wall up and segregate people or ban a whole group of people based on religion. It just shows that our political process is a mess. I think it was a commercial showing the ways he’s acted, making fun of handicapped people, making fun of people and oh, people voted for him. It shows what kind of society we still live in. (interview 2, , June 16, 2016)

Others spoke from a more personal stance and expressed anger and frustration with feelings of personal attacks against themselves, their families and friends coming from the Trump campaign, particularly against immigrant communities. Monique, who immigrated to the United States from Jamaica, shared,

I really have to say, presidency, that’s the most important to me. It’s like me being from Jamaica, and me just going up in school and when he [Trump] said he would send back all the immigrants and you know all those people. And when America decides that they want somebody like that, so many supporters support him, that sets me back because it’s like everything my ancestors are doing, ya’ll want to just…ugh, they racist. (interview 2, , June 10, 2016)
Will, with Puerto Rican roots, shared similar frustration with the anti-immigrant language,

He [Trump] says he’s gonna build a wall and then my Arab friend and me gonna get shipped out. It’s racist, they don’t censor it. We got the right to say, (pause), No you don’t have the right to say “send people back”. It makes me want to not be involved in the political process. I just hope people don’t vote for Trump.

(interview 2, , May 9, 2016)

It was disheartening, but understandable, to hear participants sharing these feelings of personal attacks and suggestions that because of a divisive candidate these educated and informed individuals are backing out of the political process. This presents another example of the duality that participants experience, whereby there are critiques on what is perceived as a lack of participation by minorities or low-income citizens, while on the other hand candidates in the political process are isolating and targeting these same citizens based on their identities. While every participant who was eligible to vote shared that they did vote in the previous election, it was apparent that their appetite for the current political race was weaning quickly. To use Trump’s own language, this is a huge problem.

This exclusion of potential political participants is a tremendous challenge to the state of our democracy. If our campuses are only making efforts to engage students in community service, and are not addressing this engagement gap in the political sphere, we are missing an important opportunity as community service alone will not work against the structures and systems that have perpetuated the community issues raised by
participants in this study. Biesta (2011) warns about the danger of underemphasizing the political aspects of citizenship, “citizenship becomes de-politicised and, as a result, students are not sufficiently empowered to take effective political action in a way that goes beyond their immediate concerns and responsibilities” (p. 26). The success of a candidate, such as Trump, adds to the feeling of exclusion (or perhaps, actual exclusion) from the political landscape and makes participation unrewarding and demoralizing. As was highlighted previously, what results is a withdrawal of the voices of those with the least power and voice to begin with from the political process, when in fact their engagement is exactly what is needed to bring about the change they seek. This is a perfect example of the “actual conditions of citizenship” that Biesta puts forth, whereby students may be encouraged to participate in the political process, but the environment of the current campaigns acts as a tremendous deterrent.

This reiterates the importance of recognizing that while community colleges have an opportunity to influence, encourage and empower participation, schools alone cannot build an active citizenry. Biesta (2011) concurs, “the responsibility for citizenship learning and, through this, for the quality of democratic life more generally, therefore cannot be confined to families, schools, colleges and universities, but has to be seen as a responsibility of society as a whole” (p. 1). He continues, “this points the finger straight back at policy makers and politicians, as their decisions have a crucial impact on the conditions that shape the everyday lives of children, young people and adults and thus on the conditions under which citizenship is enacted and learned” (p. 1). If students have not had the opportunity to develop confidence in themselves civic actors, learned about
effective strategies for engagement and organizing, or had the opportunity to practice or put their civic ideals into action they may withdrawal from the political process, instead of pushing back against it, perpetuating the civic empowerment gap and allowing marginalized voices to remain unheard in the process. Below I suggest some strategies for community colleges to consider, in order to strengthen the civic stamina of their students, to prevent further attrition from all arenas of civic participation.

New Directions: Campus as a Crucial Site for Community Belonging

As can be seen in the preceding section, these student narratives confirmed and reinforced the importance of many branches of previous research on civic identity development. However, the narratives included in this study also drew attention to a new, important direction related to the disjuncture many students face regarding their feelings of connection and belonging to various community environments and the potential role of a community college campus to bridge this gap. While this new direction has roots in previous research related to the influence of the campus community, such as Astin’s theory of involvement (1984), Boyer’s principles of community (1990), and others exploring the influence of “belonging” on campus (Cheng, 2004; Cooper, 2009; Foster, 2010; Elkins, Forrester & Noel-Elkins, 2011), this study pushes this further to propose the vital connection between campus belonging and civic identity development in the absence of a connection to the greater community context.

In discussions with participants in which we explored the way that they felt and viewed themselves within their own neighborhoods and communities, a clear disconnect and conflicting duality emerged for several students between the sense of belonging and
trust that they developed and felt within the campus community, as opposed to the turmoil and disconnect they described as it related to their home neighborhood or community.

Will, who has been a long-time employee for campus security described the contrasting experiences he has had engaging with campus police, as opposed to his experiences with police in his neighborhood,

Here [on campus] they are nice, but I’ve dealt with police stopping me in the street for no reason, putting me in the car waiting for 45 minutes, just because they thought I was someone they were looking for. It’s happened to me.

(interview 2, May 9, 2016)

He discussed the irony of getting stopped by police in his neighborhood while still wearing his campus safety uniform from work. These experiences have impacted Will’s perception of himself within his community, sharing that he’s felt targeted. As he shared these stories a sense of defeat and frustration were present in his voice and mannerisms.

Joshua shared passionately about the “street code” he has experienced in his home community, which he said he is glad is not as prevalent within the campus community. He shared about the disconnect he sees between the community he lives in and the ideal community that policies are shaped around,

There is a duality in the urban community as far as what the law says and what the community says you should do. Community says, when you disrespect me than I have a right to beat you up. There’s a certain code in the streets to go by. And that’s where we are now. (interview 2, May 25, 2016)
He contrasted this with the sense of connection he feels as a part of the campus community,

But, being here makes me feel like a part of a family. I believe that the faculty are very, very good at embracing you; they make you feel as though it’s ok to fail but to learn from it. They give you every opportunity. (interview 2, May 25, 2016)

Monique also discussed the challenges that she sees with the rules of streets, or “street cred” as she called it, preventing people in her community from becoming contributing citizens and preventing a sense of belonging for her in her community. She shared,

You tough you get street cred, so you can’t be seen in no protest. They influenced by that, street cred. They want to be someone, want to be somebody so bad. They feel out of place, it’s not that many people in this world, we all can live nice. (interview 2, June 10, 2016)

In a K-12 context, Rubin, Hayes, and Benson (2009) made note of a similar duality in their study exploring civics with an inner-city high school civics course, “many urban youth of color in the study pointed to disjunctures between the civic ideals expressed in civics textbooks and the reality of their lives” (p.241). The disjuncture between what is taught and the reality of one’s lived experience, complicates student’s perspectives of themselves in the community and their own efficacy, similar to the contradictions expressed by many participants in this study.

Similarly, Biesta (2011) makes the case that more attention must be paid to the “actual condition of citizenship” as opposed to simply focusing on what to teach about
citizenship (p 14). He argues, “the problem of citizenship is not about young people as individuals but about young people-in-context, which is why citizenship education should not only focus on young people as isolated individuals but on young people-in-relationship and on the social, economic, cultural and political conditions of their lives” (p. 15). Biesta (2011) suggests that formal civic education efforts are “always mediated by what children and young people experience in their everyday lives about democratic ways of acting and being and about their own position as citizens – and such everyday ‘lessons’ in citizenship are not necessarily always sending out positive messages” (p 17).

In contrast to this disconnect from community, several participants discussed how they found a home or a family on campus, even when they had no real place of their own to call home or felt no connection in the greater community. Monique, who shared that she had moved from house to house as a child and teenager in foster care, as many as 40 houses over 6 years, conveyed the sense of belonging she has found on campus, "Really, I would say the best part of being a student here is you feel like you’re a part of something” (interview 1, April 15, 2016). Similarly, Will, who worked his way out of homelessness in his late 20’s said,

Well, for me I think it’s (pause)… a privilege, to be a student. You get treated like you are at home. Overall I felt welcomed, more than I have anywhere in life, or in any job or even at home. (interview 1, March 27, 2016)

In his work, Whyte (1999) utilizes the term “political socialization” which he describes as,
“the process through which people become aware of how power is distributed in society and acquire their orientation and patterns of behavior as citizens. The outcome of the process, through both formal and informal ways, will vary according to a number of factors and may lead, on one end of the scale, to an individual who is highly active in community matters, or, on the other end, to an individual who is apathetic. Within those groups, individuals will differ in degrees of participation or apathy, in motivations underlying their stances, and also in degrees of allegiance or hostility toward the structures and ideals of the society in which they live” (p.156).

This varying scale of participation, apathy, allegiance and hostility, was observed just within these three participant’s narratives noted in the above discussion of community versus campus dynamics. Monique, Joshua and Will all acknowledged the varying power struggles that they have witnessed and personally experienced in their communities, however their responses to this recognition varied in three very different ways. Joshua maintains what he called “supreme optimism” (interview 2, May 25, 2016) committing his own time and energy to educate and empower others within the community, despite the challenges and power dynamics he has witnessed and acknowledged. Monique passionately expressed a range of emotions, from fear to anger to frustration with the injustices she has seen and experienced and expresses a desire to be able to do more, but a lack of clarity about how to go about this. Finally, Will, conveyed the most withdrawn and unattached response to both the struggles of his neighborhood in the face of corporate power, as well as his own interactions with institutional power, such as that as the police.
While there has been previous research done exploring how to build community on campus and the influence that this sense of campus belonging has on a student’s experience and success (Cheng, 2004; Cooper, 2009; Foster, 2010; Elkins, Forrester & Noel-Elkins, 2011), this study builds upon this foundation to convey the essential role that campuses (especially community college campuses) can play in providing a positive sense of belonging in order to foster positive civic identity development within students. With the disjuncture of experience and perception shared by student participants in this study in mind, it is not only important to recognize the essential space that a community college campus can become for some students when their own home communities do not offer a sense of belonging or connection, but also important to consider how our campuses address this duality using the campus space as a platform for building confidence and practicing civic skills that can eventually be translated into the larger community context.

The work of Coare and Johnston (2003), examining citizenship in Britain, is supportive of this idea. Their work highlights the potential for secondary spaces (such as a college campus, as I suggest) to become positive civic learning spaces, working against the ‘anti-citizenship messages’ one may receive in another context, “the creation of a space which provides basic emotional and practical support first, can become a space for citizenship learning and even, as the authors argue, ‘a physical citizenship space’ (Biesta, 2011, p. 79). If students don’t feel safe or are not sure where to turn within their own home communities, the campus community can serve as a safe “stepping stone to community life” (interview 2, May 9, 2016), as Will described. I argue that campus
belonging could serve as the foundation for success for all of the other findings described earlier. If students come to “find a home” on campus, as several participants in this study described, it provides a safe space for them to connect with others, explore leadership, service and other civic experiences, and test the civic waters by taking action on issues important to them. These small steps can build confidence and civic agency which could result in greater involvement in their wider community as a result. Future research could aspire to track this development examining the likelihood of sustained engagement.
CHAPTER VII

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The findings presented in this study suggest priority areas for faculty, staff, potential program funders, and administrators interested in the civic identity development of community college students. From envisioning campus as an essential space for community belonging, to building personal relationships and extending invitations for civic participation, and establishing opportunities for students to move beyond service to social change efforts and political agency, each of these individual student narratives shed light on the diverse experiences and perspectives our students bring to campus and the factors that influence their continued development and learning in the civic realm.

Below are three recommendations for practice and ideas to build upon for future research, based on the lessons learned from these six student narratives, about influences and barriers to civic identity development and engagement.

Implications for Practice

In the following section I provide recommendations for practice based on the findings of this study.

Create Space for Civic Reflection: Acknowledge Civic Histories

An unanticipated result from this narrative study was the positive feedback that participants provided to me at the conclusion of our meetings together about the value of
these conversations for them and the impact of creating a space for personal reflections on their civic actions, beliefs and interests. As we wrapped up our final interviews, I was surprised by participants thanking me for the conversation and sharing reflections on how some of their perspectives had changed or that they had new interests in ways to become more active in their communities or around issues of importance to them. While I had initially envisioned an action-research project for this study, with the format that I ended up undertaking I did not anticipate such an out-pouring of gratitude and expressions of impact from participants in this narrative study.

This positive feedback points to the developmental value of civic dialogue and reflection. A major contribution of this study is the demonstration that even short-term, informal opportunities to discuss social issues, personal values and beliefs, as well as to share about one’s own civic history and experience can serve as a catalyst for envisioning ones civic self in new ways. Based on this finding it is a recommendation for community colleges, and higher education institutions in general, to create purposeful spaces and opportunities for students (as well as staff and faculty) to reflect on and explore their own civic identities and experiences to learn from one another, as well as spark coalition-building and planning for future, sustained action.

The narratives included in this study suggest the potential for this type of purposeful reflection. Some personal reflections that participants shared at the conclusion of this study, included Alexis reflecting on re-evaluating her role locally versus the importance she places on her international community involvement:
I’m so glad I got to do this, I never thought about myself in this way until now. It’s given me a lot to think about. I’ve never, (pause), I’m not gonna say I haven’t seen myself in this light before, but like re-evaluating what I’ve done I in my community and what has impacted me in what way. It’s definitely got me thinking about being more into my own community. My Nigerian community is part of my heritage, I need to like get out ‘cause, I don’t even know my neighbors. Anyone else on my street, I cannot even tell you my name. They look out for us. It’s given me some insight in what I should be doing in my own community. 

(interview 3, May 17, 2016)

Similarly, Monique shared that through our conversations she re-discovered her passion for using her voice to raise up others,

You asked a lot, what can you do to make a difference? It made me think to myself, hey, you gotta go back and look into that! You’re like a voice that need to be heard. But it leads to me, in my head like, dang, I could motivate so many people but how can you go about that? It’s making me meditate more on that. Before you came, it’s like we need you, we need you to be out there. I throw it on the back of my mind, but when you came around it really was just like you know you have to really go back and meditate more on it. But, like, I learned a lot though, you asked a lot of questions. You’s the only person that I told so many different things to. As far as like school-wise. Stuff like that. But mostly going back like how can you make a difference, how can you take what you know to make a difference. I’m really meditating more in it versus throwing it in the back
of my mind again because a lot of people tell me that you should motivational
speak. You brought that back up in the forefront for me. (interview 2, June 10,
2016)

Joshua also reflected on a new interest he’s exploring about the role he can play in
the political process, using his voice for policy and larger social change efforts,

This made me, (pause), well, this conversation make me think about looking more
into political, as far as affiliations and things. It’s a little bit difficult, but maybe I
need to open it up to get more involved into the different legislations that go on.
So I am slowly getting more, being aware of what’s going on and you have to be.
Have to be aware of what’s going on with political, so yes it has me thinking
more, looking a little bit more – instead of helping one, but a group of people –
not just church. Uh, now I do vote, I do learn about what’s on the ballots and
stuff, but more political, no. And you know what, I think that’s important, that’s
really important, but thinking about it now I need to be more involved with that
on a local level. I do know the councilman in my area. A friend of mine she’s
with the Black American Council and she just talked about going to Columbus to
advocate for the $15 minimum wage. And I’m like, I didn’t think of it like that, I
need to start being more active in that. We as a student government we went to
Washington and advocated for community colleges and I understand that on a
political platform, it’s more of less you’re in it for the long haul. Ok we went
there, talked about community college issues and these senators’ offices, and they
said “were not doing anything until after the election” and it kind of took the sails
out of you. But, to be an activist, you have to be long-suffering, you have to keep on going, no matter what. But yeah, that’s good. I have changed the little bit. I’m thinking a little bit differently now. (interview 3, June 7, 2016)

Ariel shared how these conversations shifted his perspective, “It’s makes me think about my surroundings differently. I never really thought about myself in the community and how my community impacts me. I now want to finish school and plan on staying in this community” (interview 2, June 16, 2016).

Crystal’s reflections were dramatically different after our final interview together compared with our first when she could hardly acknowledge a community issue that mattered to her,

I’ve realized I definitely need to be more active in the community, definitely be more active and ya’ know things that I’m passionate about. I’ve definitely always thought about these things but as far as putting forth the effort to doing it, not so much, I mean I’d talk about it with people, but it’s one thing to talk about it then actually do it. (interview 2, June 7, 2016)

These individual reflections, that in many cases were shared with me without any prompting or request, made me realize that there is a strong appetite for these conversations and opportunities for critical civic reflection. The students that I spoke with had an authentic interest and concern for the challenges facing them and their communities, and a genuine interest in exploring the various ways and opportunities to engage.
In addition to the willingness of students to engage in this deeply personal civic reflection, it has become clear from listening to the narratives of these six community college students is that no one student’s path or civic journey is the same, even for students who reside in neighborhoods within a three mile radius of one another and share a common campus experience. Another contribution of this study is raising awareness about the importance of recognizing and valuing the diverse civic histories that our students bring to their college experience. This study confirms Rubin’s (2007) assertion, that “civic experiences may differ sharply depending upon how students are situated socially, historically, and culturally” (p.451). Monique shared that one of the challenges and frustrations she faced as a student at Civic Community College was working with faculty who, she felt, didn’t make the effort to understand her perspectives and way of seeing the world. She shared, “professors, they don’t understand that everybody has different backgrounds, they went to different schools, different life experiences” (interview 1, April 15, 2016).

Particularly if efforts are going to be made to engage students in civic dialogue or civic action, it is important that a space be provided for students to share and reflect on their own civic identities and the experiences that have informed them, as these previous experiences can deeply impact their beliefs and understanding of their community and themselves as civic actors. As Hollander and Burack (2008) argue, “Civic learning is a life-long experience and studies of the effect of higher education and student development need to be informed by the civic history of students prior to their college experience” (p.5).
Biesta (2011) adds to this understanding by challenging us to see civic learning as non-linear, recursive, and cumulative, with civic identity fluctuating and continuing to emerge in new and different ways based on formal learning and everyday civic experiences. He asserts,

Civic learning is a non-linear process because it is closely connected to ongoing positive and negative experiences with democracy and citizenship, and thus is likely to reflect fluctuations in these experiences. Also civic learning is not simply the result of everyday experiences with democracy and citizenship but also feeds back into these experiences, which is the reason for calling civic learning a recursive process. Although civic learning is not a linear process, it is important to see that it is cumulative because positive and negative experiences in the past cannot simply be eradicated and will influence future action and learning (p. 86).

We cannot assume that we are beginning with a blank slate with students or that all students share the same beliefs about community issues or civic topics. Our students are all bringing a diverse number of perspectives on their concepts of community, neighborhoods, and the efficacy of various forms of civic engagement, as demonstrated by the six unique narratives presented here.

Rubin, Hayes, & Benson (2009) write extensively about this, particularly as it relates to urban youth, “Urban youth have daily school and community experiences with poverty, violence, and injustice that complicate their relationship with civic life” (p. 213). They continue, “Yet most civic education (and schooling in general) does not take into account this particular vantage point on civic life” (p.213). As was highlighted earlier in
this chapter, many participants reflected on the duality they experienced in daily life, the challenges they witnessed in their neighborhoods, and the personal attacks they felt from various institutions, even while maintaining an optimistic and open-minded perspective on their own potential civic influence. Rubin, Hayes, & Benson (2009) found a similar situation with students at an urban, public high school: “For students in Surrey, who knew the system had clearly failed them, civic learning was fraught with complexity and contradiction. This makes civic education in such a setting at once complicated, difficult, and essential” (p.220). Ruiz-Healy (2013) reflected on the initiatives of the Rappaport Family Foundation, committed to civic engagement at community colleges in a recent report on outcomes,

We must recognize students as experts of the problems and the solutions. Young leaders often have the experience of feeling tokenized by institutions and condescended to by people in positions of authority. No one understands the myriad of challenges community college students face – and the possible solutions – better than the students themselves. Similarly, it is students who have the most insight into the best strategies for engaging and empowering other students (p.53).

As is reflected in the previous section, many of my participants confessed that our conversations and interviews were the only time that they had ever been challenged to think about their communities and their own role and responsibilities in this way. Exploring and sharing personal civic histories can not only begin a personal transformation for students as they begin to see themselves as an asset and member of a
larger community, but can provide a space for students to learn from one another, develop a sense of solidarity or explore differences. It is at this point that crucial learning opportunities can be fostered, by identifying the challenges, assets and barriers that students experience and harnessing these ideas to launch more critical dialogue and potentially even action. Rubin, Hayes, & Benson (2009) suggest that, “teaching practices that engage students in discussion, investigation, and analysis of the civic problems they encounter in their daily lives hold potential for fostering more aware and empowered civic identities” (p.214). This leads to another opportunity to more fully engage our community college students, especially those from marginalized communities, in their own civic development.

Freire’s Framework: Building Awareness through Critical Reflection and Action

Building on the previous recommendation, the six students included in this study represent a range of lived experiences, from experiences with homelessness, the impact of drug abuse, foster care, community violence, racism and hate crimes, immigration reform, and challenges of affordable housing. While it’s been my experience that on some four-year campuses, some students working to take action on major issues such as these, have no personal connection or first-hand understanding of the issues they are advocating for. On the other hand, these six individuals that I have had the opportunity to listen to and learn from, all bring insights not just from an interest in seeing community change, but from a perspective of understanding the issues from the inside – the assets and the barriers. However, it wasn’t always a lack of time or interest that prevented them from taking action on these issues, as is often suggested in the common narrative about
community college students. The majority of students I spoke with shared an uncertainty of where to begin, of how to work from outside the system. They lack an effective platform for their personal understanding of these issues to be heard. Instead they work within a system where it is often outsiders creating policy and processes to address issues that they may not even have a first-hand account of.

Speaking about engagement in British society, Biesta (2011) addresses this issue of what some deem as “good” and “bad” citizens, “‘good citizens’ – those who are aware of their rights and obligations and who participate actively in voluntary and political activities – there are also ‘bad’ citizens: those who want rights without acknowledging their obligations” (p 74). However, he is quick to clarify that these “bad” citizens are most often those individuals who lack power and resources. He clarifies, “by showing that ‘bad’ citizenship is more often the effect of a lack of resources rather than the outcome of the ‘wrong’ values and attitudes, provides a compelling argument against the idea that individuals are to blame for an alleged crisis in democracy” (p 75). Understanding that it is not a lack of interest that deters participation, opens the doors of opportunity for community colleges, specifically, to find meaningful ways of engage the lived experiences and knowledge of their students.

While students across all arenas of higher education from community colleges to four-year institutions bring with them diverse lived experiences such as these, we must acknowledge the opportunity, especially at our community colleges serving underrepresented communities, to bridge this civic empowerment gap from personal experience to action. Atkins and Hart (2003) convey that, “paradoxically, factors in high-
poverty, urban neighborhoods, where the need for civically engaged individuals is
greatest, inhibit the development of civic identity, which is crucial for sustained civic
gagement” (p.156). Issues of social distrust and lower community levels of civic
participation, which were both apparent in the civic narratives shared by my participants,
all contribute to the challenge of developing a civic identity that could lead to civic action
(Atkins & Hart, 2003). Their work concurs with Youniss and Yates (1997) and the
demonstration that opportunities to participate and contribute to one’s community are
vital to the development of a positive civic identity.

While Levinson (2012) advocates strongly for civic learning and engagement
opportunities to be made more readily and purposefully available to students from
marginalized backgrounds in order to address the civic empowerment gap, a major
critique of her work is that her recommendations fail to prepare students to address root
causes or challenge the existing system of power dynamics. Duarte, Moses, Sayles-
Hannon, & Wheeler-Bell (2012) suggest, “Levinson’s own recommendations and
emphases on preparing disadvantaged students to fit into dominant power arrangements
fall short of helping students learn how to change that unequal status quo” (p.654).

As was discussed earlier in this chapter, while the community service, service-
learning and leadership programs currently available to Civic Community College
students certainly appear to be helping students to develop some important civic
capacities, such as communication skills, self-confidence, and the building of civic
networks with other civically active peers and community members, each of the students
in this study conveyed that they do not see this form of civic action having any effect on the larger issues plaguing their communities.

Here I suggest the utilization of Paulo Freire’s concept of critical consciousness as an important consideration to inform how community college students from marginalized communities, whether that be racial, ethnic, class or other, can begin to learn from their own civic histories, and others, to inform future civic action beyond charitable volunteerism and awareness raising to focus on advocacy, activism and social change. Watts, Diemer, and Voight (2011) reflect on the reciprocal relationship that Freire suggested between this critical reflection and action, “critical reflection is generally considered a precursor to critical action—people do not act to change their social conditions without some consciousness or awareness that their social conditions are unjust” (para. 10). They suggest that critical reflection tends to be the most neglected in current research on civic engagement, and suggest,

Rather than limiting analysis to “blaming the victim” and other individualistic explanations for societal inequities, critical reflection results from an analysis of the structural causes of racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and gendered disparities in health, well-being, educational attainment, wealth, and other domains. It also frames social inequalities in a historical context, with an emphasis on its root causes—social structures policies, and practices. (para. 12)

Reitz (2002) and some of his fellow community college colleagues have proposed “EduAction” as an “innovative teaching strategy grounded in radical social analysis that can bridge the gap between the classroom and the community, theory and practice” based
on Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed and building on the current movement of many community colleges who are developing service-learning, multicultural education, and civic action programs (p.199). *EduAction* revolves around a participatory, problem-based learning strategy that begins with student-led dialogue about social problems. Reitz suggests, like many service-learning researchers, that the faculty member must reconsider his or her role as a facilitator of dialogue as opposed to the “sage on the stage” (p.200). *EduAction* course assignments and projects become action-oriented, often connecting with community organizations and community leaders relevant to the topics of discussion. Acknowledging the challenges of revising curriculum and embedding new pedagogy into existing programs, Reitz (2002) also highlights successes that he and colleagues have had in integrating this framework into the co-curricular through student organizations and campus-wide issue forums. Overall he calls for community colleges to become “an engine for community development and transformation” (2002, p 202).

Similarly, Solorzano (1989) documented his implementation of a Freirean problem-posing pedagogy in his community college classroom with a focus on addressing the negative portrayal of Chicanos in the media at that time. In addition to describing the process implemented in his classroom, Solorzano (1989) highlighted the successes external and internal to the students. He found, “from their interactions with a variety of people, it was apparent that the students developed commitment to and confidence in their own ideas, as well as research, organizational and communication skills to test those ideas” (p.223). He also highlighted the challenges of engaging such a pedagogy, including a semester-based time limit to begin and end a project of this nature,
and the disorienting nature that an action-oriented project may present as the faculty members loses some control of the process. These challenges are not unlike those shared by many service-learning faculty.

While some may view this action-oriented, critical pedagogy as too radical for the current state of community colleges, where the challenges and competing priorities of supporting under-prepared students, increasing retention, and a focus on job-training are of concern, I would suggest that these things are not unrelated or oppositional. Instead, helping students find relevance in their education by empowering them to use their developing skills and knowledge to impact their immediate communities can in fact support each of these other institutional efforts.

**From Individual to Institutionalization**

Finally, an important message, highlighted previously, from these student stories is the power of interpersonal relationships between students and campus staff and faculty. From invitations to get involved in various organizations and programs to general encouragement, support and mentoring, many of the students in this study expressed that these relationships were one of the highlights of their community college experience. However, in order to reach a wider scope of students, institutions truly committed to the civic development of their students must explore the structures and processes in place to support the institutionalization of civic learning beyond the one on one opportunities, which often leaves civic learning and empowerment up to a small handful of individuals on campus willing to make that extra effort with little to no institutional recognition or incentive.
Through my earlier informational interviews with Civic Community College faculty and staff, there was a clear gap between the interest and desire to fulfill the mission of connecting campus to the community, and the lack of resources directed to initiatives focused on civic learning and empowerment. There are a number of outstanding campus models that have taken on the challenge of civic learning and moved it back to the center of their core mission and institutional identity. Mesa Community College located in Mesa, AZ was recognized by the Community College National Center for Community Engagement (CCNCCE) as a national leader for promoting community engagement at the community colleges. MCC partners with over 366 local community partners. As of January 2015 17,346 students have served a total of 530,088 service hours. More than 200 MCC faculty members have been involved in the efforts, representing every academic department, with a combined total of 3,586 service and community-based courses. Additionally, more than 3,300 AmeriCorps volunteers (students and community members) provided more than 1.6 million hours of service. MCC has also been the recipient of numerous local and national grants to further their community engagement efforts. Other recognized community college models include the Borough of Manhattan Community College (CUNY), recognized for it’s “BMCC Engaged in Service Together” (BEST) efforts and co-curricular transcript tracking community engagement efforts of students, and Middlesex Community College, with a robust service-learning program offering over 100 service-learning courses for students. Both are also recognized by NASPA’s Lead Initiative on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. According to NASPA (2016) the Lead Initiative “comprises a network of
74 NASPA member colleges and universities committed to encouraging and highlighting the work of student affairs in making civic learning and democratic engagement a part of every student’s college education”.

The “Assessment Rubric for Institutionalizing Community Engagement in Higher Education” developed by Furco, Weerts, Burton, and Kent (2009) provides a very useful framework and tool for campus administrators to utilize to assess the current level of institutionalization, as well as identify areas for aspirational growth related to community engagement. The rubric focuses on the philosophy and mission of campus community engagement, faculty support for and involvement in community engagement, student support for and involvement in community engagement, community participation and partnerships, and overall institutional support for community engagement (including budget, staffing and departmental support). Institutionalizing programs and policies that make civic learning more accessible across campus programs ensures that more students have the opportunity to begin to see themselves as valuable civic actors. When programs and polices are built into the campus culture and curriculum, it ensures that even when civically active faculty or staff leave campus, the legacy of their work has a chance to continue.

**Implications for Future Research**

Based on the findings and recommendations of this study, presented above, several opportunities exist for future research about the complexity of civic identity of community college students. First, opportunities to expand this research through more action-oriented methods would provide a tremendous learning opportunity to test some of
the hypotheses proposed in this study related to the use of critical pedagogy within classroom and co-curricular environments. Ideas could include the development of a Photo Voice study that incorporates the student participants into the research process, or a research project situated in a writing or speech course based on critical reflection of an identified civic topic relevant to the students. These action-oriented research methods would not only capture where students in the study begin related to civic identity, but would document the dynamic learning process as students explore their own civic histories, learn from others, and begin to connect this critical reflection to action.

Another branch worth exploring would be a comparative study looking at community college campuses recognized for their community engagement efforts to examine the philosophy and approach taken by each campus – whether a charitable service-oriented model or a social-justice and critical pedagogical model. An analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of these real-time examples, as well as student outcomes would inform other campuses interested in increasing their own efforts in these areas.

Finally, a longitudinal study examining the long-term effects of purposeful civic learning experiences during a community college education would be a valuable undertaking in order to understand what program and experiential characteristics most deeply impact one’s civic identity, leading to life-long civic engagement.

**Limitations of the Study**

A primary limitation of this study was the time constraint of one semester of engagement. While student participants were very open to sharing their stories and
exploring various aspect of their civic histories, a longer-term engagement could have allowed for even greater depth of understanding.

Another limitation was my own lack of familiarity, as a researcher, with Civic Community College. While this distance and unfamiliarity can be a positive quality in some respects for research, bringing a less biased perspective, I also had a steep learning curve to understand the basics of the community college experience within this particular campus system. I had to stop and get clarification throughout my interviews to ensure I was accurately understanding some of the jargon and other campus processes being discussed by my participants.

Finally, while the six students that I interviewed for this study brought a diverse number of lived experiences, from local and international perspectives, a diversity of majors and career interests, and an age range reflection of the campus student population, a final limitation was that not many of my participants had children (besides Joshua) or worked in addition to their time at school (besides Ariel and Will). I understand that this may not be completely representative of the community college student population, generally. It is possible that those who were busy with family and full-time work commitments were unable to commit to the meetings and time required of this study, limiting their participation and the inclusion of their voices and perspectives.

Summary

As Boggs (1991) argued in his proposition for the civic educational imperative, “adult education should facilitate understanding of community problems and choices, equip citizens to participate intelligently and skillfully in the democratic process, and
augment the learning that accrues from such participation with opportunities to reflect and dialogue about the experience” (p.7). As I began this research I prepared to enter the space with a blank slate, open to hearing the stories of my participants and quilting the pieces of their narratives together as the project progressed. Through this narrative process, connections were made between the civic experiences of my participants (both positive and negative), from childhood through their time at a community college, providing enlightening insights for educators to the ways that these students view their role and responsibility within their communities, how they express the efficacy of their own actions and efforts, and the community issues that weigh most heavily on their hearts and minds. Significantly, attention is raised about the importance that a sense of belonging on campus can provide to students as a space for civic identity development.

This narrative approach was useful for gaining a deeper understanding into civic identity and connections to the civic empowerment gap that previous statistics and data left uncovered. As Rubin, Hayes, & Benson (2009) suggest, “socio-cultural researchers find that larger social forces and young people’s daily experiences in schools and communities affect their emerging senses of themselves as civic beings in ways that large-scale, quantitative measures are unable to capture” (p.214). As opposed to the “they are too busy, too disengaged and generally uninterested… ‘bad citizens’” narrative that often gets attached to community college students, I encountered students deeply troubled by the state of the country, the conditions of their communities, and questioning how they can personally do more. Additionally, I became more aware of the complex community contexts and structural barriers that present challenges to their active social
and political engagement. This was balanced by stories of individual mentoring by faculty and staff, influential campus leadership and service experiences, and a strong desire for further exploration into their own civic potentials.

As its primary contributions, this study challenges us to consider the opportunity that community colleges have to serve as a positive community environment for students to experience a sense of belonging and agency, when they may not experience this in the greater community context. This space can become a platform for civic engagement and civic identity development amongst its study body, beginning with opportunities for community service and civic reflection as an on-ramp to future efforts for social change and political engagement. Preparing for the workforce and preparing for active citizenship don’t have to be mutually exclusive. Skills learned for civic participation, such as communication and collaboration, can also be valuable workplace skills. While civic identity development and the engagement of an active and informed citizenry can not be the concern of schools and higher education institutions alone, we can see from the narratives informing this study that there is a tremendous role for our community college campuses to play.
APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT SCRIPTS
Appendix A

Recruitment Scripts

(1) Recruitment Email (to faculty or staff):

Dear [insert name],

My name is Christy Burke Walkuski and I am a Doctoral Candidate at Kent State University. I am in the process of beginning research for my Dissertation exploring the civic identity of community college students. I am writing to inquire to see if you may be willing to share some information with students at your institution who may be interested in participating in this study.

This study will explore what meaning community college students make of their own civic actions, habits, and beliefs. Exploring things such as, why do some students become actively involved in their communities through volunteering, political engagement and beyond, while others do not? How has their community college experience impacted their civic engagement and perspectives?

If you have students who may be willing to share their story, through a series of 3 interviews, I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to invite them to participate. Below you will find an invitation email for students, as well as a research interest form - if you would be willing to share this with your classes or any student communities you are connected with I would greatly appreciate it. Additionally, I am more than willing to come to campus to share information about this opportunity in person.

I am happy to share more about this opportunity and answer any questions you may have.

Thank you in advance!

Christy Burke Walkuski
Cburke10@kent.edu

(See student recruitment email below)
(2) Recruitment Email (to students):

Dear [insert name],

You have been identified as a potential participant for a research study about community college students. My name is Christy Burke Walkuski and I am a student at Kent State University. I am beginning a research project that will work to tell the stories of community college students like yourself. Below is more information about how you can be a part of this project.

About the project: What issues are important to you? In what ways are you involved in your community? My study will explore what meaning community college students make of their own civic actions, habits, and beliefs. Your stories can help to inform college faculty and administrators about this topic, and can inform the development of future programs for community college students related to civic engagement. This study will give you an opportunity to reflect on your experiences as a student and community member.

I am inviting you to participate in this study and share your story. Participating would involve meeting with me 3 times for interviews that will be between 60-90 minutes in length. During these interviews I would ask you to share stories about current and previous community and school experiences that have shaped your civic perspectives. The interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. Your name will not be used in any publication or presentation; rather, pseudonyms that you select will be used. The name of your institution will also be omitted.

I have attached a participant interest form here. If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete this form and return to me at cburke10@kent.edu. By completing this form you are not obligated to participate in the project, and it also does not guarantee you will be selected to participate. You can also feel free to email me with any questions about this project.

I am happy to share more about this opportunity and answer any questions you may have. Thank you in advance for considering this opportunity!

Christy Burke Walkuski
Cburke10@kent.edu

(see recruitment pitch below)
Hello! My name is Christy Burke Walkuski and I am a doctoral student at Kent State University where I am studying Cultural Foundations of Education. In addition to being a student I also work at Baldwin Wallace University where I run community service programs for students. I am beginning a research project and am here today to share about the opportunity for you to get involved and participate.

My research is all about telling the stories of community college students. Specifically, I am interested in hearing and telling stories about community college student civic identity – what community issues are important to you? Are you involved in your community? Why or why not? I’m also interested in hearing stories about your experiences here at your community college and how this has influenced your perceptions of yourself and your community. Sharing your stories as a part of this research can help inform community college faculty and administrators and can lead to the development of new programs to better serve community college students as it relates to civic engagement.

If you would be interested in being a part of this project and telling your story here is how you can get involved:

1) You can complete this Participant Interest Information form – this form will tell me a little bit more about you. By completing this form you are not obligated to participate in the project, and it also does not guarantee you will be selected to participate.

2) If you are selected to participate you will be asked to take part in 3 interviews that will be 60-90 minutes in length and will be audiotaped and transcribed.

3) Your name will not be used in any publication or presentation; rather, pseudonyms will be used. The name of your institution will also be omitted.

4) Your commitment to this project is not expected to go beyond 1 semester and you can withdraw from the project at any point without consequence.

Please take your time in thinking about this opportunity. I am available to answer any questions you may have – you can contact me at cburke10@kent.edu.

Thank you for your time today, I am happy to answer any questions about this opportunity.
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT INTEREST FORM
Appendix B

Participant Interest Form

Civic Narratives Study: Participant Interest Informational Sheet

By completing this form you are expressing interest in participating in the “Civic Narratives” study. Completing this form does not obligate you to participate nor guarantee that you will be selected to participate. You will be contacted by the lead researcher of this study to confirm if you have or have not been selected to participate. Thank you for your interest!

Name: _________________________________________________________________

Are you currently enrolled as a community college student? YES NO

Age: ______________ Are you a: FULL TIME PART TIME STUDENT

How long have you been a student at this school? __________________________

What is your major or program of study? _________________________________

Race/ Ethnicity Identification (please check all that apply)

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native ☐ Asian ☐ Black or African American

☐ Hispanic or Latino ☐ Middle Eastern ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

☐ White

Preferred method of contact:

- Cell phone: _____________________________________________________________

- Email: __________________________________________________________________

I heard about this study from: _____________________________________________

Where did you attend High School (name of school and city/state):

_____________________________________________________________________

Have you done any volunteer work in the past year? YES NO

Did you vote in the last presidential election? YES NO
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Study Title: Civic Narratives: Exploring the Civic Identity of Community College Students

You are being invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Christy Burke Walkuski, a doctoral student at Kent State University. This consent form will provide you with information on the research project, what you will need to do, and the associated risks and benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary. Please read this form carefully. It is important that you ask questions and fully understand the research in order to make an informed decision. You will receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Purpose: This research study is exploring the civic experiences and beliefs of community college students. This study is interested in knowing how community college students relate to their community, how they are involved in their communities and why.

Procedures – What will you be asked to do?
If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in 3 semi-structured interviews over the course of 1 semester. These interviews will each last an estimated 60-90 minutes and will take place at an agreed upon campus location. During these interviews participants will be asked to share stories that relate to their current beliefs and actions about topics such as volunteering, politics, and community issues. This may include discussing experiences from childhood, high school, or describing ones neighborhood. Participants will also be asked to discuss experiences from ones community college experience. The anticipated length of this study is no more than 1 semester

Each interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Participants can review audio recordings or transcriptions at any point during the study, upon request. Upon completion of the data analysis and transcription all audio files will be destroyed.

Benefits
The potential benefits of participating in this study include the opportunity to share about and reflect on your experiences as a community college student and experiences in your community. This research may not benefit you directly. However, your participation in this study may help us to understand how better support community college students in the future.
Risks and Discomforts
During this study we will be discussing some personal and private information that could potentially result in feelings of emotional discomfort. If you do not wish to answer a question, you may skip it and go on to the next question.

Privacy and Confidentiality
To maintain confidentiality, your name will not be used in any publication or presentation related to this research. Instead, a pseudonym that you select will be used. In addition, the name and location of the college will not be identified. All audiotapes and written data will be stored in a secured area to which only the researcher and the supervising faculty member have access. Participation is voluntary and you may opt out at any time. Additionally, you may choose to not answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. Your research information may, in certain circumstances, be disclosed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which oversees research at Kent State University, or to certain federal agencies. Confidentiality may not be maintained if you indicate that you may do harm to yourself or others.

Voluntary Participation
Taking part in this research study is entirely up to you. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You will be informed of any new, relevant information that may affect your health, welfare, or willingness to continue your study participation.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Christy Burke Walkuski at 440-823-8153 or Dr. Natasha Levinson at 330-672-3000.

This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the IRB at 330.672.2704.

Consent Statement and Signature
I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me for future reference.

Participant Signature __________________ Date __________________
Appendix D

Interview Questions

Interview One (Focus on: personal context, interests and involvement, family / educational background)

Prior to participating in an interview, participants must sign the Informed Consent form. Before the interview starts, the researcher will explain that the entire discussion will be recorded and transcribed. The researcher will remind participant that they can skip any question they do not wish to answer. The researcher will again remind participants of the purpose of the study, and will then, commence with the interview questions.

1. General Introductions / Tell me about yourself

2. What brought you to Community College?
   a. What are you studying? Future career goals?
   b. What is it like to be a student here?
   c. What is the best part / the most challenging part?
   d. Tell me about your favorite class that you have taken here

3. What do you do in addition to time as a student?
   a. Employment
   b. Extra-curricular activities / groups / clubs
   c. Community involvement
   d. Social activities
   e. Involvement in religious communities
   f. Involvement with children’s affairs (PTO..etc) – if applicable
   g. Were you involved in any activities in High School / after high school?
   h. Were you involved in any activities as a child (Ex. Boy Scouts, Sports..etc)

4. Tell me about your family
   a. Siblings?
   b. Children?
   c. Parents? Did parents attend college? What type of employment?
   d. What is one of your favorite stories about your family?
   e. How would your family describe you?

5. Tell me about where you live
   a. Where do you live now?
   b. Where did you grow up?
   c. What do you like about your neighborhood?
   d. What would you chang
e. Do you feel that you know your neighbors? Why do you think that is?
f. Do you trust people in your neighborhood? Why/Why not?
g. Are there things you wish people knew about your neighborhood? Or any misconceptions?
h. Were there adults that you would have considered a role model to you growing up?

6. Were there any major community or global events that occurred as you were growing up that you would describe as influential for you? Any current events that have played a big role in who you are today?

**Interview Two (Focus on: making meaning – defining community, exploring social issues; beginning to explore action and efficacy)**

Prior to participating in an interview, participants must sign the Informed Consent form. Before the interview starts, the researcher will explain that the entire discussion will be recorded and transcribed. The researcher will remind participant that they can skip any question they do not wish to answer. The researcher will again remind participants of the purpose of the study, and will then, commence with the interview questions.

1. (Participant will be asked to bring photos that captures their concept of their community)
   a. Tell me about the photos you brought
   b. What do you think these say about your community?
   c. How do you feel as a part of this community?
   d. What do you see as the strengths / challenges of your community?
   e. What role do you think you play in your community? What role would you like to play in your community?

2. Tell me about how you get the news or stay up to date on current events? Global, National, local focus?

3. What social issues are most important to you? Why?
   a. Do you do anything related to these issues that are important to you? Why/Why not? What does that look like? What successes have you experienced or challenges have you faced related to this?
   b. Do you think that there is anything you can personally do to improve or change these issues or other things in your community?
   c. Do you think there is anything that others can do to improve / change these issues? Who? How?

4. What does “service” mean to you? Do you think it is important to help others? Why/Why not? In what ways? How do you act on this? Where you do think your beliefs about this came from? (family, religion, school…etc?)
5. There are many ways to be active in your community – exploring specific forms of involvement – have you / tell me about your experience with…
   a. Participated in community service / volunteered (required or self-selected?)
   b. Voted or worked for any political groups?
   c. Written a letter to an elected official?
   d. Been a part of a rally or protest
   e. Worked to educate someone about a specific issue / cause?
   f. Collected money or donations for a cause or organization?
   g. Taken a service-learning course at school?
For all of the above – what motivated you to be a part of this? How did it feel to be involved? One time or sustained involvement? ; OR if no involvement – tell me why you have not chosen to participate in these ways.

7. Are there other ways you have been or are involved that we have not talked about?

8. *(if applicable)* We previously talked about things you are involved in outside of school – (refer to interview 1 question 3) how has this/these experiences influenced your role or involvement in your community?

9. Has there ever been a time when you’ve worked with other people to create, start, or change something? What was it?

10. Who is someone that you would describe as a leader? Why?
   a. Do you see yourself as a leader? Why / Why not? In what contexts…

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*Interview Three (Focus on: exploring intention for future actions and civic efficacy)*

Prior to participating in an interview, participants must sign the Informed Consent form. Before the interview starts, the researcher will explain that the entire discussion will be recorded and transcribed. The researcher will remind participant that they can skip any question they do not wish to answer. The researcher will again remind participants of the purpose of the study, and will then, commence with the interview questions.

1. What do you see as the purpose of getting an education at Community College? For you / for others?

2. How has your experience as a student at this Community College influenced how you see your community? How you view your role in your community? How you get involved in your community?
   a. Do you believe your education has prepared you to take action on issues that are important to you? Knowledge or skills developed? Why/Why not? How
b. else could we better prepare students to be involved in the community / active on issues that are important to them or their community?

c. Do you think colleges / schools should be teaching students about being an active citizen? Why/Why not? What opportunities exist for that here?

3. Do you think there are aspects of your identity that make it easier or harder for you to get involved/make a difference in the community (ie – being a women, being a young person, being a person of color, religious affiliation...etc)?

4. Do you see yourself being involved in your community in the future? During school? After school? Why/why not? In what ways?

5. Do you agree with this statement: “I have a responsibility to use the knowledge and skills I have gained through my education to make a difference in my community” Why / why not? What does this statement mean to you?

6. What are your future career goals? What impact do you think this career will have on your community? Is it important to you that you are able to align your personal values and beliefs with your employment / career choice?

*Appropriate follow-up questions will be asked and are dependent upon the responses of the individual participants. These questions will most likely vary between participants, as each will present their own unique narratives.*
APPENDIX E

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Appendix E:

Theoretical Framework: Civic Identity themes for data analysis

Table 2

Theoretical Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Key Themes</strong></th>
<th><strong>Lens for Data Analysis</strong></th>
<th><strong>Correlating Interview Question examples</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Learn by Doing: Opportunity to Practice in the Civic Realm** | - Identifying the influence of early civic experiences  
- Identify relevant early exposure to civic dialogue / activity (ex. volunteering)  
- Influence of family, schools, community organizations | - Tell me about any experiences you had in your community as a child or teenager (ex. volunteering, activities, sports?)  
- Do you remember talking about politics, current events or community issues as a child or teenager? |
| **What They Do Matters: Service, Social Justice, and Activism** | - Examining the scope of civic involvement (volunteering vs activism) opportunities to alleviate real community problems  
- Examining level of exposure to social issues (increased awareness of social problems)  
- Identifying influential organizations or movements that motivated their involvement; opportunities to establish connections with community organizations or community leaders | - Have you ever participated in a rally or protest? Or worked to educate someone about a specific cause or issue?  
- Were there any global or local events that occurred as you were growing up that you would describe as influential for you? Current events that played a big role in who you are today?  
- Has there ever been a time when you’ve worked with others to create, start or change something? |
| Civic Context and Civic Identity | - Impact of exposure to societal / community conflict  
- Identifying community barriers to civic engagement or positive civic identity development (ex. social distrust, low-levels of community participation)  
- Exploring opportunities for involvement  
- Influence of adult role models  
- Exposure to poverty, violence, injustice  
- Influence of organizational involvement / religion | - Tell me about your neighborhood / community. Do you trust people in your neighborhood? What are the strengths/ challenges of your community?  
- Are there things you wish people knew about your neighborhood? Or any misconceptions?  
- What would you change about your neighborhood / community?  
- Do you feel there are opportunities for people to get involved in community issues?  
- Were there adults that you considered a role model to you growing up?  
- Were you involved in any organizations or are you currently involved in any organizations/clubs or religious affiliations? |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Collective Nature of Civic Identity | - Exploring the influence of others  
- Identifying opportunities to collaborate and work with others towards a community goal  
- Identifying a shift from individual-focused perspectives to the value of collective action (I vs we) | - Has there ever been a time when you’ve worked with others to create, start or change something?  
- Were you involved in any organizations or are you currently involved in any organizations/clubs? |
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